



Ward takes a reflective moment near a pond on his wildlife and nature preserve.

Taking the high road

By Sharyn McCrumb

A NASCAR driver devotes his life to saving the land

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

and Ward Burton took both of them. Southside Virginia ... late on a Friday afternoon in the early 1970s ... on a country road deep in the woods of Halifax County a car stops, and a sturdy little boy, with a mop of brown hair and the face of an angel, climbs out and walks away without a backward glance. He carries a bedroll, a fishing rod and a shotgun. He is headed for the Cove, a wilderness area of abandoned farmsteads subsiding back into woodland along the banks of the Staunton River. He is alone. For the entire weekend—and for nearly every winter weekend of his adolescence—this self-reliant boy, whose favorite movie is “Old Yeller,” will stay alone in a thousand-acre wood, sleeping in a rustic cabin without electricity or running water. He eats whatever he can shoot in the forest or fish from the river, cooking his catch on an open fire, and sleeping in his bedroll on the cabin floor. It is as if, when he enters the Cove,

he can set his watch back two centuries. Year after year in that silent Eden, the boy followed the round of the seasons, learning every foot of that land, every variation of leaf or color or sky, and putting down roots of his own in the Virginia woods.

Whatever happened to that solitary child who seemed so determined to live a pioneer existence in a time when men walked on the moon?

Why, he grew up and won the Daytona 500.

Thirty years have passed since former NASCAR driver Ward Burton was that determined boy learning self-reliance in the wilderness. Now 43, on hiatus from his racing career, he looks like Hollywood’s idea of a combat general—a fine-featured man with intense blue eyes, flecks of gray in his close-cropped brown hair, and the focused determination of one who will stay the course on a speedway or to achieve his goals in life.

“People always tell me how strange it is that I am equally at home in the woods and in the loud and fast sport of stock car racing, but it seems perfectly natural to me. I have always been a part of both those worlds,” says Ward Burton. “I was racing go-carts from the age of 8, which is about the same age that I started going out to the Cove.”

And whatever happened to the Cove, that unspoiled riverfront wilderness once a childhood refuge, and now any developer’s dream of prime real estate?

That land is still a wilderness. Because Ward Burton has made it his mission in life to save it.

With the encouragement of his father, John E. Burton Jr., Ward spent the other half of his early life focused on the wild and tumultuous sport of auto racing. With his two younger brothers, Brian and Jeff, Ward drove in go-cart competitions at local tracks all over the state of Virginia, amassing enough trophies among the three of them to fill a garage, and moving up to bigger and faster rides as the boys grew older.

The boundary line between the forest trail and the fast track was a seasonal one for Ward. Winter was Cove time: deer season in bleak November; cold mornings spent duck-hunting on river marshes

rimed with ice; and the task of helping Mr. Sanders with the upkeep of the property by mending fences, gathering firewood, etc. When summer came, Ward would leave the solitude of the Halifax woodlands and go racing.

Although these two worlds seem contradictory, Ward excelled in both: perfecting his skill as a winning driver, and becoming a proficient outdoorsman and captain of the rifle team at Hargrave Military Academy. Two years at Elon College in piedmont North Carolina took him away from both his lifelong passions for a while, but in his early 20s, unsure of what he wanted to do next, he returned to live at the Cove while he decided which path to take.

For two years he worked in construction, drifting along in the time warp of the green wilderness, waiting for some sign of what he should do next. It came in the early 1980s

when he went to the South Boston Speedway one night to watch a race in which his youngest brother Jeff was competing. Ward had been out of racing himself for several years by then, but before the night was over, he was caught up again in the old enchantment of fast cars and the adrenalin rush of danger. For nearly a decade he raced locally, still keeping a day job, and finally working his way into NASCAR’s Busch circuit in 1990 and then, along with brother Jeff (currently a NASCAR driver of the #31 car for Richard Childress Racing) into Cup racing in 1994, where Ward’s five wins, seven poles and numerous track records—but most of all his quiet integrity and his kindness to fans—made him one of the most loved and respected drivers in the sport.

In 2002, Ward Burton became the only Virginian ever to win the Daytona 500.



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The trail and the track

From an early age, Ward’s life was divided between a Huck Finn childhood in rural Virginia and the intensity of auto racing.

As a youth he spent part of his time in *Field & Stream* pursuits: rambling alone in the woods of Halifax County, hunting and fishing with his grandfather, J.E. Burton, himself an avid sportsman, and learning the lessons of conservation and environmental responsibility from his mentor C.W. Sanders, the man to whom the Cove belonged during Ward’s youth.

