History and Culture Along the Benton MacKaye Trail

The Benton MacKaye Trail

The history of the Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) is interwoven with the history of the Appalachian Trail (AT). Benton MacKaye first proposed his dream for a long distance trail stretching from Georgia to Maine in his 1921 article, 'An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning'. Included in the visionary forester's proposal was a map depicting a southern spur route that later became the inspiration for the trail known today as the Benton MacKaye Trail.

Photo courtesy ATC Archives

By the 1970s, the AT was becoming overcrowded. Dave Sherman, then the State Coordinator of the Georgia Heritage Trust Program (Georgia Department of Natural Resources) and later the Founding Father of the BMT, became interested in establishing a secluded, wilderness trail.

An admirer of Benton MacKaye, Sherman became interested in MacKaye's proposed Georgia spur route. "It was such a natural fit to name the trail for the man who designed it — Benton MacKaye," said Sherman. "His map showed the trail coming down the spine of the Smokies and extending into the Cohuttas. But once it got through the Smokies and across the Little Tennessee River -- then followed the height of land down the spine of the Blue Ridge range, where should it go south of the Cohuttas? Because the Cohuttas are more a range of elevations and not just a single, fixed summit, it seemed appropriate simply to route it over to Springer Mountain," Sherman concluded.

The BMT traverses 82 miles in Georgia and 206 miles in Tennessee/North Carolina. This includes the Chattahoochee-Oconee, Cherokee and Nantahala National Forests as well as 93 miles in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP), making it the longest trail in the Smokies. Also known for its remoteness, a third of the trail lies in Wilderness areas where vehicular access and motorized tools are prohibited. Here, the hiker finds true peace and solitude.

The Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) was incorporated in 1980. When the trail crossed the border into Tennessee in 1987, BMTA celebrated the completion of 93 miles of trail. The grand opening for the entire trail was held in 2005. Today, approximately 95% of the route is on public lands managed by either the US Forest Service (USFS) or the National Park Service (NPS). Only 15 miles currently remain on private land or as short road walks.

GEORGIA

The Benton MacKaye Trail in Georgia rambles through three counties that are part of the north Georgia Mountains. These low but very hardy mountains are a subsection of the Blue Ridge range of the Appalachians. Most of the trail is within the Chattahoochee National Forest where elevations range from 650 to 4,784 feet above sea level. The USFS began to purchase land for the forest in the 1920s. It was officially established in 1936. The trail enters the Cohutta Wilderness Area on its eastern perimeter. At 36,977 acres, it is the largest USFS Wilderness Area in the Southeast and is a paradise of hiking trails. There also are miles of unpaved roads around the perimeter of the Wilderness Area. These roads are popular with horseback riders as well as mule- or horse-drawn wagons.

An historian described some of the historical events that occurred in the area traversed by the BMT trail as "a dark corner in Georgia history". Like most remote rural areas in the South — especially in the Appalachians, early settlers struggled to develop stable communities. The discovery of gold in nearby Lumpkin County hastened plans for the removal of the native Cherokee from the area, further opening it to European settlers. There was little gold there. The resourceful pioneer families found other creative ways to make a living — sustenance farming, small lumber operations, and gathering and selling chestnuts and wild ginseng.

During the Civil War, Sharp and bitter divisions arose in these communities that left scars and led to bloodshed among families. In 1876-77 tempers were further exacerbated when Federal troops were deployed to try to curb moonshine activities.

Deforestation began even before the Civil War. Huge amounts of wood were required to stoke the copper smelters at the mines in Copperhill, Tennessee. Beginning in 1876 and continuing until 1935, logging also contributed to deforestation. The Conasauga River Lumber Company engaged in logging on a massive scale. The lumber company built roads, railroads, and "company towns" throughout the mountains. Hundreds of loggers could be working on any given day. Equipment such as log skidders and cables were used to remove timber from remote sites, and hikers sometimes see relics of this long-ago industry on the trails. The Great Depression stalled the logging industry. Many of the former loggers joined the Civilian Conservation Corps. At least two Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps were established in the vicinity of the BMT — one near Ellijay and another northwest of Blue Ridge. There may have been a third near Wilscot Gap. These workers aided in the reforestation of the Chattahoochee National Forest and were instrumental in erosion control, watershed protection and the building of recreational facilities. The National Forest obtained large tracts of land from the lumber companies in 1934-1935. The railroads were dismantled in 1937.

