

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS

Colloquy

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View from Myrtle Point on Mount Le Conte, The Panoramic Images of Elgin P. Kintner, M.D., University of Tennessee Libraries.

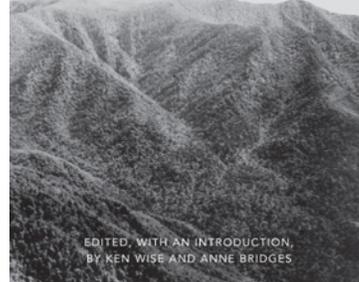
Great Smoky Mountains Easily Stand First: THE SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN PARK COMMISSION HIKE UP MOUNT LE CONTE

The year was 1924 and it finally seemed likely that there would be a national park in the Southern Appalachians. National Park Service director Stephen Mather and Secretary of the Interior Herbert Work were both enthusiastic about the idea. Mather wrote the previous year, "There should be a typical section of the Appalachian Range established as a national park with its native flora and fauna conserved and made accessible for public use and its development undertaken by Federal funds." To that end, Work created a special committee charged with investigating locations suitable for a national park. Chaired by Representative Henry W. Temple from Pennsylvania, the committee held their first meeting in March during which they named themselves the Southern Appalachian National Park Commission. After the commission had queried interested parties, they left Washington July 25th to personally survey likely locations.

The previous year, a group of civic-minded Knoxvilleans, led by Willis P. Davis and Colonel David Chapman, had formed the Great Smoky Mountains Conservation Association with the express purpose of promoting the formation of a national park in the Smokies. Members of the group were interested in preserving the national beauty of the Smokies while also providing an economic boost to the region with increased tourism and an incentive for the federal government to build roads and other improvements.

PAUL J. ADAMS

Mount Le Conte



EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION,
BY KEN WISE AND ANNE BRIDGES

Recently published by the University of Tennessee Press: a new edition of *Mount Le Conte*, by Paul J. Adams, with added photographs and an introduction and notes by Ken Wise and Anne Bridges.

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Mountain View Hotel in Gatlinburg. The hiking party stayed here before beginning the hike up Mount Le Conte. Albert "Dutch" Roth Digital Photograph Collection, University of Tennessee Libraries.

As the news that the commission would visit the Smokies spread, the Conservation Association, with Chapman in the lead, began plans to host the visit. The highlight of the trip would be a hike up Mount Le Conte. To the disappointment of the association, Secretary Work became ill and had to return to Washington. Another member of the committee, Major W. A. Welch, had to bow out because of the death of his mother. The two commission members who were able to make the trip to the Smokies were William C. Gregg, a New Jersey railroad car manufacturer and national park supporter, and Harlan P. Kelsey, from Massachusetts, representing the Appalachian Mountain Club. The group travelled to Gatlinburg on August 6 where they were impressed by an unusually brilliant rainbow arched over the Smokies. They spent the night at the Mountain View Hotel in preparation for the ascent up Le Conte the next day.

Paul Adams, a young man from Knoxville, was included as a member of the Le Conte group. He had come to the attention of Chapman and others in the Conservation Association because of his knowledge of the Smokies and the attendant flora and fauna. Several Knoxville area businessmen, members of the press, Gatlinburg guide Wiley Oakley, several young men from Gatlinburg, and two cinematographers from the Keystone Film Company who were hired to record the trip rounded out the hiking party. Newspaperman Loye W. Miller, then age twenty-five, filed several detailed stories about the adventures of the hikers in the *Knoxville News* (later *Knoxville News-Sentinel*). Adams later documented the trip in his book *Mt. LeConte*.

Always a rugged hike, the trip up Le Conte was even more rugged in 1924. Horses were provided for some of

the hikers to make the first mile of the trip easier. Others like Adams choose to walk. The party ate lunch at Rainbow Falls and then began the vigorous climb over the falls. Adams recalled, "Back then, one needed both strong legs and arms to gain the top of Rainbow Falls. The 'trail' went up a leaning tree near the bluff, about 100 feet west of the falls. Helpers at the base of the tree helped some of our less agile guests to reach the first tree branches." Miller was less charitable in saying "It sapped the breath of many a sedentary cigarette-smoker in the party." The film crew had to give their equipment to the young men from Gatlinburg who were more adept at mountain climbing.

At last the summit of the mountain was reached where the party found a shack had been built for their stay. Unfortunately, the group had grown to twenty-five, while the accommodations were designed for eighteen. The reporter Miller was one of the younger men who were "delegated to sleep under a leaky lean-to with a mattress of balsam boughs that had been well-soaked by the rains." He spent most of the night trying to make his one blanket cover both his feet and head. To make matters worse, a water droplet periodically landed on his head.

The difficult night was mostly forgotten after an early morning trip to Myrtle Point. Chapman had been concerned that the rainy weather would prevent a view of the sunrise. But the group was not disappointed. Adams wrote, "The sky overhead was clear. But we looked down on billowing tops of thunderheads in the valleys. . . . Through a moderate haze in the east, we could see Mount Guyot. And then the sun, a ball of red fire, rose over Guyot. Its rays sparkled splendor in the cloud tops below. . . . We were small spectators, awe-struck by the vast, primitive beauty of an extra-special Myrtle Point sunrise." The film crew took the first movies ever filmed at the top of the Smokies.

