Travels into Western North Carolina
Chronological Notes

Intending to explore as far west as the Overhill Settlements of the Cherokees, south of the current Knoxville, Tennessee, Bartram left Charleston in late April 1775. His itinerary took him through the present Clemson University area and across the Oconee Mountains in western South Carolina. He crossed the Chattooga River and passed the ruins of Stekoia, near the current Clayton, Georgia. At the eastern continental divide, he entered the valley of the Little Tennessee River, exploring for several days in late May. He proceeded into the Nantahala Mountains, but cut his trip westward short after three days, returning to Cowee and then to Georgia.

On April 19, a few days before Bartram departed Charleston for the “Cherokee Mountains,” Minutemen fired on Redcoats in Concord, Massachusetts. On the day he crossed the Savannah River into South Carolina, the Second Continental Congress convened and began preparations for coordinated military action against the British, and eighty-three Green Mountain Boys captured Fort Ticonderoga in New York. Rumors of the British stirring of the Indians against the colonials were sweeping the Southeast.

British troops began the occupation of Boston on May 25 and on June 15, a week before Bartram left on his journey to the Mississippi, George Washington was elected commander in chief of the Continental Army.
Figure 6. Map of Bartram’s Travels into Western North Carolina (1775)
When Bartram rode through here in 1775, he had only a rancid chunk of cheese left in his saddlebag," I tell Maria as we drive into North Carolina and enter the valley of the Little Tennessee River. "But we’ll eat chicken-fried steaks and thick gravy at the Downtowner."

"I’m holding you to that," she answers, reminding me of my habit of frugal dining.

Through the years, on hiking, camping, or canoeing trips, I’d gone out of my way to join the farmers and businessmen of Macon County at the Downtowner Cafe in Franklin, North Carolina, for breakfast or lunch. It was one of those cafes at the heart of small Southern towns, where I could treat myself to a stack of pancakes or a plate of tall white biscuits drowned in the sawmill gravy that has bred miles of cholesterol-laden veins.

A half-hour later, we stand puzzled under a faded red awning, reading neon-green, blue, and pink chalk lettering on a small blackboard. The special of the day, says the board, is creamy Vidalia onion soup and Italian chicken salad on pita. It also says that this is now the Frog and Owl Kitchen: A Mountain Bistro.

"Where’s the Downtowner?" I ask a man leaving the building through the plate glass door.

"Downtowner? Never heard of it," he says as he zips his Atlanta Braves jacket.

Curiosity overcomes grief. We enter the door and find the walls have morphed from off-white to dark green. Broad-shaded fixtures, hung from tracks on the ceiling, cast soft light on framed prints and pen and ink drawings, fit for bistros in Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles. I recall that the Downtowner was decorated with photos and prints of the Smokies.
Gone are the counter, the booths, and the denim-jacketed farmers with John Deere caps. Women outnumber men five to one. Silver-haired couples, well dressed and silent, sit at most tables.

Our waiter, a skinny boy wearing a black shirt and pants, a goatee, and a ball cap with the name “The Frog and Owl” in shades of green and orange stitching, moves quickly and efficiently, but with an air of relaxed hospitality. He lists the “specials” (ragout, Italian chicken on pita with black olives and bean sprouts, and something that features arugula) and struggles to describe tabouleh to the women at the table beside us.

Ladies upward from thirty, dressed in designer sweaters, muted-toned skirts and blouses covered with dark tattersall blazers. Huggers and smilers, they pass gift-wrapped packages toward the woman with pink cheeks and softly-curled blonde hair. She pulls the ribbon from a package, spreads the white tissue, and opens her mouth as her fingers lift a silvery Christmas ornament. “Oooh! How perfect.”

I turn to Maria and ask, in my best curmudgeonly tone: “How could they do this?”

“It’s a birthday party,” she says.

“No. I mean how could they do away with the old cafe?”

“Hey! It’s a fine restaurant,” she argues. “The food tastes great, the waiter is friendly, and your heart will thank you that you ate the pasta and chicken instead of gravy!” Then, with her characteristic honesty and a smile, she adds, “But I’d still like a plate of fried chicken and thick gravy on mashed potatoes.”

“True daughter of the South!”

Still grousing as I visit a pipe shop down the street, I ask the owner what had happened to the Downtowner and where we can get a breakfast like it served.

“Went out of business. Couldn’t compete with Hardee’s. You can get biscuits and pancakes out at the Sunset, out on State 28 North.” He shows me a Peterson bent and adds, “I miss the cafe, too.”

Those of us who live in cities see bulldozers level houses in a day and skyscrapers grow like weeds. We seek mountain coes largely because we need to see some stability, to feel some sense of our grandparents’ simpler lives. But, while change is not as rapid in the backcountry, it is happening. And although the replacement of a cafe by a bistro is a minor alteration compared with all that has passed through this valley since Bartram rode his horse into the American frontier, it is a clear snapshot of the latest wave.

This valley of the upper Little Tennessee River hosted the southwestern edge of the American Revolution, bade a forced farewell to the Cherokees who skillfully farmed its rich soil, and welcomed a wave of hardy Scots-Irish in the early 1800s. A railroad came and went. Giant trees vanished before the
loggers’ engines. Then, in the twentieth century, a swelling tide of retirees and other refugees from cities, seeking a quiet life in a temperate climate, flecked the mountainsides with four-bedroom, three-bath “cabins.” Construction has replaced farming as the major source of income, and a software company employs more than four hundred.

Although Bartram spent less than a week in “the Vale of Cowee” on his way to the Overhill Settlements of the Cherokees, his descriptions of the area and its people provide a rich insight into the frontier in the final moments before the burgeoning new nation changed it forever.

He entered the valley at the eastern continental divide at Mountain City, Georgia, forded a “delightful brook, the water of the Tanase” (the Little Tennessee River), and looked out on “the opening of the extensive and fruitful vale of Cowe” (Travels 345). The bottomland and the network of side valleys remain “fruitful”; truck farmers grow tomatoes and cabbages in its rich soil. Sleek cattle feed on thick grass in pastures cupped in the hands of tree-covered hills.

North Carolina’s Bartram Trail runs over the mountains to the east, paralleling his actual path. Near Franklin, it descends to the river, more closely following Bartram. The trail society has also designated a stretch of the river as a canoe trail. A plywood signboard beside the river, supported by sturdy pine lumber, is bare, stripped of any maps, notices, or descriptions it once held, but graffiti on the blank board inform us that “Stephanie Lowery Been Here,” along with “Micki, Kim and George, 2000.”

