

Norm Julian mines Monongahela Valley region for stories and finds stardust

Former neighbor Bill Fichtner says Norman Julian is a city boy who didn't follow his advice. He made pets of his chickens. "He named every one of them," Fichtner says.

You can eat a chicken. You can't eat Emily, Santa Claus, or Caruso. Instead of making dinner, Norm made frantic calls to the vet when one got frostbite.

Paul Atkins, Norm's academic adviser at West Virginia University back in the Sixties, sees his former student as a frontiersman who subsisted off the land. Atkins admires Norm's determination "to make a go of it on his own terms. He has that American pioneer mentality."

Maybe Norm's long-time editor at the Morgantown Dominion Post, Ralph Brem, best explains Norm. "His feet are in both places, city and country. He blends in anywhere because he's a good listener, a good people person. Norm knows when to shut up and let other people talk."

Those qualities made Norman Julian an award-winning columnist. In separate years, the Pennsylvania Society of Newspaper Editors and the West Virginia Press Association named Norm as best columnist. For over fifty years, sporting his trademark Stetson and an outdoorsman's beard, he has painted word pictures of the lives of mountain people and places.

Many of those columns found their way into three essay collections: *Trillium Acres*, *Snake Hill*, and *Mountains and Valleys*. Norm's novel *Cheat* is based on stories, terrain and people he got to know while covering his beat in the Cheat River region. That novel and the not-yet-published sequel, *Flood*, won cash prizes in the West Virginia Writers, Inc., contests. *Flood* also was a finalist in the Santa Fe Writers national contest.

He also penned *Legends*, which some see as the best book ever on West Virginia basketball, according to Terry McNemar, past president of West Virginia Writers, Inc.

Not surprisingly, most of Norm's books are self-published. He is nothing if not a do-it-yourselfer.

Part homesteader, part environmentalist, part philosopher, part writer.

The Mountain State version of Henry David Thoreau—who happens to be Norm's favorite philosopher. Someone he studied before changing his major to journalism because he favored eating regular meals.

Like Thoreau, Norm has always marched to beat of his own drummer.

In his youth Norm felt "a little out of the mainstream" because his parents were "old country." Yet his roots sink as deeply into the mountain soil as any man's. His grandfather, Sebastian Julian, like hundreds of Italians, was recruited by a padrone to work in the coal mines. In the late 1800s, coal companies frequently hired an immigrant to return to his native land and persuade others to come to the States, where they became virtual prisoners. The padrone controlled their wages, contracts, and food, sometimes keeping them behind barbed wire patrolled by armed guards.

One day, Sebastian came home from the Kingmont Mine in Marion County in an especially good mood.

"Why so happy?" his sister asked.

"I've been working in a dangerous place, but the work there is finished."

The next day Sebastian was sent back into that place one last time. The roof fell in. The only one injured, he suffered from fractured cervical vertebrae and died a few months later at age 57. He left behind 11 children. Four of his sons were fighting overseas at the time of his death in 1944.

“My grandma and the rest of the family had a tough time of it,” Norm says.

After Sebastian’s death, Norman’s father Rocco continued to work the Kingmont mine for a while. A large man, Rocco loaded 33 tons of coal over two shifts in one day, a record for that mine. But he realized he, too, was likely to die if he stuck with it. He moved into the state’s other big industry: glass. Rocco was the first Italian hired at the old Monongah Glass Factory in Fairmont, basically as a clean-up man. He loved machinery, though, and took every opportunity to observe and learn.

One day the Irish operator came in very drunk and said, “Dago, I’ve been watching you. I think you can run this machine and make glass. This is your chance.”

“My dad operated the machine well and soon after was made a regular operator,” Norm says.

At Monongah Glass, Rocco met Norman’s mother, Antonia. Eventually the couple married and moved to Clarksburg, where Rocco worked for Hazel Atlas Glass Company.

Norm grew up in the North View neighborhood. As a teen, he had many interests. Sports. Art. Music. Building. Yet he chose not to make any of these a career. Maybe you could see his career choice coming if you knew he skipped classes at Victory High School so he could hang out in the public library.

“My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining-rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine.” – Henry David Thoreau

In a way, you could say Norman followed his father and grandfather into mining. Instead of coal, Norm has spent his life mining the hills for stories about people and places and just as important, for the inner peace that comes from living in close connection with the land.

“I thought if I could be a writer, I could pursue lots of interests,” he says. “Everything you do or are interested in can figure in your writing.”

He began as a sports stringer for the Clarksburg Exponent in high school and later worked for the Fairmont Times. For a couple of years, he covered games for both papers, called in the stories, changing the language, and got paid twice for the same event. “I paid my way through two years of Fairmont State that way and learned a lot about grassroots journalism,” he says.

