How about a ride?” Sam Troutman says. So we get in his truck, pull off the paved road, and go back in time. Back in the woods, he stops next to a weathered house. Sam’s great-great-grandfather, Henry Martin Troutman, built it 150 years ago. But that’s not the oldest homestead back here. Off to the left, deep in the trees, up the hill and next to a spring, a few logs and part of an old chimney remain from Jacob Troutman’s place. He established the Troutman family here on 200 acres he bought in 1778.

“All you see back in here,” Sam says, “that’s Troutman land.”

Just east of here, Jacob’s descendants are starting to gather for their annual family reunion. The Iredell County town of Troutman, three miles away, is named for the family. But real Troutman country is out here, on Troutman Farm Road, where the old community schoolhouse and the Troutman family cemetery sit next to the old Troutman train depot. (The family hauled the depot out here when the town was going to tear it down.)

In 1904, to celebrate Henry Troutman’s birthday and his daughter’s visit from California, the Troutmans held their first reunion. They’ve done it ever since, except for one year in the ‘30s when there was a flu epidemic. The 2013 reunion, on the second Saturday in October, is the family’s 109th.

Sam still lives out here. He’s an electrical contractor and raises dairy cattle with his brother. He’s got family in every direction. Troutmans now own about 2,000 acres out this way. They’ve lived here nearly as long as America has been a country. The family is more spread out now, and they get to the reunion via minivans and US Airways instead of horse and train. In this scattered world, it’s hard to get people to linger in one place. But the Troutmans are holding together.

“It’s a charmed place,” Sam says. He pulls in under the trees next to the schoolhouse. Family members are setting out tables. It’s almost time.

“I’m a triple Troutman,” Curtis Fortner says. “Three different lines of the family converge before you get to me. That means some cousins married way back when. You have to remember that there weren’t a lot of people around like they are now. Still, I always wonder why they didn’t just ride over to Statesville and find somebody. But no, somebody looked across the table at supper one night and said, ‘Hmm, she’s kinda cute.’”

Curtis, who’s 53, is a writer and antiques appraiser and interior designer and furniture-store manager. But his real job is herding the Troutman clan. (There are Fortners and Parkers and Lippards and all kinds of others among the extended clan. In family shorthand, they’re all Troutmans.) Curtis is incoming president of the family historical association, keeper of the Troutman stories, center of attention. When Troutmans have a question about the family, they ask Curtis. He loves this. He loves everything about the reunion, although his default demeanor is mock irritation. “Lord,” he says as some Troutman kids pull a little too long on the schoolhouse bell, “I’m gonna have to choke a child with a bell rope.”

Curtis has been battling a problem in his vascular system that causes unexpected internal bleeding. His hemoglobin levels were low just before the reunion, and his doctor wanted to put him in the hospital. Curtis refused; there would be Troutman nurses at the reunion, and they’d know what to do if he fell out. The Troutmans have always been a tough crew.

Their ancestors came from Germany (where the family name was spelled Trautmann) in 1751. Johann Jacob Troutman was born in Pennsylvania in 1767. When he was 2, his family moved south, to the German settlement of Rockwell in Rowan County. When he was 21, after his father died, Jacob took his mother and moved 30 miles west. He bought that 200 acres on the hill next to the spring. He
met a woman named Margaret Fesperman, and they married. A writer for the Statesville Landmark, covering the 1908 reunion, described it this way: “... he [Jacob] built a house, then chopped off a field, then brought home a wife and began life as a farmer. Soon the woods were full of shoats and yearlings and little Troutmans.”

That was the beginning of what the Troutmans know as their little piece of the world. Now they’ve chronicled their family’s history through the 11th generation.

There’s a lot to keep track of. The family history, Descending Jacob’s Ladder, is 609 pages, and they’re working on Volume 2. The family cookbook has 900 recipes. There’s a Troutman coat of arms, boasting ostrich plumes (they stand for victory). There’s an official clan song: A heritage we have to claim! And proud we are to bear the name ... There’s also an unofficial clan song. But we’ll get to that later.

The family is proud of its stories. Not far into the history book, you find another Jacob Troutman — two generations after the original — who built giant brush fires to “purify the air” and raced over the hills on his horse, “whooping and hollering.” He might have had a brain tumor. The neighbors called him Crazy Jake.

One Troutman was a Confederate soldier who carried a minie ball in his hip for 17 years. Another let Union troops camp on his property. Some owned slaves. Another gave 35 acres of land to a slave couple who had been freed.