Across the highway, near an outlet store of a company that dominates the mobile home market of Appalachia, a shop displays chimineas and garish yard art imported from Mexico. Down the road is an upscale feed and seed store.

Somewhere along this stretch of river, Bartram, hungry and soggy after being caught in a thunderstorm on the previous day, spotted a trader paddling a canoe across the river. “G’on to my house yonder,” says the paddler in a nasal, Anglo-Saxon twang. “I’ll be there in a bit.”

The trader was one of the three Europeans Bartram mentions in the valley of the Little Tennessee. With his Cherokee wife, he lodged the weary botanist overnight, entertaining him “with the most perfect civility.” The housewife, says Bartram, was “a very agreeable good woman,” who treated them to cream and strawberries in the evening and, the following morning, with “excellent coffee, relished with buckanned venison, hot corn cakes, excellent butter and cheese” (Travels 349).

When he rode to the crests of the mountains around Cowee, Bartram saw, up and down the river, smoke from the cooking fires of dozens of towns in this Cherokee heartland. Farmers planted beans and corn in little hills of rich soil;
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hunters brought deer, rabbit, and turkeys from the forests. At the peak of their strength, Cherokees controlled an area “more than twice the size of England and immeasurably richer in natural resources,” says Christopher Camuto (5).

In 1760, the political turmoil of Europeans at war sucked them into a downward spiral. Their troubles began when, in alliance with the French, they ambushed Colonel Archibald Montgomery’s troops and sent them scurrying back into South Carolina. A year later, Colonel James Grant led a two-mile-long column of 2,800 men over the mountains of northern Georgia and down the valley of the Little Tennessee. Grant overcame the Cherokees in the Second Battle of Echoe and burned the towns of the valley. Siding with the British in 1776, they came under attack by the armies of the American Revolution.

Camuto calculates that the Cherokees, battered and surrounded by a growing number of white settlers, ceded “nearly 120,000 square miles of land between 1721 and 1835, when the fraudulent treaty of New Echota was imposed on the tribe prior to their removal” (5).

In 1818, Jacob Siler and William Brittain, a pair of entrepreneurs from Buncombe County, set up a lean-to where Cartoogechaya Creek enters the Little Tennessee River. Legend says that, three days after their arrival, Cherokee Chief Santeetlah came with a party of men and demanded that they leave. “The Council of Chiefs has sold all of this land to the white men,” Siler told the chief.

Siler and Brittain stayed, established a store, and welcomed a modest influx of white settlers who moved to the valleys after the Cherokees gave up their Little Tennessee River settlements in the Treaty of Washington of 1819 and moved farther into the mountains. By 1830, Macon and Cherokee counties held 5,333 farmers and merchants, largely Scots-Irish and English, along with a few African Americans who came to the valley as free people or slaves.

Growth was gradual until the late twentieth century. Then, between 1990 and 2000, Macon County’s population swelled almost 27 percent. Nearly half of those living in the county in 2000 were born in another state. Many are retirees; one in four residents of Macon County is over 65, a higher proportion of seniors than in Florida.

A woman with an English accent stands behind the counter of the attractive stone welcome center on the southern edge of Franklin, counseling travelers. A war bride from World War II London, she and her American husband lived some thirty years in Florida. Twenty-one years ago, after two break-ins at their Miami home, they moved to Macon County. The piano tuner we met in a restaurant and the owner of a tobacco and tea shop on Main Street echo her story of frustration with city life and the desire to retreat to the relative calm of the valley.

Some longtime Macon Countians claim that the newcomers from New England and Florida give the locals problems. “They expect instant change; they
won't accept the traditional ways of doing business,” said one. “They are rude,” said another. On the other hand, newcomer activists say, “We have to get those locals out of office.”

White, affluent retirees are not the only population migrating to the valley. In late September, when red tomatoes cover the ground in the fields near Prentiss Bridge, a farm truck stands in the parking lot of a white metal packing house. Men with brown skin and straight, black hair climb down from the weathered plywood shelter on the bed of the truck. Their leader, speaking with a heavy Mexican accent, discusses with the farm’s owner where the men will work the final days of the harvest. Hispanics, the fastest growing population group in the county, outnumber African Americans.

“They came here first as migrants, working the truck farms,” a Macon Countian told me. “Now they are permanent. They own several restaurants and grocery stores. I went to the driver’s license office last week and was the only English-speaking person in line. I asked the officer if it was like this every day. He told me it was.”

Franklin, the seat of Macon County, was established in the early nineteenth century on a hill above the ancient site of Nikwasi (Bartram’s “Nucasce”). Narrow two-story buildings stand brick-to-brick along Main Street, reflecting small-town architecture of the early 1900s. A gazebo, a bell tower and garden, a statue of a Confederate soldier, and a modern brick county courthouse flank the corners of the town square. The old jail houses a gem and mineral museum.

A few feet from the square lies Reverend Jesse Pendergrass’s general store. Built in 1904, the store provides a nostalgic setting for the Macon County Historical Society’s museum. Though its iron door latch resists easy opening, the staff offer a friendly welcome. Relics and photographs of the county’s history, displays of old books, and items for sale have replaced the dry goods in the original glass and dark-stained wood display cases. In the back room at a long table, its dark walnut wood marked by the work of a hundred years, sit three women searching through newspapers to gather stories and obituaries to add to the file cabinets that line the walls. Genealogy is the leading agenda of the historical society. Family trees wrap around county history like a vine.

Beyond Main Street, roads wind up the hills to the west, connecting large old houses, modest bungalows, and a hospital with the town center. Strip malls, roadside shops, and motels line the five arteries that connect within the city limits. To the east, above the four-lane divided highway that bends around the town, builders have gouged sides of mountains to level them for motels and shopping areas.
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From the central business district, I follow a mobile magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) truck to where the highway dips toward the bridge over the Little Tennessee River. Here, a passerby with a keen eye can see the Nikwasi mound, sole remnant of a once-prominent Cherokee town. Legend says the Indians who built the mound maintained a sacred fire on the mound and considered it “the Center” of the world.

Nikwasi sat on the left bank of the Little Tennessee, below its confluence with the Cullasaja River. Its houses and fields once covered 100 acres of the valley around the ancient mound until the armies of Colonel Grant burned the village, along with others in the valley in 1761. Bartram rode through the charcoal of Nikwasi’s ruins.