“Sanders taught me that land wasn’t something you owned,” Ward Burton says. “He believed that we are the stewards of the land, entrusted with caring for it and preserving it for future generations. You have to give back to the land.”

His first Cup win—at Rockingham in 1995—enabled him to begin the fulfillment of a lifelong dream: that of saving the Cove for posterity. With assistance from corporate donors like MBNA and Caterpillar, who had sponsored him in Cup racing, he established the Ward Burton Wildlife Foundation, whose holdings, encompassing that same land he'd roamed as a child, have grown to more than 2,000 acres of wetlands, field and forest, all protected by the organization.

The area, which includes seven and a half miles of river frontage along the Staunton River, is sanctuary to beaver, deer, black bear, wild turkeys, waterfowl and other species native to the eastern forest. Conservation easements ensure that these Cove dwellers stay protected. Beyond that immediate goal of saving this particular stretch of wilderness, the property is intended to serve as a model nationally, a demonstration of what can be done to provide a well-managed wildlife habitat. One goal of the foundation is to expand its mission, creating similar conservation models on donated lands across the country.

In December 2003 the Ward Burton Wildlife Foundation received a \$1 million federally funded Forest Legacy grant, one of fewer than 40 such grants awarded nationwide that year. Used to obtain easements for 1,100 acres of land at the Cove, the Forest Legacy grant helped make it possible to conserve the area in its natural state for future generations to enjoy.

“Racing gave me the opportunity to fulfill my dream of preserving that land,” he says. “If I had not had a successful career in racing, I would have never had the means to set up the foundation and to preserve the integrity of the land. I feel very fortunate that I have been able to accomplish so many of my goals, and to be able to give back to the land.”

Another important facet of the Wildlife Foundation's mission is to educate children in the importance of conservation and stewardship of the land. The organization works with the local 4-H club and with the local soil and water conservation district, as well as with other environmental organizations nationwide. Plans are in the works to build an educational center and an auditorium so that visitors can come to the Cove to learn about the mission of the Ward Burton Wildlife Foundation, and to be shown how they can incorporate its ideals into their own plans for land management.

Other Wildlife Foundation projects include an archaeological dig in the Cove to study traces of Native American occupation on the land, and the restoration of an 18th-century plantation house, once the centerpiece of a thriving frontier farm that flourished there.

A love of the land

On a sunny day in mid-winter, the Cove's wetlands sparkle with the mirrored blue of a cloudless sky, and Ward Burton ambles along through the field of dry grass, seemingly content at a pace about 180 miles slower than the one he is accustomed to in NASCAR.

At the far end of the stubbled field a flock of birds takes flight from the shadows of the marsh and scatter, wheeling in great broken rings. “Mallards,” he says, pointing up at the dark shapes, indistinguishable by their markings in the glare, but recognizable to him by shape and movement. The presence of the wild ducks signifies a small victory in a long campaign to restore this land to its former unspoiled condition. He is talking about having restored the wetlands that had been drained years ago when this field had been farmland. One senses that he could go on for hours about land restoration and the ecological and tax advantages of conservation, and that he infinitely prefers such subjects to other topics, such as how famous he is, or the details of past races, or what he's going to do next.

For Ward Burton, time has stopped on his racing career, giving him a chance to explore his options for the future, and to spend more time tending the land. Foundation business might entail a meeting with the

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governor or it might mean bush-hogging a field—he seems equally at ease in either role. Whatever he decides to do in the future, one senses that he will never be very far from this place, and that it had claimed him long before he set in motion the foundation that would reclaim it.

There is much more to be done—probably a lifetime’s worth—but that was always a given. “It is the land that matters,” Ward Burton says simply, gazing out at the sweep of oak forest and gently rolling fields that have sustained him spiritually all his life. This is his real purpose in life, being guardian of that land, and using his success as an example to encourage others to do the same.

“I can’t save it all,” he says. He walks through a field of brown grasses hemmed by silver birches along the river’s edge. “I’m just one person. I don’t have the means to do everything that needs to be done, but I’m doing what I can.”

Preservation—now and in the future

“Doing what he can” turns out to be very much indeed. His commitment to preservation has rescued thousands of acres of wetlands and forest, and by example he has inspired countless others to follow in his footsteps and to do their part to conserve our fragile environmental heritage. Future plans include an outreach program that will bring in students from school systems and inner cities to share the world of nature with them and help instill a passion for the outdoors, and programs to educate landowners in being better stewards of their land, including how to obtain federal, state and local assistance. Ward echoes what he learned from Sanders all those years ago when he says, “The land is not ours, it’s about giving back, and we’ve got the perfect model to do so.”