Benton MacKaye Plaque — The bronze plaque on Springer Mountain honors the visionary forester for whom the trail is named, Benton MacKaye.

Brawley Fire Tower — No longer in use, it is a relic of the days before aircraft were used for spotting fires. Microwave towers now are attached to the original structure. Two US Geologic Survey Markers are below the tower.

Shallowford Bridge — Built in 1918, the 175-foot-long bridge was built using the classic "Pratt through truss". It is eligible for inclusion in the National Registry of Historic Places.

Shallowford Bridge

BMTA Headquarters — Though not on the trail per se, the headquarters cabin (located in Gilmer County, Georgia, and now used for tool storage), once served as part of the Fighting Town Creek, Georgia, livery stable for the Atlanta/Knoxville Highway.

Fowler >> Dyer Gap — Old GA 2 used to cross the mountains from Fort Oglethorpe to South Carolina through Dyer Gap. It fell into disuse and portions of it were closed when the area to the west was designated as wilderness in the mid 1970s. A cemetery and open pavilion still are maintained at Dyer Gap. Several very old head-stones mark the graves of settlers from the area.

Six to eight families lived near Flat Top Mountain. The community included a grist mill as well as a school. Several of the wildlife clearings in this area are the remains of old home sites. Some of the meadows are the result of naturally reclaimed beaver ponds. Hikers should be on the alert for remnants of previous settlements such as stacked rocks, fruit trees (especially apple) and walls around creeks and springs.

TENNESSEE/NORTH CAROLINA

In Tennessee and North Carolina, the BMT primarily traverses the high ridges along the border between the two states. These ridges were the hunting grounds of the Cherokee Indians. Later, settler cabins/small subsistence farms were established. In 1831 the discovery of gold near Coker Creek, Tennessee, led to a minor gold rush in the region. Settlers and miners followed. This exacerbated the call to move the Cherokee out of the region. In 1838, one of the saddest sagas in American History occurred — the Cherokee Removal. Thousands of Native Americans and Army troops traversed these mountain trails and passes as the Cherokee were forced to move west.

In 1912, the federal government purchased 222,000 acres in Eastern Tennessee for the USFS. The USFS was given a

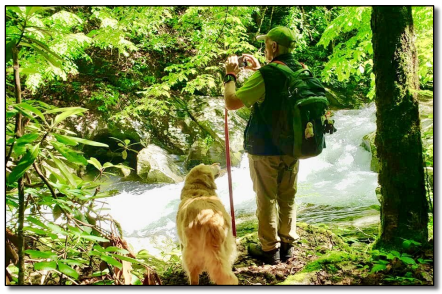
mandate to reclaim the land for the enjoyment of the public as well as for future sustainable logging operations.

Purchases in 1916 and 1925 as well as a reformation of forest lands in 1936 brought the Cherokee National Forest to over 640,000 acres. From 1933-1942 the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Work Progress Administration (WPA) were used to aid in the reforestation as well as the construction of trails, campgrounds and visitor facilities. These young men were given much-needed jobs during the Great Depression and provided an invaluable service to the country. Several large CCC camps were located near today's BMT, including one at the site of the current Tellico Ranger Station along Tellico River Road and another near Unicoi Gap and Coker Creek.

The trees have grown back and little logging occurs today. Many of the areas have been designated by Congress as Wilderness or Wilderness Study Areas. In these areas there are no maintained roads or motorized vehicles — mountain bikes are not permitted. The trails can be maintained only with primitive tools such as crosscut saw and axe. No logging, mining or other extractive industries are allowed in the Wilderness Areas. It is hoped that eventually all the Wilderness Areas will once again have hundred-year-old trees standing tall and proud.

White Oak Flats >> Hiwassee River – The BMT runs parallel to Big Lost Creek. The waterway features cascades and waterfalls as it winds through a deep limestone gorge. Beautiful rock formations are visible on both sides of the trail. The trail follows an old railroad grade built for logging in the early 1900s.

