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Merry Greetings of the Season!

We send our greetings this year in the hope that you are all well and have not been personally afflicted by the events of September 11, 2001. None of our near and dear were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and as far as we know that is also true of our more distant acquaintances. We have tried to learn the lesson that those who are not as lucky have had brought forcefully home — the important things are family and friends and everything else is optional.



View from Shenandoah Mountain as one enters Highland County from the east on US 250. Photo by Rick Webb



We are both well, as is John's mother and Char's kids and the grandchildren (two of whom are in college this year (*yoicks!*), and the business flourishes. Our large animals are all in rude health, and the two house cats likewise. But we lost Nuisance (our barn cat that came with the farm) to cancer December 14.

No horrendous projects this year on the place. The dam was scheduled for work, but that did not materialize. The temporary fix John did two years ago is holding well, but we cross our fingers that it does not have to meet any watery challenges before it gets rebuilt. A lot of less ambitious projects have been accomplished, including installation of an electric gas pump and several upgrades to our maple syrup operation. John has rejoiced in having a teenager from the neighborhood come every Friday afternoon and work on whatever needs to be done — they have worked on the roads and cleared rocks out of pastures and Jacob pretty much replaced John on the lawn mower and leaf rake. Since we have been having a very extended Indian summer there hasn't been any call to test his snow removal abilities yet.

We finalized the conservation easement on our place that we described last Christmas. This is a legal agreement with a state agency to protect the place in perpetuity from development, commercial timber cutting and the like. Some basic language is mandated in such an agreement but much of it is tailored to the specific needs and wishes of the property and property owner. Anyone curious about what is involved can read the text of our agreement at: <http://personal.cfw.com/~jrs/easement.html> .

Not much traveling this year, with the notable exception of Char going to Anacortes, WA, in February to be with her sister Thelma during her husband's terminal illness. The good part was to spend time with family and see nieces and a nephew she had not seen for something like 30 years. And while she was there word arrived that Dick Gregg (Char's first husband) died. This was unexpected because his bout with cancer had been going pretty well.

Char has been playing more — Civil War music for the Battle of McDowell reenactment in May, several Fridays in the summer for Farmer's Market, a local talent concert in August, for the High Country Cloggers at the Hands and Harvest Festival, Christmas music for Wintertide — and she taught a few lessons in the summer. "I'm still not very good, but people ask me and I can't resist."

We have been absorbed this year in public issues — to wit, the road improvement project proposed by VA Department of Transportation for US 250 in Highland County. We won't bore you with details, but if you've ever been involved in attempting to deflect a government body, you know what a time-consuming effort it has been. It started in January with the first inkling that something was happening, then the discovery that the proposed improvement was far and away too elaborate and expensive, and has involved scaling the walls of VDOT and developing an alternative proposal. We are now at the stage of the Public Hearing, which was held December 9. VDOT and the County Supervisors hope this is the end of it, but we doubt it.

Our neighbor and good friend David Allen was spending many hours a day on the 250 project until he suddenly died in October — which left a large hole in the group that was working on it. John has been trying to fill David's shoes, an impossible task which has kept him in off the streets. It was also a deep personal loss for us. Not a day goes by that one or both of us don't think about him. He owned the farm with the high meadow from which you can see most of our place (photo on last year's letter) and which was the site of his memorial service. So he watches over us.

We finally grasped the nettle firmly and sold the State College property this year. It was uncanny how easy it was once we started. We looked in the phone book for a realtor and chose the one with no ad and the smallest listing. We reasoned we would get more personal service from a small firm and it worked a treat. Mary Breon worked very hard for us and sold both houses within a few weeks of putting them on the market. This was somewhat of a letting-go for John. He bought the 118 South Buckhout house in 1963 and lived there for 25 years before we moved to Mustoe. It is a great relief to be free of the hassles of absentee landlordism and we do not miss the trips up there to deal with house issues — aside from the opportunities they afforded to visit with old friends.

Our new cabin, finished in spring 2000 aside from some porches, has been a joy for many purposes and has sheltered a variety of visitors. Stop by to visit and see its virtues for yourself! One good thing about the traumas and tragedies of 2001 is a heightened awareness of how much we care about all of you and how important it is for us to stay in touch and get together. Don't put off seeing us and all your other friends and relations — you just never know whether there will be another chance!

Have a joyous holiday season! Let's drink a toast to 2002 and make it a better year!

Love to you all,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Char & John". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned at the bottom of the letter.