

# MOUNTAINS

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

## Marker honors pioneering photographer

George Masa contributed to Smokies becoming a park



**Word from the Smokies**  
Frances Figart  
Columnist

Most people know that North Carolina and Tennessee share the most visited park in the nation, and that the total number of visitors to the Smokies in 2021 exceeded 14 million.

But many may not yet know that one of the figures responsible for the Smokies even becoming a park was a sprightly Japanese man with a big grin, a clunky camera that was state-of-the-art for its day, and a strange wheel attached to bicycle handlebars with which he measured many of the peaks comprising the Smokies Divide.

In an effort to honor this charismatic photographer and influencer critical to the creation of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources will recognize Masaharu Iizuka (aka George Masa) with a new North Carolina Highway Historical Marker on Patton Avenue just west of Pack Square in Asheville, to be unveiled April 8 at 10:30 a.m.

The marker will be placed near the locations of two of Masa's offices. His first, Plateau Studio, was above Smith's Drug Store in Pack Square; his last was in the Grove Arcade — two iconic buildings still significant in the architecture of downtown Asheville.

"Masa was a modest man who photographed a landscape that few had seen and even fewer had explored," said Janet McCue of upstate New York, whose research on Masa began with "Back of Beyond: A Horace Kephart Biography," which she wrote with Bryson City's George Ellison. Historian and curator John Szarkowski described this type of professional as 'the photographer-as-explorer ... a new kind of picture-maker: part scientist, part reporter, and part artist.'

McCue is working with Asheville-based filmmaker Paul Bonesteel on a full-length biography of Masa to be published in 2023 by Great Smoky Moun-



George Masa poses in field with three view cameras on tripods circa 1920-30. PROVIDED BY THE HORACE KEPHART FAMILY COLLECTION, GSMA

tains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. But McCue and Bonesteel have set for themselves quite a challenge because a portion of Masaharu Iizuka's life has for years been shrouded in mystery.

"We think he was born in Osaka, but there are many gaps in the early history," said Bonesteel, who will emcee the Pack Square commemoration event. "We have engaged a Japanese researcher to help uncover the details of Masa's life before he arrived in the United States around the turn of the century."

"We know from his diary that he 'launched out on an adventure' on January 18, 1915, what we think might have been his birthday," McCue said. "He



McCue



Bonesteel

boarded a train in San Francisco and headed east, eventually making his way to Asheville, where he accepted a position in the laundry room of the elegant Grove Park Inn."

Masa would go on to open his own Asheville photography studio, documenting the booming town, its prominent visitors, and its mountain landscapes. The Vanderbilts would hire him to photograph their Biltmore gardens while industrialists and architects engaged him to highlight Asheville's striking new buildings and progressive civic improvements.

He became the official photographer of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce. And he worked with the leading film companies, including Paramount, Pathé and Warner Brothers.

When he wasn't shooting cityscapes, Masa was in the mountains with his friend, author, outdoorsman, and environmental activist Horace Kephart. Challenged by the vertical terrain and fickle weather of the Smokies, Masa nevertheless captured the power and beauty of the mountains in breathtaking images that would help convince a nation that the last of the eastern wilderness was worth protecting as a national park.

"He was part of the North Carolina nomenclature committee that researched and named significant areas in the Smokies," said William A. Hart, a long-time Masa scholar and one of the marker event's organizers. "Weighed down by his ever-present camera, a can of caviar, and some bread, he used a wheel odometer to measure and map

portions of the Appalachian Trail."

Masa became an unofficial publicity arm of the park, sending photo scrapbooks of Great Smoky Mountains photos to both the governors of North Carolina and Tennessee and the First Lady, Mrs. Calvin Coolidge.

"Since Masa's death on June 21, 1933, he has never 'disappeared' from local memory," Bonesteel said. "The Carolina Mountain Club, which buried him, helped quite a bit with that, but primarily writers for the newspaper perpetuated his story. John Parris, Bob Terrell, Jason Sandford and Rob Neufeld all preceded and paralleled the work of Bill Hart."

The value of local newspapers, reporting, and features has been key to Bonesteel's and McCue's research for their forthcoming book as well. Following Masa's death, Asheville newspapers wrote several tributes honoring this favorite son. Here are some excerpts:

- "His services in the development of the park have been invaluable. For years he has given his time and talent to this great project and although his resources were limited he was always ready to put any call that had to do with the park ahead of his own interests. As an outdoors photographer Mr. Masa's extraordinary talent has long been acclaimed. ... Mr. Masa spared himself no exertions or hardships or even dangers if the prize was to be a new view of surpassing loveliness."

- "He has identified himself with the life of this region. He has left his stamp upon it."

Learn more about the new Masa marker at [ncmarkers.com/Markers.aspx?MarkerId=P-99](http://ncmarkers.com/Markers.aspx?MarkerId=P-99).

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. Reach her at [frances@gsmassoc.org](mailto:frances@gsmassoc.org) and learn more at [SmokiesInformation.org](http://SmokiesInformation.org).

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