Across the Southeast, plows have leveled ceremonial mounds and dams have flooded whole villages. The Macon County Historical Society saved Nikwasi from this destiny when it purchased the mound in 1948 and deeded it in trust to the town of Franklin. The mound stands as the lone jewel in a small, well-kept, grassy park in the median of a divided highway, surrounded by Betsy’s School of Dance, the Manna Food Bank, an air-conditioning shop, and the empty building of a defunct auto dealer.

From Nikwasi, Bartram rode three miles down the river and found himself trapped in a maze of the fields of Watauga (“Whatoga”). He writes, the road carried me winding about through their little plantations of Corn, Beans, &c., up to the councilhouse, which was a very large dome or rotunda, situated on the top of an ancient artificial mount, and here my route terminated; all before me and on every side appeared little plantations of young Corn, Beans, &c., divided from each other by narrow strips or borders of grass, which marked the bounds of each one’s property, their habitation standing in the midst: finding no common high road to lead me through the town, I was now at a stand how to proceed farther, when observing an Indian man at the door of his habitation, three or four hundred yards from me, beckoning me to come to him, I ventured to ride through their lots, being careful to do no injury to the young plants, the rising hopes of their labour and industry, crossed a little grassy vale watered by a silver stream... then ascended a green hill to the house, where I was cheerfully welcomed at the door and led in by the chief. (Travel 350)

Bartram’s description of Watauga fits what archaeologists know of Cherokee towns. According to H. Trawick Ward and R. P. Stephen Davis, the Cherokees lived in “loosely clustered villages” surrounded by small farmsteads (271).
When the City of Franklin built the Porters Bend Dam in 1925, it covered Watauga’s fields with the waters of Lake Emory. It was the Roaring Twenties, when increasing numbers of families were driving their new automobiles across the nation on a growing network of highways. As the wealthy sought resorts, Franklin intended to get its share of the action by enhancing the recreational attractiveness of the area. At the same time, corporate loggers in the Smokies needed electrical power. The lake and power plant seemed an ideal project.

The lake’s developers never realized the fishing and golfing mecca. Immediately after the dam’s construction, millions of tons of soil eroded from the heavily logged mountains into Lake Emory. Mining, animal use, and other development along the upstream banks of the river added to the sediment that clogged the waterway. Only three years after its construction, the lake proved non-productive for power generation. At the same time, the Great Depression pulled the plug on tourism. When Franklin put the project up for sale, Nantahala Power bought it. Today its dark green waters wind through hills cut by subdivision streets named Czonka, Camelot, and Memory Lane. Conservationists affiliated with the nonprofit American Rivers organization point to the Emory Dam and its seven-mile lake as an example of “how a hydropower and recreational development plan without proper environmental considerations can turn into a fiscal and natural disaster.”

The lake provides at least one benefit, however. Paul Carlson of the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee says, “Lake Emory captures tons of silt that would damage the ecology of the river downstream. When silt builds up among the rocks of mountain streams it clogs the spawning grounds of trout and smaller fish. Until we can prevent upstream erosion, the dam is a blessing.”

Following his visit with the chief of Watauga, Bartram rode to Cowee, the capital of the Middle Settlements of the Cherokee, some six miles down the river. Tyler and I follow him one June afternoon. We slide our canoe into the river at Jerry Anselmo’s “Great Smokey Mountain Fish Camp,” then maneuver through rock fish-traps and shoals that span the river. The sparkling waters of the Little Tennessee nourish giant oaks, sycamores, and beeches. Floating in their shade, Tyler works spinner baits, coaxing smallmouth bass from their lairs, until we spot the mouth of Cowee Creek on the right and get our first view of the ancient town site. The creek’s waters bear a dingy runoff from a recent rain and ripple over a gravel bar, mixing with the deep jade river beneath the yellow-green boughs of a tulip poplar. Flowing from Cowee Mountain to the north, the Creek runs through foothills then cuts six feet into the rich bottomland soil that once hosted Cherokee corn, beans, and squash.
We slide our canoe over smooth, round gravel and onto the muddy shore. Tyler jumps out and ties the painter to a root while I unwind my stiff legs and shuffle our duffel to the front of the canoe.

Families of Cowee lived in this field when Bartram arrived. It was a suburb of the original town of Cowee, which sat some 400 yards downstream, across the river. By 1775 the community of a hundred houses and gardens had expanded to both sides of the river.

Bartram considered "the great vale of Cowee . . . one of the most charming natural mountainous landscapes perhaps any where to be seen; ridges of hills rising grand and sublimely above one another and beyond another, some boldly and majestically advancing into the verdant plain, their feet bathed with the silver flood of the Tanase" (Travels 353). According to a legend collected by the anthropologist James Mooney about a hundred years after Bartram, a Shawano warrior agreed. The man had been a prisoner here, but had escaped to his people in the north. After the tribes made peace, he returned to the area on a hunting trip. "While standing on a hill overlooking the valley," Mooney writes, "[the warrior] saw several Cherokee on an opposite hill, and called out to them, 'Do you still own Cowee?' They shouted in reply, 'Yes, we own it yet.' Back came the answer from the Shawano, who wanted to encourage them not to sell any more of their lands, 'Well, it's the best town of the Cherokee. It's a good country; hold on to it'" (378).

At the center of the main town, the residents of Cowee had built their log meeting place, "a large rotunda, capable of accommodating several hundred people; it stands on top of an ancient artificial mound of earth, of about twenty feet perpendicular, and the rotunda on the top of it being above thirty feet more, gives the whole fabric an elevation of about sixty feet from the common surface of the ground" (Travels 367).

Tree trunk posts supported a roof of cross beams and lathe on which bark and earth had been placed to provide protection from the rain. Almost nightly, villagers and their guests sat on bleacher-style benches covered with mats of grass and bark to enjoy dances, songs, and storytelling.

On the night their chief invited Bartram into the councilhouse, Cowee's people were preparing for a ball game with a neighboring town. Girls dressed in "clean white robes and ornamented with beads, bracelets and a profusion of gay ribbons" sang and moved "slowly round and round" (Travels 370). A whoop interrupted their dance as the ball team, dressed with silver beads, entered briskly, carrying their rackets and waving plumes as they sang and danced for their cheering townspeople.

