

The Impact of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park on Gatlinburg

If there is one word that best sums up the impact of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park on Gatlinburg, Tennessee, it is “development.” Before the Park came, Gatlinburg was little more than a small farming community, consisting of a few scattered homes, two general stores, a church, and of course, the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School. But in the decades following the Park’s founding, the town experienced a whirlwind of tourist-related development that would see virtually every inch of level land -- and quite a bit of hillside land, at that -- covered with hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, and resort homes.

Of course, the Gatlinburg tourist trade actually predates the founding of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park by several decades. According to historian Margaret Lynn Brown, hikers, naturalists, sightseers, and other pleasure-seekers were visiting the Smokies regularly by the late nineteenth century, and as one might expect, the town’s more enterprising residents were happy to accommodate them. For example, in 1918, entrepreneur Andy Huff built a small hotel on his Gatlinburg property -- the “Mountain View” -- which catered to loggers, tourists, and other parties in need of lodging. Down the road, in a general store situated near the confluence of Baskins Creek and the Little Pigeon River, Huff’s neighbor Ephraim E. Ogle began what is surely a familiar tradition to modern Gatlinburg visitors -- performing wedding ceremonies for vacationing couples. And further back in the mountains, one of Gatlinburg’s more aged residents, “Aunt Sophie” Campbell, made a modest profit selling homemade clay pipes to passing hikers. She and her husband “Uncle Tom” were quite popular among visitors; over the years, their diminutive cabin served as the “jumping off” point for many an expedition into the mountains.

There was other development as well. During the 1920s, numerous dance halls, souvenir shops, and other tourist-related businesses sprang up along Gatlinburg's main thoroughfare. At approximately the same time, wealthy urbanites from Knoxville and other nearby cities such as Asheville, North Carolina began constructing summer cottages in the vicinity of the Settlement School. By 1931, four years prior to the founding of the Park, the once-sleepy mountain hamlet had taken on the character of a bustling small town. In fact, by 1935, Gatlinburg had eclipsed nearby Sevierville in terms of population, making it the largest city in Sevier County.

Never one to pass up a lucrative business opportunity, the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School did what it could to capitalize on the pre-Park tourist trade. In 1927, eight years before the Park was founded, the school began selling handmade craft items such as woven coverlets, chairs, carved figurines, and baskets to passers-by from its Arrowcraft Shop, and then used the profits to supplement its educational and health care programs. So successful was Arrowcraft that local artisans soon followed the Fraternity's lead. By the early 1930s, there were numerous independent shops in operation along Gatlinburg's main thoroughfare, competing directly with Pi Beta Phi for an ever-increasing amount of tourist dollars.

Still, economic development arising from the pre-Park tourist trade paled in comparison to that which occurred *after* 1935 (the year the Park was officially founded); for as the decades passed, and number of visitors entering the Park swelled from hundreds of thousands to millions annually, entrepreneurs took up the task of providing them with hotels, restaurants, and amusements. Much of this development was, unfortunately, sprawling and unsightly -- a fact which proved worrisome to the staff of the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School. In her 1965 report to the Settlement School Committee, Settlement School Director Marion Mueller noted unhappily that "downtown Gatlinburg certainly gives the appearance of using every inch, and, frankly, I do

not think the net result is a beautiful sight. It shows a definite lack of city planning.” And yet, the sprawl appears not to have concerned the entrepreneurs. Development continued at a breakneck pace, until the entirety of the Gatlinburg section of the Little Pigeon River Valley was more or less completely occupied by structures.

Not surprisingly, given its location adjacent to the National Park and abundance of hotels and restaurants, Gatlinburg soon developed a bustling convention business. During the 1951-1952 fiscal year, Gatlinburg played host to the National Governors’ Convention, the Wilson Club of America Convention, the District Rotary Convention, and a Marble Industry Convention. Two years later, the Tennessee Bar Association, Tennessee Jaycees, and Southeast Arts Association staged their annual conventions in the city, as did the Council of Southern Mountain Workers and the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild. As it did with the growing arts and handicrafts market, the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School took full advantage of Gatlinburg’s reputation as a tourist hub to accumulate funds and develop new educational programs. Beginning in 1959, the school rented out its newly-renovated “Red Barn” to church groups, Pi Beta Phi chapters, and others who wished to stage meetings in the shadow of the Smokies. The fraternity’s popular Summer Workshop in Crafts and Community Recreation (and later, Arrowmont) benefited from the presence of the National Park as well; for although students and teachers were busy with arts and crafts projects, they were nevertheless eager to hike, swim, and enjoy numerous other Park-related recreational activities.

There were, of course, a number of problems that accompanied Gatlinburg’s meteoric, Park-related growth -- that is, in addition to the aforementioned problem of unsightly sprawl. First and foremost, the sheer number of people visiting the Park -- and hence, spending a portion of their time in Gatlinburg -- far exceeded the city’s ability to generate electricity, provide clean

drinking water, and dispose of waste. Some worried aloud that the city might experience an epidemic of water-borne disease -- a very real threat indeed and one that, if realized, might well have had disastrous effects on the local economy. Second, Gatlinburg lacked sufficient police power to cope with the steadily increasing tourist and resident populations, and so was unable to combat a corresponding rise in the local crime rate. Vandals were a constant nuisance, and the city's largely unregulated dance halls and bars earned a rather unsavory reputation. They were so notorious, in fact, that musician Johnny Cash saw fit to immortalize Gatlinburg in his well-known comedic song about a drunken brawl, "A Boy Named Sue."

The sanitation, water, power, and crime problems were easy enough to resolve, for they required only that the city develop and carry out public works projects and increase its police force. The aesthetic questions were, however, more difficult to resolve. In fact, contemporary Gatlinburg continues to struggle with this issue. In recent years, an organization known as the Gatlinburg Gateway Foundation has taken steps to raise awareness of and address these problems, primarily by staging public seminars and by backing projects such as the burial of utility lines. The Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts has been heavily involved in this effort as well, for the sprawl has a direct (and often negative) effect on the school's ability to recruit arts and crafts faculty and students.