Established in 1909, the deserted town of Probst (the headquarters for the Prendergast Lumber Company) is just across the creek from the trail. The crumbling foundations of eight buildings are all that remain.



Lost Creek

Childers Creek >> Towee Creek – From the Childers Creek Trailhead, the BMT follows the John Muir National Recreation Trail #152 (JMT) to Coker Creek. The JMT is named in honor of naturalist John Muir. His book, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf,* describes Muir's 1867 trek across the South immediately after the Civil War. From the Apalachia Powerhouse, the BMT/JMT parallels the Hiwassee River (both up and downstream).

Trail of Tears – The Unicoi Turnpike National Historic Trail intersects the BMT at Unicoi Gap. The two trails share the tread for a short ways south of the gap. The Unicoi Turnpike, which is part of the route of the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, spanned the Cherokee Nation, and reached from near Savannah, Georgia, to the Little Tennessee River. It is said to have been in use for over 1,000 years. The Unicoi Turnpike was the primary route on which the Cherokee were "forced marched" from the North Carolina mountains to the west side of the Appalachians and from there to Fort Armistead at Coker Creek, Tennessee, and Fort Cass at Charleston, Tennessee, on the Hiwassee River. At Fort Cass, the routes diverged into several different routes to the Oklahoma Territory. It was called the Tellico Path, the Overhill Trading Path and the Great Trading Path. In 1812, it became a 12-foot wagon road called the Unicoi Turnpike with a tollgate near Unicoi Gap. After the Cherokee Removal, it became known as a part of the Trail of Tears. Much of it is now the Joe Brown Highway, a mostly unpaved road, leading to Murphy, North Carolina.

Tate Gap – In the late 40s, Doc Rogers built a three-story house at Tate Gap. Most of the property was acquired by the USFS in 1973, with an additional 100 acres recently purchased. The building is now just a shell — a spring runs through the old basement.

Doc Rogers' House

Whigg Meadow – The meadow is atop a high elevation bald (5,000 feet). The Whigg family once lived on the northern edge of this meadow growing their subsistence crops and raising sheep. The old home foundation can be found near the north end of the meadow. In the springtime, flame azalea, blackberries and huckleberries abound.

Little Tennessee River >> Fontana Village – This section was part of the original AT until 1947 when the AT was rerouted over Fontana Dam. The Land Trust for the Little Tennessee River holds a conservation easement to protect the land near the river.

Historic Tapoco Lodge – Built around 1930, the Tapoco Lodge now is a luxurious getaway catering to hikers and back-packers as well as other outdoor sports enthusiasts, including canoers, kayakers and motorcyclists.

Tapoco Lodge >> Green Gap (Intersection with Stairway to Heaven) — Initially, the BMT exited the Slickrock Wilderness at the Cheoah Bridge, crossed the Little Tennessee and followed the old AT route over private property to the state line on Route 129 called Deals Gap. The BMT then followed a one-mile road walk on Route 129, the famous Tail of the Dragon — one of the most dangerous sections of road in the southeast with no pedestrian spaces, no distance vision for drivers and heavy tourist traffic. The remaining two miles of road walk along Route 28 beside the Little Tennessee was calm for hikers, and the BMT entered the park at Twenty Mile Ranger Station.

Tapoco Lodge

In 2014, BMTA received permission to reroute the trail through the Slickrock Wilderness to the original proposed route over Stratton Bald, the third highest point on the BMT. The trail would continue to Tapoco Lodge and across to the Yellow Creek Mountain Trail to Fontana, a total reroute of approximately 21 miles. Originally estimated to take three years, thanks to herculean efforts by BMTA, the American Hiking Society and Sierra Club volunteers, the entire reroute was completed in just 90 days. In 2014, the American Hiking Society called this the "most important hiking trail reroute in the country that year". More importantly, it gave easy access for hikers to avoid the road walks, acquire park passes and make an easy connection to the AT above Fontana Village.

Fontana Village Resort -- A modern-day upscale resort, the rustic cabins that now serve as guest accommodations were originally the homes for the workers building Fontana Dam in the 1940s.