The town of Troutman started with Anne Troutman, a widow who moved her family a few miles away from the original land in 1853. The town was incorporated in 1905, but most of the Troutmans still lived in the country. In 1906, the community built a one-room schoolhouse next to the Troutman cemetery. The family started using the spot for the reunion. When the school closed in 1927, John Isaiah Troutman bought the building. Now, it’s the center of the Troutmans from across the country return to their namesake town every October. This year will be the 110th reunion for the tight-knit clan.
Troutman universe.
An elderly family member calls me over to tell a story. Back around 1910, one of the Troutman boys was walking down the dirt road to the schoolhouse when he found a box. He looked inside and his eyes got wide. He ran to school to show off what he’d found.
He tried to give the other kids a peek without the teacher noticing, but it’s hard to hide much in a one-room schoolhouse. She took the box, looked inside, and saw: a stash of condoms. Horrified, she took the box straight to the wood-stove. The boy hollered at her to stop but she threw the whole box into the fire. That’s when he told her what he saw underneath the condoms.
Bullets.
“Just about blew up the schoolhouse,” the man says. “Nobody’s gonna tell you that story.”
Awhile later, I ask Curtis about it.
“Oh, yeah, it happened,” he says. “It knocked the stovepipe off and the whole place filled with smoke. The fire department had to come. We’re not ashamed of anything here. The Troutmans are an open book.”
But nobody seems to have any good Troutman versus Troutman stories. The main thing everyone thinks of is a minor dispute over the reunion date. It used to be in August, but then it dawned on people that August in North Carolina is hot. So in 2005, the family voted to move the reunion to October. A few folks squawked about it. But that’s over now.

There are a few semi-famous Troutmans. Dr. Richard Troutman was a pioneer in cornea transplants. Doris Troutman Plenn wrote the children’s books The Green Song and The Violet Tree. She also added a verse to the old hymn “How Can I Keep From Singing,” and is credited with teaching the song to Pete Seeger. Seeger and his wife came to the reunion as Doris’s guests in the late ’60s.
But over the years, the Troutmans have been like pretty much everybody else. At the beginning, most were farmers. Then they went from the fields to the factories. Now some work with their hands and others work at a desk. The one constant is this patch of land. They circle back to it like a waterwheel dipping in the river.

The reunion begins in the cemetery. A dozen Troutmans have died since the last gathering. Family members came in the day before and put fresh flowers on the more than 400 graves in the cemetery. Rick Parks sings “It Is Well With My Soul.”
Then people move inside, to the old schoolhouse, and sit on wobbly benches. The program has been about the same for decades. The song “Hark! Ten Thousand Harps and Voices.” A guest speaker. A hymn called simply “Parting Hymn.” A benediction sung to the tune of “Edelweiss.”
In between, the Troutmans take measure of themselves. There’s a 3-month-old girl in the crowd, and a 6-month-old boy. There’s an 82-year-old woman and an 86-year-old man.

Troutmans have come from New York City; Peoria, Illinois; Sarasota, Florida; Roanoke, Louisiana; and Mesa, Arizona. At a couple of points, nobody’s quite sure what to do next, and it feels a little awkward, maybe like the whole thing has gone on too long. But then Brent Warren gets up to recognize his mother, Maxine, as one of the family’s honorary trustees. He chokes up talking about how much she means to him, how much being part of the family means to him.
Vicki Troutman leans over to me from her seat in the back. “You should know,” she says, “we all cry at the drop of a hat.”
Vicki, who’s 62, is a retired PE teacher, a former district Teacher of the Year. She’s lived in Troutman just about her whole life. Her father helped salvage the train depot and bring it out here; her mother put together the first family cookbook. Before coming to the reunion, Vicki wrote on Facebook: ... there is something about family that brings out the best and worst in people, but we are still bound together by a history that will remain in our lives and the lives of future generations for perpetuity. the day has always been bitterweet as
we celebrate the moment and remember those whose vision made it possible. My favorite part of the day [not lunch, contrary to popular belief] is when we gather in the cemetery to remember our dead. I stand by my parents’ grave and reflect on their commitment to our family and remember how truly blessed I have been. Love you mom and dad and miss you daily ... but especially today ... 

She has been cracking jokes under her breath during the whole program. But now, as the tears come, she quietly slips away from the group.


Those are just some highlights. The spread runs down two sets of tables, shaped into a T, 70 by 75 feet, the way the Troutmans have always done it. It smells like God’s kitchen. The two llamas in the back field wander up to the fence to sniff. (The llamas keep coyotes from messing with the nearby cattle. Turns out coyotes don’t like llamas.)

Families set up picnic tables and camp chairs on the grass next to the schoolhouse. There’s an inflatable slide for the kids. Somebody is giving rides on
a hay wagon. A few people are touring the old depot, which still has the original sign misspelling the town name as TROUTMANS. Sam Parker, who has missed three reunions in his 72 years, pokes his belly to see if there’s room for dessert. “Elegantly shabby,” he says. “That’s this place, and that’s our people.”

This seems like a good place to mention the unofficial clan song. MaryLou Troutman and her husband, the Rev. Tom Page, wrote it to the tune of John Denver’s “Thank God I’m a Country Boy.” They wrote five verses, but the best one is the first:

Well, the Troutman clan is kinda laid-back;
There isn’t an opinion that the Troutmans lack.
It’s kinda like champagne with your Big Mac;
Thank God I’m a Troutman.

Tom’s out here in the yard singing something now, and Sam has gone off for dessert, and Curtis is all excited because somebody brought him the minutes to a bunch of old reunions. It has turned out to be a beautiful fall afternoon. Later on, the family will break into smaller groups and gather at people’s houses for supper. But now there’s just the quiet buzz of a family catching up with itself. Troutmans have walked this patch of land for 236 years. They’ve reunited here 109 times. Nobody’s in a hurry to go anywhere.

Tommy Tomlinson is a writer in Charlotte. His family used to have its big reunions in Nabunia, Georgia, the former home of the World Armadillo Olympics. Tomlinson’s most recent story for Our State was “From Vision to View” (Jan 2014).