This page is dedicated to:

Dr. Neil Compton 1912 - 1999

To learn more about Dr. Compton do a web search for:
  Dr. Neil Compton
  Buffalo National River
  Compton Gardens
  ozarksociety.net

This edition is dedicated to Dr. Compton and his favorite places to go in the Ozarks. I include accounts of outings with Neil.

Thank you for checking the Sugar Creek Chapter portion of this web site. The Sugar Creek of the Ozark Society was once the flagship chapter of the organization, with the peak membership of around 80 members during the 1980's. Most of the members have now moved on into quiet retirement and relatively few new members have joined the ranks. The result of the dwindling membership and participation resulted in dropping the Monday programs with scheduled speakers and programs. If anyone would information about places we have canoed or hiked, or if you are inclined to do a little hiking or canoeing, or some other such event, please contact me. A good example of ‘or some other event’ might be to help Ken Smith with trail building along the Buffalo River corridor. Look for the information on the web site.

From the inception of the Ozark Society in the 1960’s, the heart of the movement was propelled by Dr. Neil Compton of Bentonville. Dr. Compton was the John Muir of the Ozarks. His charming wit and his ability to tell stories about growing up in the Ozarks, his willingness to hike or canoe into any all regions of the Ozarks, and his affinity for making friends wherever he went endeared him to everyone he met.

Dr. Neil Compton is remembered by his friends and family as a phenomenal character who enriched their lives. However, his character and destiny was larger than that. One of his passions was photography, another was the environment. Combined with his ability to make impromptu speeches and enthral his audience with memorable narrative, Dr. Compton was the man for the occasion. When the time came to make a stand for the Buffalo River, Dr. Compton was able to combine his varied passions, and traveled the state showing slides of the Buffalo River and surrounding Ozarks, and making speeches to the citizens of the state. He encourage them to rally a cause to save the Buffalo River from being dammed. The result was that Congress created the first National River and was signed into existence by Richard Nixon on March 1, 1972. It is generally agreed, without the effort of Dr. Compton, one of the most beautiful rivers in the United States would be under water.
For approximately 30 years Dr. Compton shared his love of the Ozarks with members of the Ozark Society and guests, taking them on hikes into the wilds of the Ozark hills and down the beautiful Ozark streams. I was fortunate to become involved with Neil on these outings and I fondly remember every trip that I was fortunate enough to participate with him. It is because of his love for the Ozarks that I feel compelled to keep his memory alive, and do what I can to keep the Sugar Creek Chapter an entity. Dr. Compton passed away at age 88 on 10 February, 1999. His accomplishments and kindred spirit lives on in his works and remembered by his many friends.

To learn more about Dr. Compton do a web search for:
- Dr. Neil Compton
- Buffalo National River
- Compton Gardens
  (Dr. Compton's 17 acre home in Bentonville 321 N. Main)
- ozarksociety.com

I asked Dr. Compton's daughter, Ellen, to make a list of what she thought would be Neil’s favorite places to hike. Going over the list she sent me, I realized that I had been with Neil to many of these locations. I thought I would write up a brief description of some of the hikes I have been on with Neil to share. In addition to the several books Neil published, there are also numerous hiking books by Tim Ernst and others that will relate important information to make those outings a success. These books about the Ozarks that will help you find adequate information to guide you to most of these destinations. Terry Fredericks, Robert Cross, and Ken Smith are just a few of the many Highlands Chapter members of the Ozark Society in Fayetteville that would be willing to share information about these remote areas of the Ozark Plateau. Feel free to join enjoy the Highland Chapter monthly meeting which meets the second Wednesday of each month. For more information click on the Highland Chapter icon.

I submit the following descriptions of a few of the wild places I have visited with Neil. If you have similar stories to share, please let me know. Get out your maps and hiking books and follow along on the adventures.

Respectfully submitted

Joseph Meyer
Acting Chapter Chairman
Sugar Creek Chapter
Ozark Society
meyer@ipa.net

Hawksbill Craig in the upper Buffalo River Canyon: This area is several miles South of Boxley and requires driving the roads of Cave Mountain. The actual ‘craig’ does not overlook the Buffalo River, but one of the feeder streams, Whitaker Creek. On the map this is called Whitaker Point. Neil once made the comment that the rock jutting out into space looked like the bill of a hawk. Hawksbill, and the name stuck. When standing on this promontory, take a look at the rock to your left. When the shadows hit the rock just right, it looks like a giant turtle head, but I have never heard anyone else make this association. Most hikers are just thrilled looking into Whitaker Creek Valley and do not see the ‘turtle’. I have been to this rock four or five times. The first time was with Dr. Compton and we approached it from Cave Mt. Road. At that time there were no makings along the road to tell where the trail head was located. Neil just knew where it was. A year or two later I returned with my family. The trail was not well identified and we had some trouble finding the over look. Those trees all
seemed to look alike. Some years ago the photo of Hawks Bill started appearing in national advertising and on local phone books. Everyone wanted to know where it was located. The last time my wife and I hiked to the rock was in October about 2005. There was a constant stream of hikers and it was about impossible to get a picture of yourself on the rock without twenty other hikers. What a difference of solitude from the first several hikes compared to the last hike.