Fontana Dam — Built around the time of WWII to provide power for Alcoa (aluminum for military airplanes) and the Manhattan Project. It is the highest dam east of the Mississippi River. The dam and associated infrastructure were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2017. Four hundred feet up the road (after the BMT crosses the dam), the trail enters the GSMNP.


Little Tennessee River

Fontana Lake – Created by the Fontana Dam, the lake is 29 miles long and has more than 240 miles of shoreline. It encompasses 11,700 acres and is managed by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)**.** Fontana Lake's deep, cold waters provide the ideal habitat for a variety of fish – record size muskie and walleye have been pulled from its depths. Many believe it's one of the best smallmouth bass fishing lakes in the country, including the Fisherman's Bass Tournament Circuit, which has held a Hall of Fame Classic at Fontana Lake.


The Little Tennessee River flowing out of Fontana Dam.


Fontana Lake

GREAT SMOKEY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

The first humans in the area probably were Paleo-Indians, arriving some 8,000 years ago. By the time European explorers arrived, the mountains of western North Carolina were inhabited by several tribes — the Cherokee, Tuscarora, Meherrin, Coree and Neuse River — collectively known as the Iroquois. The Cherokees evolved into a highly "civilized" people and viewed themselves as an autonomous nation. By the mid-1800s, they could read and write using the Cherokee alphabet (invented by Sequoyah in 1821).

In the mid 1500s, De Soto and other Spaniards searched for gold as they crossed through western North Carolina. They were followed by settlers and fur trappers in the 1600s. In 1673 James Needham and Gabriel Arthur established a trade link between the Cherokee and the Virginia Colony. The first official tourist to visit this area was botanist William Bartram, arriving in 1776. The southern side of the Appalachian Mountains remained isolated through the early 1800s with settlers mainly cultivating the valleys. Once those lands were claimed, the settlers began to clear and settle land farther up the mountainsides.

Hazel Creek

In 1830, the Proctors (Moses and Patience and their son, William) were one of the first families to move from the rapidly growing town of Cades Cove over the mountains to the area known as Hazel Creek. By the beginning of the Civil War, five or six families lived along the creek. They were joined by others fleeing the chaos of the war. At the turn of the century, the lumber industry was growing exponentially throughout the United States The companies infiltrated the virgin forests of the Smokies, but moving the timber out of the forest to lumber mills was difficult. In other areas, companies relied on floating trees down rivers to sawmills, but Hazel Creek did not have sufficient water flow to do this. Lumbermen coped with the problem by building several small dams called "splash dams". Loggers would wait for heavy rains when the water flow was as strong as possible. They then would open the uppermost dam. Logs would catapult downstream. Dams would be sequentially opened to continue the logs' descent to the rivers — and subsequently to the waiting sawmills.

In 1802 the state of Georgia began to press the United States government to expel the Cherokee from the state. The discovery of gold near Auroria, Georgia, in 1828 escalated the situation to a crisis level and by early 1838, several thousand Cherokee already had traveled west on their own. The forced removal of the Cherokee began in earnest in June of that year. Soldiers constructed a military road that began near present day Andrews, North Carolina. The Tatham Gap Road led west, crossed the mountains at Joanna Bald and descended through Cheoah at Fort Montgomery (present day Robbinsville, North Carolina). The road then crossed Stecoah Gap and Stecoah Valley to eventually join the Little Tennessee Turnpike. About 500 Cherokee avoided removal by hiding deep in the mountains, forming the basis of the current Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation.

Around 1904, author, scholar and librarian Horace Kephart arrived in the Hazel Creek area. Initially, he lived with the other settlers in the vicinity of Hazel Creek. A plaque on Deep Creek at Campsite #57 commemorates his last permanent camp. Kephart wrote a book, entitled "*Our Southern Highlanders*". First published in 1913, the book chronicled the lives of the people who lived in Hazel Creek and the Southern Appalachians. The book is considered to be a priceless cultural study of the people who lived in the southern Appalachians during the first 10 years of the twentieth century. Kephart wrote dozens of articles promoting the beauty of the Smokies and the benefits of preserving such a pristine and beautiful area as a national park. The following excerpt appeared in a booklet titled "*A National Park in the Great Smoky Mountains*", written by Horace Kephart:

> "*Here stands today, in the Great Smoky Mountains, the last hundred square miles of uncut primeval forest, just as it stood, save for added growth, when Columbus discovered America. It will all be destroyed within ten or fifteen years if the Government does not take it over and preserve it intact so that future generations may see what a genuine forest wilderness is like."*

Unfortunately, his writing not only inspired people to want to preserve the wilderness, it also alerted the lumber companies to the untapped potential of the remote areas of the Appalachian forests. Companies flocked to the region to harvest the more valuable hardwoods — chestnut, walnut and cherry as well as the more common pine and poplar. A race developed between the lumber companies and the environmentalists. The large lumber companies

rushed to stake their claims on the different watersheds of the area. Kitchens Lumber Company located their operations on Twenty Mile Creek. W. M. Ritter decided to locate his sawmills at a location about three miles up Hazel Creek. The logging companies built a narrow gauge railway to connect with the standard gauge track of the Southern Railway Company. By 1920, the town of Proctor, located at the head of Hazel Creek, had grown to over a thousand people. However, the lumber companies began to downsize and by 1928, the town no longer existed. The employment and culture had transformed the inhabitants of the area from subsistence farmers to industrialized consumers. The land was stripped.

The idea of creating a National preserve of the area was first proposed in the 1880s. In 1899, a meeting of bureaucrats and statesmen, journalists and industrialists gathered to form the Appalachian National Park Association. Congress granted them $5,000. The funds were used to conduct a survey of the forests. Horace Kephart's 1925 booklet, "*A National Park in the Great Smoky Mountains",* brought public interest and awareness to the issue. The challenge was to accumulate enough money to make it happen. A brilliant fundraising program was developed which included children donating pennies, nickels and dimes through their schools for a "People's Park". On March 30, 1928, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. donated five million dollars to match the money that had been donated by the governments and people of Tennessee and North Carolina. The park was established in 1934. It was among the first national parks assembled from private lands. One of the unique attributes of the park is that it will never charge an entrance fee — it is a park created by the people, for the people.

In 1933, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was created by Congress to promote the widespread use of electrical power in the region and to control the flood waters of the Ohio, Mississippi and Tennessee rivers. At the start of World War II, the dam became a high priority project because of the need for aluminum. Construction began in 1942. Hundreds of workers flocked to the remote area to meet the extremely demanding construction schedule. A downside of building the dam was that it would create a lake whose waters would cover existing homes along the river and flood five villages. Over 600 families in the Fontana area were relocated. Another problem was the family cemeteries throughout the area that were going to be submerged or inaccessible when the area flooded. Those graves had to be moved. Most graves that were not to be flooded were left alone. Some were moved to higher ground and some were indeed covered by the newly created lake. There now are at least 26 cemeteries in the park that are visited by the descendants of the original settlers. By 1945 the dam was complete and the remaining workers left the area. TVA purchased the remaining settlements. Shortly thereafter, the land was turned over to the GSMNP — allowing the park to extend its borders to the northern shores of Fontana Lake.

The issue of access to the isolated cemeteries in the park complicated efforts to manage the area. Although documents of the time do not mention the cemetery issue, descendants claim the Government promised them a new road along the north shore of Fontana Lake to visit their family areas. Efforts to address the problem culminated in 2010 when the Department of the Interior agreed to pay $52 million to Swain County to satisfy any claims in this regard. Reflecting the intense emotions associated with the issue, the road from Bryson City to the southern end of the park is known locally as the "Road To Nowhere". The northern end of the road culminates in the famous Tunnel on the Road to Nowhere.

Tunnel on the Road to Nowhere

In retrospect, it is important to note that the Cherokee were not the only humans to be forcibly removed by the US Government from the area. Railroad companies forced people to sell their land and move for the sake of the War effort and their country. The Tennessee Valley Authority and the NPS used "writs of eminent domain" to remove almost the entire remaining population from the area. In recent years, the park has been much more active in honoring the heritage of those families who were forced to leave.