If they lived until 1838, when the armies of President Martin Van Buren herded the tribe along the Trail of Tears, the dancers of Cowee would have been around 80 years old. The babies in arms that night were sixty-five.
Of Cowee, only the mound and name remain. Surrounded by a half-mile of bottom land in a sweeping bend of the river, the mound rises above a natural rock outcropping that slopes from the foothills of the Nantahalas. Hay grows knee-high over it and the surrounding fields; corn covers the field to its east. Across the river, in the flood plain, carpenters drive nails into the timber frame of a large house that will be drowned by Hurricane Ivan in 2004.

At our campsite—an open shelter with a corrugated metal roof, two wooden tables and a fire ring—we gather firewood from the grass beneath abandoned apple trees on the hills above the field.

"Are these trees left from the Indian orchards?" Tyler wonders.

"I'd like to know that, too," I answer. "There's too much we don't know. Too much we'll never understand."

We tend our small fire and talk of Indians who hunted, farmed, and built a mound a thousand years ago, of Spanish seekers of gold in the sixteenth century, and of the army of colonials that destroyed Cowee and thirty-five sister towns up and down the Little Tennessee in 1776, a year after Bartram's visit.

Over the years since Bartram's visit, farms and mica, kaolin, and corundum mines have dotted the surrounding hills. Electricity came to Cowee in the 1920s, as power lines were stretched to serve the lumber industry. In addition to a few historic buildings and tidy, modest homes, the valley holds only a handful of churches, convenience stores, and struggling roadside shops. In 2001, the Cowee–West's Mill Historic District was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Until late in the twentieth century, most of the settlements in the valley—Cowee, Iotla, Burningtown—had their own general stores and post offices. One by one, they folded as supermarkets opened in Franklin and the postal service closed its small offices.

"The closing of the stores, post offices, and little schools has changed the definition of the community," says Merritt Fouts, a lifelong resident of Iotla and Burningtown. "When I was a boy and someone talked of 'my community,' he meant Iotla, Cowee, or Burningtown. Now it is the county and Franklin."

Oral histories and memoirs continue to bear witness to those days not so long ago. In *Tablequah*, a memoir of her youth, Virginia Ramsey Brunner describes "S. T. Ramsey & Son, General Merchandise," the store her grandfather and father operated two miles up Tellico Creek from the Little Tennessee River, seven miles from Cowee:

An oversized key shifted the tumblers in the lock permitting the double-reinforced door to admit entrance to a shadowy interior. Instantly, a memorable mix of distinctive smells met the nose. Kerosene (called coal oil by locals who used
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it for lighting their homes), coffee’s exotic aroma, fatback, plug tobacco, pepper, leather from shoes and harness, lard in a large tub, cinnamon and cloves from the spice shelf and the elusive whiff of chocolate or mint from the candy jars when a top was lifted. (71)

Fabrics, lace, and spools of thread filled shelves along with crocks, cooking pots, pocket knives, and flyswatters. Bib overalls and shoes were there, as were tools and harnesses and nails and medicines for man and beast. Food items that couldn’t be produced in the pastures, farms, and gardens could be purchased: baking soda, canned salmon, spices.

Rickman’s Store, on a back road less than a mile from the school, was Cowee’s emporium. Thomas Milton Rickman bought the “John Hall Store” in 1924. During their first years there, he and his wife lived in rooms above the store, furnished with an oil stove, wooden table and chairs, and a straw tick mattress. He bartered thread for eggs and, in hard times, extended credit that would never be repaid. Neighbors say that after he sold his store he walked to it daily from his home up the road until a short time before his death at age 92.

A family bought Rickman’s Store in 1996. For six years, they maintained it as a place for tourists to buy honey, preserves, and country-style crafts from the sagging general store shelves and sturdy oak cases and to fantasize a simpler life. When the new owners sold out, they left a forlorn hull where once a community gathered for gossip, politics, and horse trading.

Tourists visit Cowee, but not in the large numbers that flock to the town of Highlands on the eastern edge of the county. Few businesses cater to them. Cowee Creek Pottery, located in an old house at West Mill, was one of the few that did until the potter left in 2003. Burly cats lounged on the sales counter and prowled stealthily among the colorful, artistic bowls, mugs, and pitchers, glazed and fired in a kiln behind the two-story store building at Cowee Creek.

Ruby mines once drew tourists. Today, only three provide a sedentary expedition for a shrinking cohort of twenty-first-century prospectors who sit on benches and wash buckets of dirt in search of nuggets of rubies and other gems. Perry’s Water Gardens on Cowee Creek Road welcomes visitors to the fourteen acres of ponds where over 170 varieties of water lilies and lotuses grow. Perry’s ships plants to outlets across the nation.

Undaunted by the decline, Jerry Anselmo promotes tourism. A successful restaurateur in Mandeville, Louisiana, north of New Orleans, Jerry was traveling through the valley in the early 1990s when he rented a canoe, fell in love with Cowee, and established the fish camp. National outdoor magazines have featured his fishing excursions, which run fifteen miles of river from Emory Dam to Lake Fontana.
The Snow Hill Inn also catered to tourists. Until Sheila Lucius fell ill in 2002, she and her husband Dave kept the Snow Hill Inn on a hillside overlooking the valleys of the Little Tennessee and Cowee Creek. Of all the bed-and-breakfast innkeepers we have met, they were doubtless the most attentive. On a warm Friday evening, Dave meets Maria and me on the columned veranda and leads us through the two-story white building.

“This was originally the Cowee School,” he tells us as we climb carpeted stairs that creak beneath our feet. “The second floor was an open auditorium. Upper grades had classes here,” he gestures to his right, “and where we are standing was the proscenium stage.”

Late in the evening, a full moon creeps around the northern slope of Lyle Knob and fills our room with silver light. We sleep deeply until a cool morning breeze carries the songs of a score of birds from the gardens below our window. As we eat fruit and sugary French toast, hummingbirds suck nectar from blossoms, separated from us by thin panes of glass.

On Sunday morning, we sit on the veranda and watch a gentle rain, welcome relief from the drought of four summers, moisten the valley. The sound of familiar hymns rolls softly over the hills from speakers on the roof of the Cowee Baptist Church.

I visited the church on a Sunday in late September 2001, parking on the asphalt lot with pickup trucks, family sedans, SUVs, and sports cars. Following men in blazers and well-dressed women and children, I entered the double white doors and found a seat on a padded velvet pew. Soft light filtered through stained-glass windows and fell on hymnals in the racks. Worshipers emerged from Sunday School, chatting across the pews while commercially recorded music filled the sanctuary. When the audiotape stopped, the pianist and organist played settings of popular hymns while the choir filed into a loft in front of the curtained baptismal pool. After more hymns, prayers, a sermon for children, and the passing of the offering plates, the pastor rose to the pulpit.