Lost Valley: This is just one of the many great features of the Buffalo River. This canyon has a wide variety of interesting features such as the large bluff shelter called Cob Cave, and the cave above Cob Cave with a 40’ waterfall plunging into a pool inside the cave, which then flows out of the cave making another waterfall as it drops over the edge of the cliff adjacent to the Cob Cave bluff shelter. If you are nervous walking a narrow trail to the top cave, think twice about going up to the cave. Several times Neil told the story of a hike they had planned, probably in the mid 70’s. As they started out he noticed big clouds to the West and decided not to make the hike. A short time later a tremendous thunderstorm broke over the mountain causing flash flooding. Neil relates that some hikers had to take shelter in trees and spent the night in the trees to avoid being washed down the stream.

Dismal Hollow and the Bear Crack: This hike is near Nail, Arkansas and takes you to a huge rock cliff with a water fall. The trail on the way out works the cliff line and at one point goes between two rocks (the Bear Crack) that a big football player may not make it through. With Dr. Compton’s lanky frame, he had no trouble making it between the cliff and the boulder.

HOME VALLEY BLUFF: This is another short hike near Nail that deserves a bit of respect. The bluff line stretches for miles to form the head wall of Big Piney Creek. The top of the bluff line is ‘level’, with small creeks forming waterfalls as they drop over the hard dolomitic limestone or cut channels through the rock to make interesting features. On my first hike to the area with Neil and Frank Butler, Neil showed us a rock which was weathered away from the main escarpment and was flat across the top. He called it the ‘Tea Table’. In addition to the unique bluff line, which is visible for miles, Neil was especially intrigued by a large rock found under a bluff with what appears to be a Nordic or Latin inscription chiseled into the rock. It is possible to speculate that there were European explores in the area long before Christopher Columbus set sail.

INDIAN CREEK: At one time this was a hike which required ‘inside’ information to find and a dedicated hiker to tackle. Over the years outdoor newspaper editors have photographed and exposed this canyon to the ‘outside’ world. When a group of us hiked this with Dr. Compton there was no trail as we descended into the canyon. Waterfalls were abundant. At a point, the stream flows into a cave, which requires flashlights as you wade the cold stream to emerge on the top of a ledge with the water dropping over as a waterfall. We used ropes to repel down the cliff and continued the hike. Today I think the park service has closed that route to protect the flora and fauna of the cave system. If Neil ever showed slides of the Buffalo River, he always included slides of the Needles Eye and the waterfall below the cave. He was about 78 years old when I did this hike with him. It was not an easy hike.

KINGS RIVER FALLS: As far as hiking to a waterfall, this is an easy one to get to. You can get directions in most of Tim Ernst’s waterfall or hiking books. At this time I had never been to the King’s River Falls, and I did not know there was an ‘easy’ and ‘shorter’ way to get there. The way I remember the set up for the hike is that Jim Walton had told Neil about a huge tree he had seen growing in a small draw which dropped into the Kings River. Jim gave Neil the approximate directions to find this tree and Neil contacted Tom Foti of the Arkansas Natural Heritage. Frank Butler, Kay Richardson, Clair Collins and myself to joined the hike. Because we were also searching for a ‘trophy
tree’ we started the hike to the waterfall about three or four miles down river from the ‘falls’. We had to set up a car shuttle for this hike. Leaving our vehicles on the top of a ridge above the valley, we hiked along the bluff until we found the draw which contained the tree. The tree was big (I do not recall the species of the tree), but I recall Tom Foti doubting if it was the biggest in the state. We then dropped several hundred feet down over the bluffs into the stream bed and started moving up stream to find the water fall and return to our shuttle car. This is where the ‘fun’ began. If one can imagine the forest primeval with a crystal clear steam, this is the place. But Mother Nature is not always compatible with humans. There was no trail, there was no path, there was no easy way. The canyon walls, boulders and talus scree were overgrown with lush hardwood forest and trees towering over the narrow stream, which ranged from 20’ to 40’ in width. We each tried finding our own ‘path’. The boulders in the stream bed were slippery and uneven so walking / wading in the stream was difficult. The boulders along the stream were covered with trees, green growth and forest duff. A likely ‘path’ on one side of the stream soon narrowed down and became a cliff, forcing all hikers to traverse the stream seeking an easier slope on the other side. At times we had to back travel to avoid getting to high above the stream and ending up on a cliff above the water. I remember working my way over the jumbled boulders, all covered with forest duff, and as I was looking for sound footing, my foot broke through the duff and most of my leg went between the rocks into a hole. This happened twice. If I would have had frail bones, a serious rescue would have had to been implemented. The stream was beautiful. Water falling over boulders into crystal clear pools, boulders the size of dump trucks jumbled on top of each other, water flowing between boulders that no kayak could ever make it through. At times I was wading in water up to my waist. At no time was I forced to swim. If there would have been a sudden rise in the water level, we would have been in a world of hurt. No one complained about the difficulty. Neil, approximately age 78, kept his steady pace. It was on this hike that Neil showed me my first ‘STAR MAGNOLIA’. There were a lot of them. The valley down stream from Kings’ River Falls is one of the last hold outs for this variety. Not to cold in the winter, plenty of rain, a North facing drainage to keep it cool in the summer. The magnolia leaves are in clusters approximately 36” in size. These trees, alone, make the hike worth it. The only other Star Magnolia that I have seen in North West Arkansas is on the property in Bentonville where Neil lived. It is now called ‘COMPTON GARDENS’ and the tree is located along the hiking trail along the creek behind Neil’s home.