Flora and Fauna — Because the park elevation varies so much, there are many different ecosystems found in the area. The biodiversity in the park is remarkable. Camping on Mount Sterling will remind you of northern Maine, while along Hazel and Noland Creeks, a temperate rain forest environment exists. The NPS is involved in a continuing process to restore the area to its earlier state. The reintroduction of the River Otter and the American Elk are real success stories. Elk have returned to the Round Bottom/Pretty Hollow area. Coyote packs roam the countryside atop Newton Bald. Unfortunately, the feral hogs are the result of an escape from the Hooper Bald area and

various invasive plant species have established footholds in the park. The hemlock woolly adelgid, pine bark beetle, emerald ash borer, acid rain and other environmental changes have altered the existing ecosystems in ways still not fully understood. There is no doubt that park officials are challenged in their efforts to "restore" any natural ecosystem. Nature is a dynamic process and change is inevitable. The area was designated a National Park on June 15, 1934, an International Biosphere Reserve in 1976 and a World Heritage Site on December 6, 1983.

The Benton MacKaye Trail through the Smokies offers hikers a unique opportunity to see these processes in action, and to, as MacKaye would say, "See, and see what you have seen". Don't just hike the trail—experience it!

Smokemont — In the late 1800s, the invention of the band saw and the expansion of logging railroads encouraged the logging boom in the Southern Appalachians. Smokemont is located at the north end of the Oconaluftee River Valley in the GSMNP. There, the Oconaluftee River, Chasteen Creek and Bradley Fork come together to create a broader river that eventually turns west, where it flows into the Tuckasegee River near Bryson City, North Carolina.

Chasteen Creek Cascades

Smokemont became a logging camp and the Three M Logging Company, later the Champion Fibre Company, removed most of the mature timber in the area. In 1925 a massive forest fire, fueled by the "slash" left by the logging operations, scorched a large percentage of the southern slopes of the Smokies. The Great Smoky Mountains Park Commission bought out the Champion Fibre Company's tract in the 1930s. A Civilian Conservation Camp was set up at Smokemont to construct roads and trails in the area. Still remaining in the Smokemont area are Lufty Baptist Church and Bradley Cemetery. Today Smokemont is a front country campground maintained by the NPS.

According to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park's website, prior to the establishment of the park, a number of animals native to the Smoky Mountains already had been extirpated from the area due to hunting, trapping and changing land uses such as logging and development. Bison, elk, mountain lion, gray wolf, red wolf, fisher, river otter, peregrine falcons and several types of fish are some of the better known species that once were native to the area. The NPS has been successful at reintroducing the river otter, elk and Peregrine Falcon to the park.

Elk had disappeared from the area by the mid-1800s. The experimental release of elk into the GSMNP began in February 2001 with the importation of 25 elk from the Land between the Lakes National Recreation Area along the Tennessee-Kentucky border. In 2002, the park imported another 27 animals. All elk were radio-collared and were monitored during the eight-year experimental phase of the project. In 2009-2010, the park began developing an environmental assessment of the program and a long-term management plan for elk.

When the GSMNP officials began introducing elk a decade ago, biologists thought coyotes would be the herd's main predator. However, black bear proved to be a bigger concern. In 2005, the park documented the first cases of black bears searching the fields of Cataloochee Valley to prey on newborn elk. The imported elk had rarely encountered black bears in the regions where they had originated: Land between the Lakes in Kentucky, and Elk island National Park in Alberta, Canada. The predation of elk calves was such a problem that wildlife officers trapped the bears and relocated them to the Twenty Mile section at the west end of the Smokies. More Elk importations have not been attempted due to fears of the transmission of chronic wasting disease or brucellosis to surrounding herds of cattle.

Most of the elk live in the Cataloochee area in the northeastern section of the park. Occasionally small groups are seen at Balsam Mountain, Oconaluftee and on the Cherokee Indian Reservation.