I noted that the printed order of worship said he intended to preach on the subject of “Hope after Devastation.” Expecting wisdom relating to the attacks on New York and Washington some three weeks earlier, I listened intently as the pastor read from the book of Lamentations and narrated the story of Jeremiah, who preached in Jerusalem in the wake of the havoc wrought by the vicious Babylonian armies six centuries before Jesus. His words of grief and instruction might provide insights for an understanding of America in the weeks following the terrorism. But the sermon did not mention America or its grief. Have the families of Cowee already walked beyond the devastation? Do they need no guidance on dealing with America’s losses? I wondered. Perhaps the good reverend felt that he can’t compete with Fox News for bringing “Hope after Devastation.”
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After the sermon, a young man walked the aisle to join the church, and the “Deacon of the Week” pronounced the Benediction. The people chatted, gathered their belongings, and headed for the door. With dignity and order, the Baptists of Cowee had accomplished their weekly spiritual quest and left to eat dinners of ham, roast beef, or fried chicken. It was Sunday morning in the South.

I had driven to the place where the river and highway bend around the Cowee Mound. I walked to the riverbank and let my soul find an evening in 1761. Across the stream, elders, women, and children moan as they walk through their fields and file up the path to the crest of the mound and enter the councilhouse. Yesterday, an army of white men with muskets had marched from the sunrise side of the mountains and littered the fields of Echow with the bloody bodies of Cherokee men. A white man from the sunrise side of the mountains, I am left outside to guess what the elders in the smoky rotunda are saying. Are they weeping? Telling stories of the bear, the raven, and the eagle? Puzzled? Frightened? Do they speak of evil and evildoers? Of revenge? Of peace?

Below me the river runs, clean and deep, under a swinging bridge and toward the west.
Gentle waves rock the houseboat and lap the rocky shore fifty feet away. I feel my body sink into the webbing of the patio lounge as the mental bugs of the past week slip through the deck planks and into the cold blue water of Fontana Lake. I shell a peanut and sip from a bottle of Dinkel Aker I brought in the ice chest. Maria smears herself with suntan oil and stretches out on a towel in the sun while Tyler baits his hook with a wad of bread hulled from a hot dog bun and casts it toward two massive carp he sees swimming near the bank.

Forty feet of clear water float the pontoons on a cove in the Alarka Creek arm of the lake. Hemlocks weave a mesh of gnarled roots in the steep slope of Jackson Line Mountain and deep green mountains rise in waves in every direction. It is easy to understand why Maria’s sister, Susan, Susan’s husband, Stephen, and daughter Sarah make weekly retreats to this floating refuge.

“Got one,” yells Tyler.

I rub my eyes and sit up from my recliner. Tyler’s rod bends in a semicircle; his reel whines as the bronze carp thrashes the water ten feet from the shore. With Stephen’s help, he lands and releases the fish, laughing and shouting. He washes the slime from his hands and baits his hook for a try at the second fish, still circling near the houseboat.

“Have a nice nap?” asks Maria from her station beside the charcoal grill.

“Oh, yes! Great nap.” I rub my eyes, pick up my copy of Bartram’s Travels, and watch a boatload of young women motor down the lake. They laugh and wave at the two young men on jet-skis who circle them.

“You know,” I say, “it was just a few miles up Alarka Creek where Bartram saw the Cherokee girls.”
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“Uh, huh,” she replies as she spears a piece of chicken, turns it, and sips her margarita. “I guess you’re going to tell me about it.” Maria has grown accustomed to hearing Bartram tales.

I step to her side and explain, “After months of roaring alligators, ‘persecuting mosquitos’ and dinners of putrid fish he was due a pleasant social encounter. He almost found it across the mountain ridge from Cowee.”

She closes the lid on the gas grill.

“Almost?”

“One of the traders at Cowee told him about ‘some curious scenes amongst the hills.’ The description intrigued him. So, in the afternoon, they rode up over Cowee Bald and down into the little valley at the source of Alarka Creek.”

Maria returns to her towel. I sit beside her.

“Listen to this,” I say, opening my book:

companies of young, innocent Cherokee virgins, some busily gathering the rich fragrant fruit, others having already filled their baskets lay reclined under the shade of floriferous and fragrant native bowers . . . , disclosing their beauties to the fluttering breeze, and bathing their limbs in the cool fleeting streams; whilst other parties, more gay and libertine, were yet collecting strawberries or wantonly chasing their companions, tantalising them, staining their lips and cheeks with the rich fruit. (Travels 357)

This sylvan scene of primitive innocence was enchanting, and perhaps too enticing for hearty young men long to continue as idle spectators.

“Let me see that book.” She reads phrases aloud:

nature prevailing over reason, we wished at least to have a more active part in their delicious sports . . . we cautiously made our approaches . . . we meant no other than an innocent frolic . . . warmed and excited . . . pursued and gained ground on a group of them . . . peeping through the bushes . . . decently advanced to meet us, half unveiling their blooming faces, incarnated with the modest maiden blush and with the native innocence and cheerfulness, presented their little baskets, merrily telling us their fruit was ripe and sound.

We accepted a basket, sat down and regaled ourselves on the delicious fruit, encircled by the whole assembly of the innocently jocose sylvan nymphs. . . . (Travels 357)

“Strawberries!” says Maria, laughing. “Cosmo would rewrite the ending.”
On Alarka Creek

Those who map Bartram's travels dispute the venue of the Cherokee maidens, but the most likely place is a meadow high on the northwest slope of Cowee Bald, the headwaters of Alarka Creek. A blacktop road, winding through two miles of rolling farm land in Cowee Valley, then rising toward the mountains from the valley of the Little Tennessee River, covers the track they followed.

Cowee Mountain appears round and soft as I view it from the road beside the tan stone Cowee School. It is hard to imagine that its slopes intimidated an army fourteen years before Bartram's journey. Edward Cashin, historian of the Revolutionary period in the South, says this crossing tested the will and energy of Lt. Colonel James Grant's army in 1761. The colonel feared for his troops' lives as they climbed the mountain that Grant thought "one of the highest and perhaps steepest in America." The army crossed the ridge, descended into the valley of the Tuckasegee, and devastated the Cherokee villages.