TWIN FALLS OF THE DEVILS FORK: Before moving to the Ozarks I lived in northern New Hampshire in the White Mountains. At that time I was seeking out information on the Ozarks and somehow came across an article by Ken Smith where he describes his search to find these falls. When I moved to the Ozarks, this is one of the places I wanted to see. When I heard Betty Brown was leading a hike to the falls, I signed on. Everyone who has hiked with Betty knows she has long legs and can cover ground faster than anyone. The group was made up of members of both the Sugar Creek Chapter and the Highlands Chapter. At about age 80, Neil had no trouble keeping up with Betty. We followed an old abandoned road for a few miles and then made a drop into the stream valley, coming onto one of the streams above the falls, and then proceeded down stream to where the two streams drop as twins into a pool. We then moved down stream to Richard Creek and worked our way upstream to view the Falls of Richard Creek. That day the stream was really rolling, crystal clear and the falls put on a great display. We returned to the Twin Falls and worked our way back up out of the valley. For some reason, the hike back up the hill gained my respect. About a year or two later, Neil and friends attempted this hike again on a beautiful October day. After dropping into the stream bed of the Devils Fork, Neil became overheated and they terminated the hike before making it to the falls. It must have been a real challenge for Neil to make it up out of that valley. I wish I would have been along to assist. He never returned to those falls.

