

The Founding of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park

To many a modern visitor, unfamiliar with the long history of Southern Appalachia, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park appears to be a pristine wilderness -- the last untouched bastion of the once-great eastern forests, which are said to have stretched unbroken from Maine to the Mississippi River. And yet, as historian Margaret Lynn Brown points out, this perception is quite inaccurate. For approximately one thousand years prior to the arrival of European settlers in North America, the Cherokee cleared fields, built homes and villages, and otherwise altered the landscape and ecology of what is now the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. After partially displacing the Cherokee in the aftermath of the American Revolution, European settlers continued shaping and reshaping the local environment, such that by the early twentieth century, the Great Smoky Mountains were less a wilderness than they were a “pastoral landscape” of farms, small towns, mines, and timber-cutting operations. Knowing this, one can hardly label the Great Smoky Mountains National Park a true “wilderness,” despite the fact that it bears all the hallmarks normally *associated* with wilderness, such as rugged terrain, significant animal populations, and a lack of human habitation. If anything, it is a created wilderness; one built, and still shaped, by the hands and cultural perceptions of human beings.

In order to create the Great Smoky Mountains National Park government authorities had to first convince or compel thousands of mountain denizens -- along with numerous logging interests -- to cede their lands to the National Park Service, and then devise a means to prevent them from returning.

The first and most significant obstacle to land acquisition came in the form of lumber companies; not necessarily because the companies’ owners opposed selling their lands to the United States Government, but because they wanted the lands held as a National Forest -- and

thus open to logging -- rather than as a National Park. Furthermore, the “timber barons” were economically and politically powerful, and as such were more than capable of mounting significant legal challenges to Park purchasing agents. Ultimately, a gift of \$5,000,000 from John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in the late 1920s on behalf of the proposed National Park did much to strengthen the land agents’ bargaining position, primarily because it convinced W. B. Townsend of the Little River Logging Company, Reuben Roberson of Champion Fibre Company, and others like them that the National Park project was an inevitability, and that it would serve them well to sell their lands before condemnation suits were brought by the government. Significant logging operations had ceased in the Smokies by the early 1930s, but not before some 300,000 acres had been denuded of trees.

Acquiring the lands held by Southern Appalachian farmers and their tenants was much easier, for they were less economically and politically powerful than the timber companies. Essentially, the states of Tennessee and North Carolina purchased what they could from willing sellers, and then relied on the power of eminent domain -- that is, the power of government to condemn and seize lands for use in public projects -- to take control of the rest. The land was then donated to the Federal Government for use in the Park. Perhaps the most notable of these eminent domain suits occurred in 1929, when the State of Tennessee moved to condemn lands owned by prominent Cades Cove resident John Oliver. According to Brown, Oliver refused to take the \$20 per acre -- less than half of its market value -- offered by Tennessee purchasing agents for his property, with the result being that the agents took him to court. As it happened, Oliver convinced the Blount County, Tennessee Circuit Court that the State had no right to condemn his land on behalf of the Federal Government; but the Tennessee Supreme Court ruled against him, thereby forcing him to give up his farm. Given the notoriety of the case, not to

mention Oliver's rather substantial social/economic standing (he was well-known among Knoxville's business class), the ruling created something of a panic among Southern Appalachian landowners. Many of his neighbors scrambled to sell their farms to purchasing agents, lest they succumb to a similar fate.

"All in all," Brown writes, "it took more than twelve years to buy the 1,132 small farms and 18 large tracts [mostly lumber company lands] in the Great Smoky Mountains." The Federal Government took over management of the area in 1931, and the Park was formally dedicated nine years later in 1940.

The Park Service soon discovered, however, that founding the Park, and then keeping its former inhabitants out, were two different matters altogether. Destitute families, driven to desperation by the hardships of the Great Depression (the worst years of which just so happened to correspond to the founding of the Park), routinely made their way into the Park and squatted in abandoned cabins. To make matters worse, bootleggers -- or those who produced illegal alcohol -- used the rugged depopulated Park as a hideout, from which point they were able to ply their trade and elude authorities. Beginning in 1934 with J. Ross Eakin, a series of Park Superintendents fought to clear "unwelcome guests" from Park lands, be it by tracking down and evicting squatters, razing abandoned cabins, or arresting bootleggers. It would take several decades for the Park Service to prevail, but in the end, prevail it did. There were, of course, considerable hard feelings generated between Park officials and local residents during this period, but in the end most mountaineers grew to accept, and even develop a genuine affection for, the Park and its preservationist mission.

And yet, even before the mountaineers were fully removed from the Smokies, the Park Service set about transforming abandoned farms and towns into the "wilderness" of

preservationists' dreams. In many cases, this was accomplished by doing nothing, other than allowing a succession of plant and animal species to reclaim the land; but where manmade ecological destruction was deemed too significant for a speedy recovery, human beings aided the process along. The weight of this restoration effort was borne, primarily, by the young men of the Civilian Conservation Corps (or CCC), who were housed by the Federal Government inside the Park boundary and who spent their days planting trees, cutting trails, clearing deadfalls, putting out forest fires, and collecting rare plant species. The landscape that they fashioned was, according to Brown, somewhat less than "naturalistic," for the United States Department of the Interior insisted that they adhere to popular landscape architecture principles when "creat[ing] scenic views . . . and restor[ing] the land to a natural appearance using native plants." Still, the end result was deemed a success, for the new Park was not only aesthetically pleasing to visit, but represented, and continues to represent, one of the richest biospheres in terms of plant and animal species on the planet.

In recent decades, preserving the Great Smoky Mountains National Park as a "wilderness" area has become increasingly more difficult. The Park boundaries have not changed appreciably since 1935, and are in no peril of being changed in the foreseeable future; but the outside world continues to encroach upon those boundaries, rendering the Smokies an increasingly small island of green amid a sea of commercial, industrial, and residential development. Of particular concern to Park officials is pollution arising from this development, for it poses a serious threat to the Park's rich -- and yet extremely delicate -- ecosystem. According to the National Park Service, air pollution arising from coal-fired power plants, automobiles, and other sources has caused significant (and in some cases, permanent) damage to plant and animal species residing in the Smokies, and continues to do so at an alarming rate.

Less dire, and yet no less vexing, is the impact pollution has had on the Park's aesthetics.

Hikers, backpackers and other tourists could once expect to see as far as 100 miles from the Park's highest peaks; now, thanks to ozone and suspended particulate matter, visibility is often reduced to twenty-five miles or less.

Resolving these issues will take time; but until then, the Great Smoky Mountains will stand as a testament to Americans' desire, for better or worse, to set aside wilderness areas for public enjoyment.