On the steep, single-lane Forest Service road that covers the ruts of the ancient mountain track, Cowee's ruggedness becomes real. Cabin driveways spring right and left along the road as it ascends through switchbacks to Leatherman Gap, turns along the back of Raven Mountain, and ends at a gate a half mile from the peak of the bald, more than 3,000 feet above the valley.

I park in a pull-off and walk the last half mile to the bald. A "bald" is a mountain peak covered with grass and shrubs. Balds may be vestiges of early human impact upon the natural terrain. Burned by Indians, these peaks remained treeless after Cherokees and whites herded their cows to them for summer pastures.

From this barren crest, Bartram and his guide looked out on the valley of the Little Tennessee and saw

the enchanting Vale of Keowe, perhaps as celebrated for fertility, fruitfulness and beautiful prospects as the Fields of Pharsalia or the Vale of Tempe: the town, the elevated peaks of the Jore mountains, a very distant prospect of the Jore village in a beautiful lawn, lifted up many thousand feet higher than our present situation, besides a view of many other villages and settlements on the sides of the mountains, at various distances and elevations; the silver rivulets gliding by them and snow white cataracts glimmering on the sides of lofty hills; the bold promontories of the Jore mountain stepping into the Tanase river, whilst his foaming waters rushed between them. (Travels 354-55)

On my October trip to Bartram's vantage point, a Forest Service fire tower provides a spectacular view. A cold front has cleared the air and painted the sky the color the people in these parts call "Carolina Blue." The "vale" lies in a soft green band across the entire southern panorama. Beyond its fields rise the rugged
Footprints across the South

Nantahalas—the Jore Mountains—topped by the rock tower on Wayah Bald. The sun setting behind the Smokies casts golden-green light across the scrub oaks, rhododendron, and ferns that are overtaking the ancient bald. I look in vain for smoke rising from Cherokee villages that once dotted the valley floor.

Cowee Bald is hardly the pristine vantage described by Bartram. A pickup and a panel truck have parked on the lane. Technicians work inside concrete block buildings, connecting cables to the disks and antennas that capture the signals of cell phones and bounce them to other peaks. Conversations that move a multinational economy connect on this crest.

In my truck I follow Bartram and his companion down the northwest slopes of the mountain to Alarka Creek in Big Laurel. They had tended the horses that the trader bred and shipped annually to Charleston. Then, somewhere in these glades, they had witnessed the recreational activities of the “sylvan nymphs.”

In Big Laurel, the cold waters of Alarka Creek, its rocky bed barely ten feet wide, curve around an open meadow filled with strawberry plants and grasses surrounded by tangles of rhododendron—“laurel” in the local vernacular. It’s a rare sight: a place along Bartram’s trail that comes close to its eighteenth-century appearance.

The creek glides gently through wooded glades in a broad upland valley, then crashes five hundred feet in less than a half-mile in a spectacular waterfall, swelling into a deep pool above the settlement of Alarka and rolling lazily through grassy fields and woodlands. Small farms and gardens that embrace houses and log barns border the stream before it flows beneath a four-lane highway, drops through pools, and stops abruptly in the sluggish, jade backwater of Fontana Lake about a dozen air-miles from its source.

Fontana greets the clear waters with tangles of logs. Plastic sacks, red and white fishing bobbers, and bottles left behind by those who sport in the lake lie trapped in the flotsam below a stony driveway that leads to Tony Sherrill’s marina. Fishing boats berth in the floating piers that cling by cables to two barges. One barge provides a home for Tony and his family; the other supports a shop selling bait, tackle, ice, and a few grocery items. A corrugated fiberglass roof shelters refrigerators, gasoline pumps, and tanks that hold bait minnows.

Cars and trucks crunch over the loose rocks of the drive. Boaters park near the dock to unload bags of food and drinks that they shuttle out to houseboats. These floating cabins have their territories, spaced evenly along the wooded banks, moored to trees, stumps, and rocks by long, heavy ropes that the boat owners lengthen and shorten as the lake rises and falls.

This lake where people play has an intriguing history. It also has changed forever the ecology of the valley. The narrow Fontana gorge of the Little
Tennessee, saddled between the Smokies and the Nantahala Mountains, was an ideal place to build a dam. The Tuckasegee, Nantahala, and Little Tennessee Rivers, along with numerous mountain creeks, charge over rocky shoals and converge at Fontana. These streams collect the abundant rainfall that soaks the surrounding mountains. Eighty-seven inches of rain and snow fall on nearby Clingman’s Dome each year, twenty-four inches more precipitation than New Orleans and twenty-seven more than the proverbially socked-in Olympic Mountains. Places in Macon County, in the headwaters of the Little Tennessee, get upwards of sixty inches of rain and snow a year.

Demand for aluminum led to the construction of the dam. Production of this lightweight metal, used to build the Corsairs and B-29s that wreaked devastation on Germany and Japan in World War II, required massive amounts of electricity. Fontana spun the abundant waters of western North Carolina through turbines and sent their precious energy through high-tension wires across the mountains to Alcoa, a sprawling factory and company town in Blount County, Tennessee.

The Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) purchased 15,000 acres of land along the river in the 1930s. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) bought an additional 55,000 acres, relocated more than 1,300 families, and poured almost three million cubic yards of concrete to create the lake, which inundated 11,800 acres of private land. It built the dam, the tallest in the eastern United States at 480 feet, in record-breaking time by using technologically advanced materials and processes and by working crews around the clock. Blue-gray clouds of limestone dust hung endlessly up and down the valley as men drove machines, drilled holes, and detonated dynamite. In November 1944, nine months before the end of World War II, Vice President Truman attended the ceremony marking the completion of the project. He praised the workers, who had been paid from fifty cents to $1.25 an hour, for their contribution to the war effort.

About six years later, a brochure arrived in my grandfather’s mailbox. It offered him an opportunity to buy a house in “Fontana Village.” This resort, a transformation of the town built by TVA to house 5,000 construction workers at the dam, promised relaxation through golfing, fishing, and hiking in the Great Smoky Mountains. Grandpa laughed, but the village’s proximity to the Smokies and the lake continues to attract visitors to its cabins, inn, and restaurants.

By spring’s end, when rain and melting snow have filled its pool, the lake is a twenty-nine-mile-long emerald, bending and turning through mountains protected by the Nantahala National Forest and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It provides, however, a poor habitat for fish. Seventy to ninety species of fish lived in the river before the dam was built; fewer than two dozen
adapted to the reservoir. Insects, mussels, and other small animals lost their habitat when it was flooded.