CANOEING THE KINGS RIVER: This trip is about May, 1982? At this point in my Ozark experience, I had canoed very few Ozark streams and looked forward to getting on this legendary river. It was also my first time canoeing with Neil. I think he would have been 70 years old on this trip. I had been
attending the Sugar Creek Chapter monthly meetings for about a year. I do not know who arranged the
day trip or how I happened to be invited along, but I was VERY pleased to participate on this trip
from Onion Creek to Marble Ford. I think it was one of the things Neil usually did before taking a
group on an outing. I think a canoe float was scheduled the next week and we were just checking the
river for safety. Terry Von Diest and ‘Fezler’ were in one of Neil’s aluminum canoes, and I was the
bow paddle in Neil’s aluminum canoe. Both canoes had the signature design of red and blue triangles
along the gunnel. I had never been on the stream before and was not that familiar with what would
be a good water level. In retrospect, I would now analyze the water as a bit above average, so the
canoeing was good. The stream was crystal clear and moving. As we shoved off from the low water
cement slab, Terry and Fezler were in the lead. I know Neil had done a lot of canoeing but I quickly
picked up that he did not fully understand white water stream navigation. He was good, but not
advanced proficient. Terry and Fezler were another story. Watching them frantically work their
canoe around the various obstacles, mostly downed trees and overhanging branches, but also
around some rocks and eddies, I could see that they were having too much fun at something they
didn’t know that much about. It wasn’t long before they worked their way out of sight. Neil was
enjoying the trip and taking his time. The next time I saw Terry and Fez they were pulling themselves
out of the water and climbing up on a large tree that had fallen across the stream. The stern of the
canoe was just barley above water with the full body of the canoe wedged up against a tree trunk, the
force of the water boiling around the curve of the hull, pinning the canoe against the trunk. Neil
worked our canoe to the right to avoid running into the branches and we glided past the overturned
 canoe, clearing the obstacle. I made a strong draw stroke to the right, pulling our canoe around and
we were in an eddy and able to analyze the situation. It was not a good. I had seen canoes pinned
up against obstacles like this, abandoned, waiting for the water to drop. Would we have to come
back at a later date to retrieve this canoe? Terry was standing on top of the tree, holding on to
branches for stability and trying to move the canoe with his foot. The canoe did wiggle. Fez, also
standing on top of the fallen tree, with his feet washed in water, had grabbed a bow line and was
trying to pull the canoe up, it moved, but not much. Both Terry and Fez were straining as hard as they
could on the ropes, but the canoe was not about to come out. The water was boiling in and spewing
out at the far end. The canoe was wedged at about a 30 degree angle to the current. Would it be
possible to get in the water and help muscle the canoe out? The water was probably four to five feet
deep, but the movement of the water was like a freight train and would suck a person into the trees.
Even if we had a saw, the tree trunk was about two feet in diameter and would have taken forever.
The stream was not that wide. The tree had been up rooted and the ball roots of the tree, sticking up
out of the water, were on the left side of the stream, with water going around the entire tree. It formed
an island. Fez was still standing on the tree, near the down stream end of the canoe, and still holding
the bow line. I untied the bow line I had placed on Neil’s canoe, and tossed it to Fez and told him to
tie the ropes together. I was still on stream right just down current from the underwater canoe and
the water washing into the right bank. I stood in water almost waist deep and had him throw me the
joined ropes. Wrapping the line about my waist like on a belay, I put my body weight into the tension
of the line. Terry and Fez soon saw my plan. Sitting on the tree with their buts almost in the water,
both men put their legs to good use and pushed hard against the canoe. With the force of the water
helping move the canoe down stream, each push of the canoe with their strong legs worked the
 canoe a foot at a time. Within minutes the canoe started sliding against the tree, and miraculously
kept on sliding as I pulled on the line. It cleared the tree and I pulled the canoe into the eddy
alongside the other canoe. I could tell that Neil was impressed with how I helped get the canoe out
and how I had handled our canoe. When we were ready to continue the trip, to my surprise, he
suggested I take the stern. That was an honor. I do love to canoe, and I know I am not the best
white water canoer, but I do love it. There were some rapids we worked through, but they were easy,
with just enough water to clear the bouldered bottom. A mile or so down stream we came onto the
largest bluff on this section of the river. I have returned to this bluff since then, and the water has
changed so the pool that was at the base of the bluff is no longer there. It is now filled in with gravel.
At that time the stream came with a rush into the pool at the upstream side of the bluff. The pool was
several hundred feet long, deep and emerald blue. We landed on a level limestone ledge and had lunch. What I loved was that the river had cut into the limestone and caused an undercut. The entire canoe could be paddled under this bluff line. The light was bouncing off the water into the underside of this formation. I knew Neil had his camera and I asked if I could take a picture of him with it. He was surprised, and almost reluctant to hand me his camera. I clicked a few pictures of Neil, his straw hat on his head, holding a paddle in his hand and the rock and the water adding color and light. I know they were great pictures. I do not know if they were prints or slides. I never did see the results.

At the end of this article is the list that Neil’s daughter, Ellen, passed on to me as some of Neil’s favorite place to visit. I hope each of you reading this takes time to visit some of these unique areas. When you are standing under the spreading beech boughs, or taking pictures of water free falling into an emerald green pool, reflect that if you had been there just a short time ago you might have been lucky enough to meet a slender Scotchman who was the family doctor to ½ of the population of Bentonville, who carried a camera, told stories, and shared his love of the Ozarks. There was no doubt that he was the John Muir of the Ozarks. Ten years after his passing, we still miss him. Do check out his books, THE HIGH OZARKS, A vision of Eden, and THE BATTLE TO SAVE THE BUFFALO.

Schermerhorn Point (I think named by Neil for his friend, Sch., who died young)
Hawksbill (I think Neil named it Hawksbill but it is officially something else)
Lost Valley *
Bear Crack on Dismal Hollow hike *
Home Valley Bluff with its Latin inscription *
Indian Creek *
Sweden Creek Falls
Kings River Falls *
Buffalo Point and Indian Rock House trail
White Rock
Twin Falls of the Devil’s Fork *
Steel Creek and the BRT from Ponca to Steel Creek and from Steel Creek on down river.
Also - Check Battle for the Buffalo. He talks about hikes that he made with his mother and with Joe & Maxine.
He always wanted to go down in Boen Gulf, but he never made it.

Possible favorite place to stop for lunch or breakfast: Café in Hindsville
GLORIA PATRI
FILIO ET SPIRITUI
SANCTO