

Hairy John

Hairy John State Park Picnic Area is along Route 45 between Hartleton, Union County and Woodward, Centre County.

The park is named for John Voneida (Vonada), who lived as a hermit near the site for many years. There are many stories about his life.

Voneida was born in the early 1800's in Jacobsburg (now Madisonburg), Centre County. He married Susanna Hoy and moved to Loganton, Clinton County c. 1830 - 1840.

According to some, Voneida was an expert marksman, who won many shooting matches in the area. The story goes that at the start of the Mexican War, Voneida went to Lock Haven to enlist in the army but was rejected due to his small stature, despite his claims to be an expert shooter. Upon his return home, he found his wife dead. He was arrested, and then released. He proclaimed his innocence, saying he would not live again in Loganton until he was cleared of her murder. John Voneida walked from his home, southward until he came to a spring in the Narrows between Union and Centre counties, where he built a cabin. He tried again to enlist in the service during the Civil War. The officer at Bellefonte said Voneida was too small to fight and sent him away.

Or, Voneida left his wife Susanna, with whom he had four children, and simply took up life as a hermit on the land he owned in the Narrows. Over the years, he occasionally visited a brother in Woodward, while shopping for supplies.

Another story is that during the 1860's, a local woman, Twila Montray (Monteray), offered to clean and cook for Voneida. She developed a good business selling food and coffee to merchants and lumbermen who traveled along the road. When news came that Centre County Civil War soldiers would be passing through the Narrows on their return to Bellefonte, Voneida showed his patriotism and appreciation by giving the men gingerbread, cake, and coffee.

Many contemporary witnesses agreed that as part of his self-imposed exile, Voneida never cut his hair nor trimmed his beard. He presented a frightening image to children and those who did not know him, and earned the nickname "Hairy John."

John Voneida died about 1880.

There are stories about him being beaten up by robbers or local troublemakers, and of Twila also being attacked. It is said she haunts the area where their cabin stood, and that Voneida's spirit is there as well.

Hairy John Voneida might well have been forgotten. However, in 1918 Pennsylvania State forester Arthur C. Silvius designed the picnic area and named the site that became Hairy John Park, part of the Bald Eagle State Forest. The spring, a spring-fed pond, picnic tables and benches made it a popular stopping place; in 1919, thousands of people visited the site. In the ensuing years, summer musical events drew thousands of visitors. Up to the 1950s and 60's, when there was also a concession stand, pavilions and outdoor grills, Hairy John Park was a place for families to picnic and spend a pleasant day.

Today it is a smaller, less well-known, park and spring. Why not stop on your way out Route 45 and visit with Hairy John?