Beginning each September, TVA draws down the lake to generate power and to accommodate the prodigious winter runoff. In the winter, it becomes what Christopher Camuto describes as

a lake where a river should be. Not a lake, really, but a reservoir drawn down this time of year for flood control. . . . The draw down reveals the artificiality of the arrangement—a hundred feet of caked earth exposed between the summer shoreline and the autumn surface of the water, creek bank vegetation left high and dry, false islands turned back into peninsulas, and ugly barren troughs hundreds of yards wide dwarfing the mouths of the big rivers that stall in muddy channels, ignominious ends of the Tuckasegee and Nanatahala rivers. (123)

Water quality is another concern. Although many of the 150 houseboats berthed along the shores of the lake have always collected or treated their waste water and disposed of it safely, some flushed their toilets directly into the lake. The resulting pollution disturbed fishermen and houseboat owners, but jet skiers became most concerned when they learned that the human waste tends to stay near the surface, which is exactly the water they plow.

TVA and marina operator Tony Sherrill began working on a solution in 2000. Tony researched solutions on other lakes and built a vessel with a 250-gallon storage tank. TVA helped with some surplus materials and a little grant money. The barge goes to the boathouses, pumps their wastewater into its tank, and discharges it into a 3,000 gallon septic tank at the marina. In 2002, Swain and Graham Counties passed ordinances requiring all houseboats to be equipped with holding tanks for their wastewater and to have all plumbing piped into the holding tanks. Houseboat owners must enter a written contract with their marina operator to pump out their holding tanks. North Carolina Governor Mike Easley signed a law in June 2005 that would further protect the lake from sewage.

Fontana provides a lesson in tradeoffs. Tradeoffs are nothing new: freedom of movement versus secure, comfortable shelters; war or taxation without representation; a good night’s sleep swapped for seeing the final play of Monday night football. As technology and the harnessing of massive quantities of energy have given us the ability to make major changes in our living space, however, the stakes of our decisions have become higher. What is the value of a mountain gorge compared with national defense? A species of fish for a roll of aluminum foil? A wetland stopover for migrating birds or an air-conditioned house?
The stakes seem always to exceed the predictions. When Fontana was built, planners thought that the cost would be a few rarely seen fish and mussels and a hundred or so displaced families who were not living too well anyway. Few anticipated the overwhelming loss of biodiversity and the loading of a lake with human waste.

Our day on the houseboat ends as shadows move quickly to darken the lake as the sun sets behind Shuckstack Mountain. Faint sounds of music and laughter tell of parties on houseboats across the Alarka impoundment. We eat our chicken and potato salad and pile our wet swim suits and gear into Stephen’s aluminum boat for the ride to the landing. The motor purrs gently as it pushes us across the glassy water under the ghostlike bats that pursue their evening meal in the dusky sky.
Burningtown

Bartram spent a few days at Cowee, waiting for “a guide and protector to the Overhill towns”—the westernmost settlements of the Cherokees, in the valley of the Tennessee River. His helper never arrived. Bartram “resolved to pursue the journey alone, though against the advice of the traders; the Overhill Indians being in an ill humour with the whites, the consequence of some late skirmishes between them and the frontier Virginians” (Travels 359).

With Patrick Galahan, the trader at Cowee, he rode up Rose Creek and crossed Saldeer Gap into Burningtown. Fog hung over the Little Tennessee valley and clouds covered the mountains the Cherokees called Jore—a name derived from Iyorre, the Cherokee word that appears on maps and street signs in Macon County as Iotla.

Oaks, hickories, and chestnuts sprouted tiny leaves along the trail. Cherokee women and children watched curiously from their work among the pale green shoots of corn that peeked through the dark soil.

Widespread Cherokee agriculture in the valley of Burningtown was about a year from its end. In the summer of 1776, seeking to quiet the threat from an alliance of British and Indians on their western flank, an army of Georgians and Carolinians discharged their muskets into Cherokee defenders and torched their cabins. The surviving Cherokees retreated to the hills and most fields of Burningtown Valley lay fallow until, in the early years of the next century, a wave of white settlers built new log homes and tilled the fields again.

Late in August, 222 years after Bartram, Maria and I drive to Lower Burningtown on a rainy Sunday morning. The Macon County Airport spreads across the ruins of the Cherokee town of Iyorre in a broad valley at the foot
Footprints across the South

of Trimont Ridge and Wayah Bald. Houses and barns surround grassy valleys where a few horses and cows browse along the fences of garden plots. Forests top the steep hills. Along the narrow paved road in Upper Burningtown, goats and a donkey pick grass from fields behind barbed wire. The houses are smaller, less well kept, as the road nears its end where a gate of brown four-inch pipe blocks the trail into the Nantahala National Forest. An unpainted wood garage that sags over a pile of furniture, rusting bicycles, and auto parts stands near the place where Galahan bid Bartram farewell.

We've come to Burningtown to meet with some newfound friends at the Burningtown Baptist Church. Following the church's signs, we cross Burningtown Creek and turn beside an abandoned store building. A gravel lane leads past a shallow dam of rocks that forms a pool where the church immerses new believers. There, in a grove of hemlocks and hardwoods at the foot of a cemetery on a grassy hill, stands the dignified single-story white building. Water falling over round rocks and smooth pebbles speaks to us as we park our car and walk across the lot. For residents of traffic-snarled, smog-laden Atlanta, the Burningtown church and its setting are John Keats's "unravish'd bride of quietness, ...foster-child of silence and slow time" ("Ode on a Grecian Urn").

Baptists formed a congregation near this place in 1839, the year after the Cherokee Removal. They built their first permanent meeting house on the crest of the cemetery hill. By the end of the century, the church numbered over 150 members and, in 1925, the church moved its building to the creekside.

Late-arriving worshipers find spaces for their cars and pick-up trucks on the grass around the blacktopped parking lot. Children, young parents, and elders fill the pews. Conversation buzzes over the notes of the piano prelude. On a table in front of the pulpit, a colorful, well-arranged bouquet in a glass vase brightens the sanctuary.

"Someone in the church did that arrangement," I whisper to Maria.
"No, it's from a florist," she guesses.
"But those are flowers from a local garden."
"Then someone with a local garden arranges flowers professionally. It's gorgeous."

At eleven o'clock, Pastor Jim Kinard rises from a pew and walks to the pulpit. He begins a relaxed and friendly conversation with his flock, then announces the "Hymn of Fellowship." As the organist and pianist strike the opening chords of "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," the people leave their pews and mix warmly with each other, gripping hands, greeting, conversing.