After breakfast, some of the guides left the group. The remaining hikers, which included the two Park Commission members Gregg and Kelsey, decided to descend the mountain on a new trail between Le Conte and Alum Cave Bluff. The trail included a section of very steep, bare rock. The guides and the more agile men positioned themselves on the barren rock to help the others down. After the guides themselves had made the descent, the film crew asked them to repeat it so they could get the scene on film.

Davis and Knoxville dentist R. N. Kesterson suffered minor injuries on the descent. But horses were to be waiting for the hikers at the Grassy Patch cabin about two miles down the trail to help the injured and weary group. Adams ran on ahead to bring the horses up the trail, but to his amazement

the horses were not at the designated location. After a quick run/hike up the Indian Gap Road, Adams determined that the horses had been delivered to the wrong location. Guide Will Ramsey from Gatlinburg saved the day by hiking down to the Sugarlands and acquiring two other horses for the injured men to ride. Some of the hikers stayed the night in Gatlinburg, while others, including Gregg and Kelsey and the Conservation Association members, continued by way of automobile to the Appalachian Club in Elkmont to have a good meal, meet with Tennessee Governor Austin Peay, and enjoy sleeping in a comfortable bed.

The Le Conte trip was a rousing success, followed by trips to Cades Cove and Gregory Bald and later visits by other commission members. In a public statement quoted in the *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, Kelsey said that, although he could not promise the specific location, there would be a national park in the Southern Appalachians. The Smoky Mountains, he said, have not only “fully come up to what we expected but have surpassed what we hoped.”

The local park supporters had to wait for the report of the commission to see if the Smokies had been recommended as the site for the new eastern national park. In the December 12th report, the Commission declared that of the many sites they visited, “the Great Smoky Mountains easily stand first because of the height of the mountains, depth of valleys, ruggedness of the area, and the unexampled variety of trees, shrubs, and plants.” However, the very ruggedness that the Commission members admired in the Smokies led them to recommend a much easier location in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. The Blue Ridge also had the advantage of being closer to Washington. It had civil war battlefields to create historic interest and the possibility of a skyline drive. But Congress

saw the wisdom of creating a national park in the Smokies as well, provided, of course, that the states of North Carolina and Tennessee would raise the money and purchase the land from the individual landowners and timber companies.

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Keystone Film Company, filming in front of Farragut Hotel, Knoxville. Four men on the left are members of the Park Commission party. Man on the far right is David Chapman. Next to Chapman is Harlan Kelsey. Identity of the two men on the left is unknown, although one of them is probably William C. Gregg. From newspaper accounts, the date was most likely August 6, 1924. Thompson Photograph Collection, Calvin M. McClung Historical Collection, Knox County Public Library.

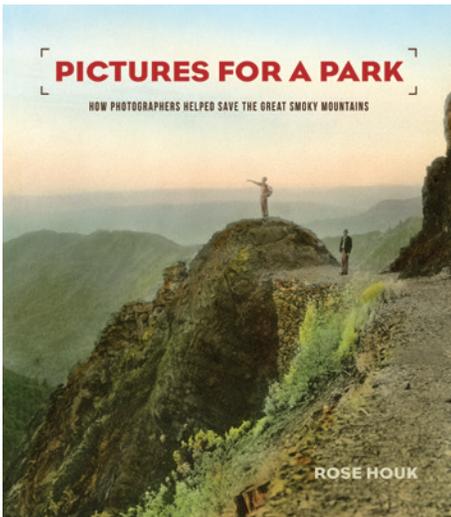


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New on the Smokies Bookshelf



Rose Houk. *Pictures for a Park: How Photographers Helped Save the Great Smoky Mountains*. Great Smoky Mountains Association, 2016.

a vanishing pioneer lifestyle, and capturing a dramatic and evolving landscape. Rose Houk has provided rich images and text to highlight the efforts of ten of the most prominent early Smokies photographers in *Pictures for a Park: How Photographers Helped Save the Great Smoky Mountains*. The photographers profiled include well-known names like Jim Thompson and George Masa and the more obscure like

It is frequently said that a picture is worth a thousand words. In the case of the Smokies photographers, a body of images was instrumental in saving acres of wilderness, documenting

E. E. Exline and George Grant. Readers may be surprised to learn that Ansel Adams, the great Western photographer, left his photographic mark on the Smokies, calling them “devilish hard to photograph” because of the closed forests and misty air. Doris Ullman, famed New York photographer, was fascinated by the mountain people, creating intimate portraits.

Author Houk’s essays are well researched and written, providing intriguing details about her subjects. *Pictures for a Park* is richly illustrated in an oversize format that displays the photographs to their best advantage. Kudos to both the author and the designer who have created a stunningly appealing homage to those men and women who had the vision to document the extraordinary beauty they saw around them and the persistence and stamina to carry heavy photographic equipment into the wilderness. More than the many words written about the Smokies, it is their legacy that brings the history of the Smokies to life.