CATALOOCHEE — In 1848, George Palmer, then 54 years old, with his wife and two youngest children moved to Cataloochee. George's son, Jesse, built a grist mill on Palmer Creek. The entire area was cleared of trees and the creek water provided the power to turn the large stone wheels to grind the grain. Corn was the main grain grown in the area. The mills not only were a necessity but a social center for the surrounding community. Because of its remote location, Cataloochee became a haven for AWOL soldiers fleeing the horror of the Civil War. Supposedly in search of the deserters, bands of men from both the Confederate and Union sides scoured the mountains. The reality was that many of the bands looted and destroyed any homes they found. George Kirk was a renegade Confederate colonel who led a band that included about 600 deserters and criminals. Kirk and his men arrived at Cataloochee during the last days of the war. The local famers, Cherokees and North Carolina Confederates were

outraged by the brutal killing and looting. They banded together to drive the “Kirk’s Raiders” back over the mountains to Tennessee.

Between 1890 and 1920, the population of Cataloochee was at its peak. The valley was almost completely cleared of trees. The forest now is regrowing and the mountain landscape includes tulip poplars, oaks, maples, birches and rhododendrons.

In the 1920s, the increase in tourism and the destructive effects of logging gave rise to a movement to create a national park in the Smokies. For this to happen, the residents living within the proposed park boundaries would have to sell their land or be forced out via eminent domain. In 1928, Reverend Pat Davis broke the news to the residents of Cataloochee at Palmer's Chapel — telling them the valley was within the proposed park boundaries and they would be forced to sell. Hattie Caldwell Davis, who was at the meeting, recalled women crying and men threatening to dynamite the roads/shoot anyone who tried to enter.

Opposition to the park movement was somewhat eased when the Park Commission allowed residents to obtain life-time leases and remain in their homes. Although some contested their condemnation suits, most simply took what was offered. Many chose to remain on lifetime leases, but restrictions on farming and logging would force most people out of Cataloochee by 1943. Currently, one of the most concentrated collections of historic structures in the GSMNP can be found in Cataloochee.

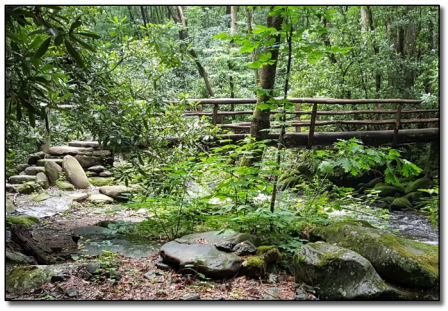
Trout Fishing —The BMT crosses several fairly large streams which are known for excellent trout fishing, including: Eagle, Hazel, Forney, Noland, Deep and Big creeks; Bradley Fork, Straight Fork and Raven Fork streams; as well as the Oconaluftee River. Within the park, a Tennessee or a North Carolina fishing license is valid.

Calhoun House & Hazel Creek — Hazel Creek was once the most popular place along the north shore of Fontana Lake. The Cherokee both lived and made summer camps along the creek for at least one thousand years. It wasn’t until 1830 that the first non-Cherokees were documented in the area. Hazel Creek allegedly was named after the American Hazel Nut trees growing along its banks. Fishing along the creek is superb.

After the park purchased the land in 1934, the Calhoun House, built in 1928, was used temporarily as a Ranger Station.

Campsite #74 » Noland Creek Trail Junction — Several cemeteries are just a few feet off the BMT/Lakeshore Trail corridor and are worth visiting. The cemeteries are not marked, but generally, if you see a trail going off to the side with a “No Horses” sign, that trail probably leads to a cemetery. For the people whose relatives are buried in these cemeteries, their only access to the cemeteries is by boat, then on foot. At times during the year, the park staff arranges rides to the cemeteries for the relatives.

This section also has many of the rare Table Mountain Pine. The tree needs a very specialized habitat found only in a few locations.



Noland Creek

Tunnel on the Road to Nowhere — The famous Tunnel on the Road to Nowhere is 375 yards long and made of stone and mortar. Built in the early 1960s, it was part of a road that was supposed to connect Bryson City and Fontana Dam. Due to budget difficulties, environmental issues, construction challenges and the fact that a good road already existed on the south side of Fontana Lake, the road was never completed.

Noland Creek Trail Jct. » Noland Divide Trail Jct. — In 1934, it took a month for 10 men from the Deep Creek CCC to drill through solid rock to construct the Upper Noland Creek Trail.

