

# MOUNTAINS

## Remembering Poet Laureate Ella V. Costner



**Word from the Smokies**  
Frances Figart  
Columnist

“The world turned in its lathe of time,  
And the hot sands heaved amain...  
The neoplasm stirred,  
while from Above was the WORD  
And she crept into life again.”

— from “Song of Life in the Smokies”  
Not long ago, I got a voice message from Carol Treiber, a member of Great Smoky Mountains Association, saying that she had read a story in “Smokies Life” magazine — and she needed my help.

When I reached Treiber, I learned she is an independent 86-year-old poet who lives alone in a modest abode beside the Tuckaseegee River near Bryson City, close as she can be to her beloved Great Smoky Mountains National Park. She wanted to do something to help more people learn about an earlier Smokies native, another independent female poet named Ella V. Costner.

Ella Costner was born Feb. 20, 1893, in a two-room log cabin on Crying Creek in the small community of Mountain Rest near today’s Cosby Campground in the Smokies. She and eight siblings helped their parents to eke out a living on a mountain farm with views of White Rock, Low Gap and Snake Den.

“While I roasted the coffee, at intervals I would run out the door to cool from the heat of the oven and throw my head back to better feel the cool breeze from the South, the delicious, lazy caressing breeze, laden with fragrant aroma of the roasting coffee,” she wrote in her book “Song of Life in the Smokies.”

“And as twilight faded, and the stars came out and the moon showed an orange glow through the treetops, I would forget the tasks of the day, the long day in the field, my bruised and briar-torn feet, and the discomfort of a sweaty, grimy body burned by the sun. I would forget that the rattler’s fangs had missed me just by a hair’s breadth. I would forget that life was ever difficult or hard here in this place, my world so filled with beauty that nothing else mattered.”

The article that Treiber had read was “Ella V. Costner: A Life Without Fear” written by William A. Hart of Fletcher. In it, Hart described how Costner became interested in language, writing, and especially poetry, excelling in school and winning prizes for her scholarship.

“With guidance from her teachers, her inquisitive mind was cultivated,” he wrote. “She was inspired by the works of great authors and introduced to a world vastly different from her own.”

Costner’s parents, though not formally educated, taught her an important lesson that would carry her through



Following publication of her book, “Barefoot in the Smokies” in 1969, Ella V. Costner was named Poet Laureate of the Smokies by the Tennessee legislature.  
ILLUSTRATION PROVIDED BY JOEY HEATH/GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ASSOCIATION

her long life. “We were taught independence in every phase of society,” she wrote, “independence of all other churches, independence of all fads and fashions, independence of cast, or convention, or creed or color, independence of all forms of Government and Law.”

That independence would shape her choice to leave home at the young age of 15, possibly escaping an arranged marriage and desperation in the face of malicious gossip in her small mountain community. The adventure that ensued took her first to Newport, Tennessee, where she attended high school, then to Johnson City, Tennessee, where she studied teacher education and took a temporary job with Singer, the sewing machine company.

From there, she went to San Antonio and Galveston, Texas, where she entered John Sealy Hospital School of Nursing and graduated with honors in 1920. In 1921, she made a “Great Pilgrimage” that included a stop in Washington, D.C., to attend the presidential inauguration of Warren G. Harding before continuing to a new position at Bellevue Hospital in New York City.

By the summer of 1922, Costner had taken a Civil Service Commission posi-



Ella Costner was commissioned second lieutenant in the Army Nurse Corps.  
PROVIDED BY THE COSTNER FAMILY

tion at Colón Hospital in the Panama Canal Zone. In addition to her regular duties, she made a two-month trip to Salvador, the capital of San Salvador, to nurse the wife of the U.S. ambassador.

Costner would live for a time in Miami before eventually settling back in Cosby, Tennessee, not far from where she grew up. Here she established one of the earliest tourism businesses, The White Rock Inn, became somewhat of a legendary bootlegger, and even spent a

night in the Knoxville jail.

“Because Ella was a striking and intelligent woman with a delightful personality and sense of humor, it is no surprise that she enjoyed an active social life, participating in dances, receptions, parties and concerts,” Hart writes.