While he is working passionately to preserve our rural culture and natural resources, he has discovered that he has much in common with Carilion Health System, whose philosophy is protecting our regional tradition and culture by saving lives. While most people would see natural resource preservation and saving lives as two distinct pursuits, Ward and Carilion realize that they are each just a part of the overall goal of helping to preserve our regional resources for future generations. When Carilion recently announced the accreditation of Virginia’s first Chest Pain Center at Roanoke Memorial Hospital, Ward shared that both of his grandfathers died of heart attacks and wondered aloud if one or both might still be here if there had been a Chest Pain Center to help them. One of these grandfathers was instrumental in instilling Ward’s passion for the outdoors, handing down passions and traditions for Ward to then take his turn at handing down.

Ward Burton’s contribution to our ecological well-being will stretch far beyond the boundaries of this place. Because of him, because of his quiet determination and his love of the land, many acres across the country will be saved and in a not-so-small way, the world will be a greener, healthier, more peaceful place. It is a greater legacy than all the racing achievements imaginable, and he knows it.

Thirty years ago two roads diverged in the life of a solitary child, and, because he took both the fast track and the country lane, it has made all the difference to Ward Burton himself and to a priceless tract of Virginia wilderness. **V**

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Ward Burton is spokesperson for

Carilion's Chest Pain Center

Ward Burton, 2002 Daytona 500 winner, was front and center in announcing that Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital's (CRMH) Chest Pain Center has become the first facility in the state to win accreditation from the Society of Chest Pain Centers (SCPC). The Virginia native, who lost both of his grandfathers to heart disease, has a special interest in the prevention and treatment of heart-related illnesses and, because of that, is serving as the Roanoke center's spokesperson.

As the only hospital in Virginia to become an accredited chest pain center, Carilion's Roanoke facility is nationally recognized as a "best practice" model for such centers dedicated to chest pain early diagnosis, treatment and education. The award recognizes Carilion's efforts to educate the public to recognize and react to early heart attack symptoms, reduce the time it takes to receive treatment, and increase the accuracy and effectiveness of treatment. There are more than 1,500 chest pain centers nationwide, but only 99 hospitals are SCPC-accredited.

At the press conference, Burton, who works in a variety of ways to preserve Virginia's natural and human resources, presented members of the Chest Pain Center's emergency "pit crew" with recognition certificates to commemorate the accreditation.

"Six-hundred-thousand people die of heart disease every year, but timely treatment can reduce heart damage and save lives," says E.W. Tibbs, Carilion vice president for emergency care services. "When someone comes through our door with chest pains, the goal is to evaluate, test, and, if necessary, treat the patient within 90 minutes. This accreditation confirms that we have the staff, technology, facilities, and processes in place to meet that goal."

To win the accreditation, CRMH had to demonstrate its expertise and commitment to quality patient care by meeting or exceeding a wide set of stringent criteria. The hospital also had to pass on-site evaluations by an SCPC review team. Carilion had to show its expertise in the following eight areas:

- Integrating the emergency department with the local emergency medical system;
- Assessing, diagnosing, and treating patients quickly;
- Effectively treating patients with low risk for acute coronary syndrome and no assignable cause for their symptoms;
- Having a functional design that promotes optimal patient care;
- Ensuring Chest Pain Center personnel competency and training;
- Maintaining organizational structure and commitment;
- Continually seeking to improve processes and procedures; and
- Supporting community outreach programs that educate the public to promptly seek medical care if they display symptoms of a possible heart attack.

Chest pain centers that win accreditation must not only identify and treat actual coronary cases quickly, but also effectively screen patients whose chest pains are not heart-related in order to avoid needless treatment and admissions. More than 5 million Americans visit hospitals each year with chest pain; an accredited chest pain center can quickly assess whether or not there is a heart-related ailment involved.

The SCPC, headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, was founded in 1998 by a group of doctors and nurses who wanted to create a "best practice" model for chest pain centers. Their rigorous approach to the accreditation process is a way to ensure that such centers meet the highest standards in quick diagnosis and effective treatment of heart-related ailments. Carilion's selection as one of the few SCPC-accredited hospitals indicates the strong commitment and effort made by hospital staff to develop and implement a thorough system capable of earning this elite certification.



—Selby Bateman