Then Norman went to Detroit, worked in a warehouse, and attended Wayne State University. A year later family drew him back to the Monongahela Valley. While working for area newspapers, he finished his journalism degree at West Virginia University. Academic adviser Paul Atkins remembers how Norm used to rail at him for requiring attendance at staff meetings for the college paper. “He had to take time off work to attend. He insisted he could put out his pages without meetings.”

From 1966-2004, Norman served as a full-time reporter for The Dominion Post. “I liked the publisher, William Townes, a Neiman Fellow. I learned bunches from him. Mostly, though, I wanted land.”

He found that land on Snake Hill, situated north of Morgantown. In the beginning it served as a weekend get-away spot. “There’s a lot of stress working on a newspaper. I’d go up on the mountain to leave that tension behind and work like hell.” Homesteading provided physical release, much like the basketball he played until he was 40.

When the Gannett newspaper chain offered him a chance to move on, he turned it down. “I don’t regret not leaving,” he says. “This is home.”

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” – Henry David Thoreau

“Contemporary man makes too much of individual wealth and not enough of communal ownership. All the good things of the Earth are shared, or should be, not only with our species but with every living thing.” –Norman Julian in *Trillium Acres*

Norman Julian’s novel *Cheat* begins with this line: “Some men need mountains, and some men don’t.” Norm found he needed them. He wanted to become intimate with a piece of wild land, getting to know it through the seasons, learning to recognize the plants and animals that lived on it. In *Snake Hill*, Norm writes that it was a place where he would “solve the main problems of existence—how to acquire minimal food, shelter and warmth in winter.” He aimed for a simple life with few material possessions.

Norm’s editor, Ralph Brem, says sometimes the story is in the stillness: “That’s when a reporter turns into a writer.”

Those instincts must have been at work when Norm sought the quiet of Snake Hill.

When he first forged a road with an axe, mattock, shovel, and spud bar, electricity hadn’t extended “its lifestyle-changing tentacles” up Snake Hill. He parked a camper on his wooded land and called it Trillium Acres after the wildflowers that carpeted the hillside. Over a decade, he tilled a garden, planted an orchard, and built a house.

“He’s an independent fellow,” says neighbor Bill Fichtner. “Likes to make things himself.”

Norm admits he used to flaunt his independence, but adds that no fewer than three dozen people helped him build his house, donating time and skills to his project.

One of the most important things Norm says Bill Fichtner taught him, by example, was how to be a good neighbor. Over the years Bill shared his knowledge of building, raising chickens, and growing fruit. Though basically an introvert, like many writers, Norm was eager to learn what Bill and others had to teach.

“Norm isn’t the easiest guy to get to know,” says Bill, “but he’s a true friend. I’d trust him with my life. I like him and everybody that knows him likes him.”

Bill recalls how Norm would sit in his yard reading with his chickens for company. Norm’s other companion was his big black dog, Rocky. “Everywhere Norm went, Rocky went,” Bill says.

For thirty-seven years, Norman partially subsisted off his land. The sounds of wind whistling, deer blowing, bears woo-wooning, and even the high-pitched squeals of one animal slaughtering another in the night fostered “a stillness within.”

He isn’t one to romanticize nature, however. “I had trouble believing in a compassionate God because there’s so much violence. Everything is out there competing and eating everything else. At the same time, it’s such a powerful thing to watch life going on.”

Fifteen years into the homesteading venture, a fire lapped at the boards of Norm's house. He followed the advice of a Department of Natural Resources official and cleared the brush away from his house. He established a lawn.

Gradually, his beloved trilliums died out. "My nicely clipped lawn hardly compensated for their lost beauty," Norm says in *Trillium Acres*. Despite his care, the land "seemed to resent" his presence.

If he had it to do over again, he wouldn't cut down as many trees. He wouldn't maintain a lawn.

Meanwhile, he continued to work for the Dominion Post. He started as a copyeditor and later founded the old Panorama magazine. In 1988, he went on the road, generating weekly columns about people and places in the north central region of the state. He talked to the artisans at Prickett's Fort. He hung out at Dolly Sods. Got to know folks.

"When I started, I thought it would be hard to come up with ideas, but it wasn't," he says. "As I traveled around, I met interesting people. If you stay interested in people and events, the well of a general interest columnist stays pretty much topped off all the time." When he retired, he had an idea list of over 100 topics remaining.

He has written about digging potatoes, harvesting ramps, and making elderberry wine. His columns covered encounters with bears, deer, snakes, and buzzards. They mused on outhouses, pickup trucks, firewood, and road kill.

"I never knew him not to meet a deadline," says Ralph Brem, "and I never knew him not to turn in a good story. Norm was born with the instincts of a good reporter. He was a joy to work with."

But the staff meetings? "Hated them and skipped every time I could find a reason to," Norm says. "I don't like working by committee."