It is also not surprising that, amid her travels, she found romance. Among Costner’s many books, most of which are sadly out of print, “Love Affair Around the World” (1979) is devoted solely to the men she loved throughout her adventurous life.

“On May 12, 1941, in an ‘impressive moment’ she was commissioned second lieutenant in the Army Nurse Corps,” Hart writes. “Although she was almost 50 years old at the time, Ella, in her where-there’s-a-will-there’s-a-way approach to life, escaped notice by reducing her age by twenty years.”

After a few months of training, the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, created a call for volunteers to go to Hawaii. Costner reached Honolulu and began her military nursing duties in March 1942 treating victims of the attack.

Rather than retiring at almost 60, Costner went to Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee, and graduated in 1955 with a bachelor’s degree in English. In 1969, the International Who’s Who in Poetry in London awarded her the Certificate of Merit for Distinguished Contributions to Poetry. Then in 1971, following publication of her book, “Barefoot in the Smokies,” Costner was named Poet Laureate of the Smokies by the Tennessee legislature.

Well into her 80s, Costner was known as a storyteller at the Cosby Folk Life Festival. She died at the age of 89 and was buried in a shaded Smokies cemetery near the place of her birth.

William A. Hart’s article “Ella V. Costner: A Life Without Fear” can be found online at SmokiesInformation.org under Membership, Missing Issues, in the September 2012 issue of “Smokies Life” (Vol. 6, Issue 2). Her story is also told in “Women of the Smokies” by Courtney Lix, sold in park bookstores and also at SmokiesInformation.org.

Costner’s rare books “Barefoot in the Smokies,” “Lamp in the Cabin,” “Poems of Paradise,” and “Song of Life in the Smokies” reside at the Collections Preservation Center in Townsend, Tennessee. Contact librarian-archivist Michael Aday at michael\_aday@partner.nps.gov or 865-448-2247 to schedule a visit.

Frances Figart is the editor of “Smokies Life” magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Email her at frances@gsmassoc.org if you would like a PDF of Hart’s full-length article.

### STATE BRIEFS

#### 6 indicted in theft ring involving package delivery drivers

EDEN – Six people have been arrested in North Carolina for their roles in a theft ring in which package delivery drivers traded packages for drugs, police said.

WGHP-TV reported that Eden police launched an investigation after they received a tip about a delivery driver trading packages. That same tip led them to five locations throughout the city.

According to police, the driver would stop in a particular neighborhood about 10 times a day and stay for an average of 10 minutes at a time, which is longer

than a typical package delivery.

Police said they identified two FedEx employees and found multiple packages at five different addresses. In all, investigators said they recovered more than \$10,000 worth of stolen merchandise.

All six suspects are facing felonies, ranging from drug possession and receiving stolen property accessing computers to defraud and animal cruelty, police said.

#### Indictment: Deputies encouraged girl to use stun gun on self

MORGANTON – Two former North

Carolina sheriff’s deputies have been indicted after authorities accused them of encouraging a teenage girl to use a stun gun on herself last year.

Joshua Marshall, 38, of Morganton and Luis Alberto Sanchez, 27, of Vilas were indicted on Jan. 24 by an Avery County grand jury on misdemeanor charges of contributing to the abuse of a juvenile and willfully failing to discharge their duties, The News Herald of Morganton reported, citing the indictments.

According to the indictments, Marshall and Sanchez encouraged a 17-year-old girl to use a stun gun belonging to the sheriff’s office on herself. Anjanette

Grube, public information director for the N.C. State Bureau of Investigation, said the teenager was participating in the Explorer program in the sheriff’s office.

The Avery County Sheriff’s Office asked the SBI investigate the case in July, Grube said. On Jan. 24, investigators took their findings to the grand jury.

Marshall was sworn in as a deputy in 2020, less than a year after he was fired from the Morganton Department of Public Safety, records said. Sanchez was sworn in as a deputy in December 2018. Both were fired on July 28, according to the Avery County Clerk of Court’s office. *The Associated Press*

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