The GSMNP has been called the "Salamander Capital of the World” and salamanders and wild ginseng are abundant in the Noland Creek area. Thirty salamander species in five families make this one of the most diverse areas on earth for this order. When Botanist Andrew Michaux traveled through the southern Appalachians in the 1790s, he identified American ginseng as a plant that had medicinal value. He taught the mountain people how to prepare the root to sell to the Chinese. Over the generations, residents of the area harvested so much of the wild ginseng to sell for cash that it is now protected by law.

Deep Creek Trail, Mountains-to-Sea Trail » Campsite 52 — Campsite #57 is the location of Horace Kephart’s cabin. Kephart was instrumental in the establishment of the park and made famous the phrase, “the back of beyond”. A bronze plaque near the trail commemorates his contribution. George Masa, a close friend of Kephart and an

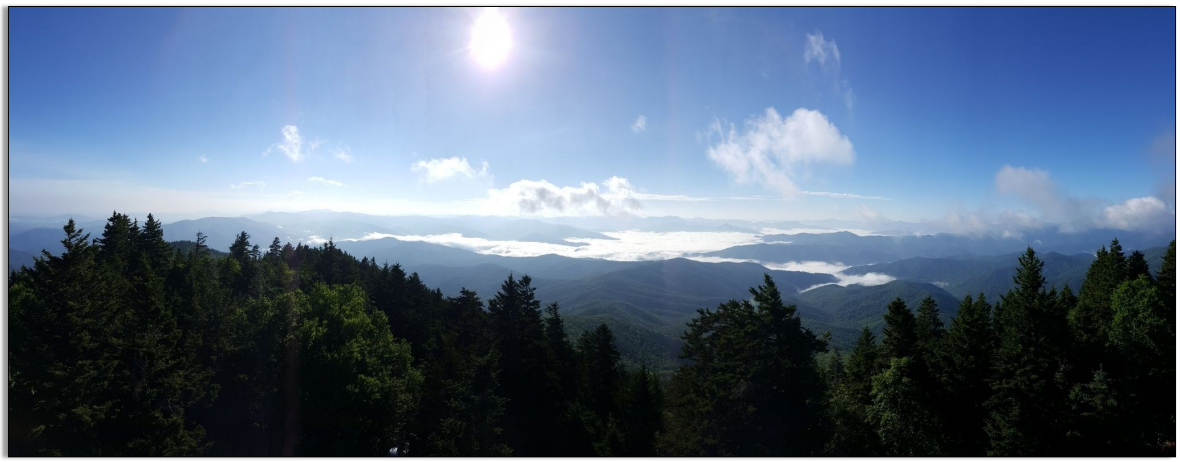
explorer and Ashville photographer, accompanied Kephart on many of his journeys. Masa catalogued the peaks of the Smokies and researched the names given to them by the Cherokee. He also scouted out the route for the AT throughout all of North Carolina. Masa Knob stands adjacent to Mount Kephart in the Smokies

Smokemont Campground » Campsite 47 — Smokemont, a contraction for Smoky Mountains, originally was a lumber company village for the Champion Fibre Company. Initially, it was called Bradleytown for the Bradley family who settled the area, then later called Luftee for the Oconaluftee River that runs through the area. After the area was purchased for inclusion in the GSMNP in 1939, the settlement was abandoned. Today, it is a busy national park campground. The Primitive Baptist Church in the area dates back to those early years.

Smokemont » Straight Fork Road — Because much of the section was never logged, the forest here is particularly beautiful. Consequently, many huge trees are to be found as the trail follows the course of the creek.

Ira McGee ground corn at his mill on Ledge Creek. In the 1920s, the area was heavily logged by the Ravensford Lumber Company. To restore the area and build trails, a CCC camp was located at the junction of Round Bottom Creek and Raven Fork.

Mount Sterling Fire Tower — Clubmoss (vegetable sulfur) is prevalent along the trail to the 5,842-foot Mount Sterling. The moss produces abundant yellow spores containing a highly flammable oil. The spores once were collected and used as ignition powder for fireworks as well as to create the flash for early cameras. The Mount Sterling Fire Tower is the highlight of this section. Hikers can climb up into the cabin at the top to view the surrounding mountains — a favorite spot for sunset pictures!



View from Mount Sterling Fire Tower