That self reliance is a trait Norm sees as part of the Mountain State's spirit. "We've always been a state with little money. Mainstream folks have always had to compete: to work, garden, and hunt to survive."

For Norm, basketball embodies many of the state's best attributes, fostering both the competitive instinct and the cooperation needed to survive. A highlight of his writing career was profiling basketball star Jerry West for the *West Virginia Encyclopedia*, meeting the man in person, and interviewing him for *Legends*.

"I think Jerry West personifies Mountain State virtues better than anyone I know," Norm says. "He is skillful, courageous, competitive, tenacious, humble—and has what it takes when things get tough. They don't call him Mr. Clutch without good reason. They would portray us differently in TV and movies if they knew us better."

His columns often provided a window into the literature of West Virginia, according to Phyllis Moore, who served as project director for the first West Virginia Literary Map and who, along with her husband, donated a substantial collection of Appalachian literature to Fairmont State University. "Over the years I've clipped, read, and filed his articles about Clair Bee, Lisa Koger, Jaimy Gordon, Homer H. Hickam, Jr., and many more authors of West Virginia," Phyllis says. "His support and encouragement of other writers is unstinting, well recognized, and appreciated."

She is a faithful reader of Norm's column. "His language is poetic yet accessible and leaves no doubt he loves the land. It's worth enduring January and February just to read what Julian will have to say."

“What is the use of a fine house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?” – Henry David Thoreau

“What happens on Trillium Acres happens everywhere.” - Norman Julian in *Trillium Acres*

Living in such a close relationship with the land, Norm has become an advocate of better stewardship. He sees three big threats to the state's natural beauty and resources: surface mining, fracking, and unplanned development.

Hydrofracking for natural gas is the latest infringement. “I am suspicious of get-rich-quick proposals of any kind. I think the onus should be on the industry to demonstrate on a small scale over, say, a decade that it can extract the gas without serious environmental damage to homes, streams, and the land. Long-range, West Virginia water may be more valuable than its fossil fuels. It's a heckuva risk, fracking on such a large scale.”

He points out the state is already marred by the scars and injuries that come with extracting mineral resources. “Too often the people who do the work have paid the price for the riches in maimings like mine accidents and illnesses like black lung, or tragedies like Buffalo Creek,” he says. “Because of that we may be more wary than most of exploiters.”

But he isn't totally pessimistic about our planet's fate. He notes that the media are helping to inform the public about risks and benefits of mineral extraction. “Perhaps this time, we can get it right. Tax the resources that are taken out of this state at an appropriate rate, hire the inspectors to approve or deny permits and guarantee that safeguards are adhered to.”

He admits that is a big order, and may be a moot point. “Fracking is already big business.”

The woodsman-philosopher not only changed the land, it changed him. Made him feel he belonged to something larger than himself. He found the divine in “the old dogs who have shared [his] life and whose wag-tail greetings have compensated for many a bad day,” in “the raucous song” of his rooster and in the “blizzards that blow over this mountaintop, revealing the celestial dynamics at work.”

Here's another nugget of poetry and philosophy mined from his life that he shares in the closing chapter of *Snake Hill*: “I have even come to believe there is divinity, and life, in the rocks, not only here but at the most remote corners of the universe. Everything we are was once stardust.”

After 37 years, both Norm and the land were changing. It became more difficult physically to keep up his property. The road to Snake Hill was paved, and the whoosh of passing cars and rumbling lawn mowers disturbed the solitude he cherished. New neighbors built large homes and erected fences that restricted the access of wildlife. “No hunting” and “No trespassing” signs went up.

Norm left Trillium Acres and returned to Morgantown. It's all good, he says. He's always been able to bridge both worlds.

Now he enjoys being part of the “Old Guys” bunch at Shoney's and laughing at their jokes. He has a garden in his city yard.

Because of his efforts to preserve and record life in West Virginia and his continued promotion of the state's culture, Julian was recognized as a 1999 “History Hero” and his name is recorded in the West Virginia Culture Center's History Hero archives. In 2011, alumni of Victory High School honored him with the Eagle Award in recognition for service to state, community, and nation, one more feather in his trademark Stetson.

These days his beard shades to white, but his eyebrows remain coal-black, a reminder of his Italian heritage.

And whatever it is that drives men to write, that thing is still inside Norman Julian. Though retired, he contributes one column a week to the Dominion Post. One day soon that second novel on the Cheat River flood will find its way into print.

One of his first writing teachers at Fairmont State, the famous folklorist Ruth Ann Musick, told Norm, “A good writer can find a lifetime of subjects to write about in his back yard.”

You just might find him in your back yard one day. You’ll recognize him by the hat on his head, the pen in his hand, and the earth-stained poetry in his soul.

You can buy Norman’s books at www.normanjulian.com.