"The service today will be unusual," says Jim when the congregants have returned to their places. He tells us that a visiting minister, a man whose mission is inviting Jews to accept Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah, will preach.
Mounting the rostrum, a yarmulke pinned to the back of his thick white hair, the preacher ceremoniously pulls a prayer shawl around his shoulders. He weaves a lesson around the shawl, describing it as a symbol of the Word of God. “I am wrapped about in the Word,” he tells us. “Elijah’s shawl fell on Elisha, giving him miraculous powers and authority. When a woman touched the hem of Jesus’ shawl, she was healed.” He goes on to draw lessons for Christians and for modern life.

Worship closes with a hymn that carries the invitation of the church when sinners are asked to repent and believers to recommit themselves to Jesus. Central to Baptist tradition is the lifelong struggle with individual sins. Nothing in their religious life shows this more than the “Hymn of Invitation” or “Hymn of Response.” Whether a city church with a liturgy or a congregation deep in the hills engaging in more spontaneous worship, at the close of their Sunday meetings, most Southern Baptist churches offer an invitation.

While Baptists often form warm, family-like fellowships with each other, faith, for them, is highly personal. No priest brings their concerns to the Lord for them. God speaks through His ministers, but the relationship of man and woman to Jesus is individual. So is interpretation of Scripture.

Bartram would have found this service foreign to the meetings of his Society of Friends. Quakers sit quietly or speak calmly and briefly. As a man reared to cherish peace and accord, he may have cringed at the preacher’s conclusion that the attacks of September 11, 2001, were God’s sentence on his people.

The Baptist theology of God revealing Himself and His will in Scripture may also have been strange to Bartram’s personal views. Though quite knowledgeable of the Bible, the naturalist found divine mystery revealed more in nature than in ancient scriptures of Hebrew and Greek. Leaves of an oak, heads of pink Joe-pye blossoms bobbing in the wind beside a spring branch, or sparkling rocks in a creek bed spoke to Bartram. If he had ever sung, “I am Thine, O Lord, I have heard Thy voice,” he would have been thinking of the voice he heard in the cry of a sandhill crane or the chirping of a Bachman’s sparrow.

Baptist theology also stands far apart from the spirituality of the Cherokees. While Native Americans somehow grafted their religions with the theology of the Roman Catholics, Methodists, and Baptists who sent missionaries into their villages, they found eternal guidance in tales and chants. The bear, the rabbit, and the buzzard revealed the mysteries of the universe through stories told by holy men. Healing came with the help of herbs and sacred formulas, not through repentance and commitment in response to the Holy Spirit and sacred scripture. Still, an eighteenth-century Cherokee observing the gathering in Burningtown would have found familiar and wholesome the Baptists’ sense of interdependence and community.
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When the hymn is over and a benediction spoken, we join the queue of worshipers who pass through the front door to greet the ministers. Outside on the porch, Merritt Fouts finds us. Chatting with Merritt is our primary reason for going to Burningtown. Small-framed, with sparse gray hair and a wide mouth that plays into a wry smile, he makes us instantly welcome. He and his wife Lucille invite us to dinner. We follow them and their daughter and son-in-law, Sharon and George Taylor, up the road to a brick home that looks down on a mountain cove. Sharon heads the Rural Land Protection Program of the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, a job that takes her into the homes of the landowners of the Little Tennessee River Valley, where she promotes conservation of land and rural values. George works in forest management, researching ruffed grouse in the Nantahala Mountains.

These people and others who dwell along the streams and mountainsides in the backcountry of the Appalachians fail to meet the standards set by Li’l Abner and Deliverance. Although pockets of hard-living folks still inhabit the mountains, the majority are educated, purposeful, and hardworking. Children who have moved to the cities along both coasts return frequently, respecting the mountain people who gave them educations and blessings as they moved to work in far-flung professions and industries.

Merritt and Lucille have stayed in Burningtown, living on the farm where Lucille was born and reared. She is a sixth-generation resident of the county. Merritt’s family came here a few years after Lucille’s. His boyhood home was in the Iotla (he pronounces it “Eye-olu”) community, across the ridge to the east of Burningtown. After service in the military, he returned, got his degree from Western Carolina University in three years, and taught school in Hayesville and Franklin. Before he retired to work his garden, deliver Meals-on-Wheels to seniors, and to serve as an ombudsman for nursing home residents, he had successful stints as principal of the Cowee and Cartoogechaye schools in Macon County. During his years as an educator, he led a group of Macon Countians to Denmark, where they demonstrated their skills in the old-time art of the Appalachian dance form called clogging.

Merritt’s most recent claim to fame is The Burningtown News, a weekly feature sent by e-mail to more than 300 computers every Sunday morning. The chatty column documents the births of babies, the harvest of the first tomato of the season, and visits of out-of-town guests. Color photographs of apple trees in blossom, wildflowers in the meadow, and the autumn “syrup (syrup) making” circle the globe through electronic magic. Someone described him as “Burningtown’s Garrison Keillor,” but Merritt does not wear red socks, and Garrison is not on speaking terms with LeLoos Bulfinch and the other Little People of the Nantahalas.
According to Merritt, LeLoos is Chief of The Luchorpan Tribe who lives with his wife Cellini and others of his people in caves near the spring on the mountain above Merritt’s house. And, although Merritt is the only person known to have met them, he makes a convincing case for their existence. Merritt says he first encountered LeLoos and Cellini as he worked, with his young dog Shaggy by his side, to drain a swamp near the spring:

It was the summer of 1998. It was one of the hottest summers on record down here on Lower Burningtown. Of course we don't have any records except in the minds of the people. That is the best record of all. Who can argue with you? No one can tell me, "No it is not the hottest," if they do not know what the record is in my head.

The only problem with this kind of recording is that each year is the hottest one on record, but it's the best we can do down here. Ain't nobody got the time to run around with a little piece of paper writing the temperature down. We don't have but one thermometer. It is nailed to a post and we can't take it down to carry around with us.

We'd lose the piece of paper fore the next year anyway so the best method is the head method.

After working in the heat and hassling with the controls of a backhoe, Merritt lay down for a nap. When he awoke,

there beside me and putting cold compresses on my head was the most beautiful (Outside LF [Lucille]) woman I had ever seen. She had on a gorgeous red dress, but it was not made from silk. She had long blond hair and beautiful blue eyes. . . .

The strange thing was, that she was no more’n 15 inches tall. . . .

Then I heard a man’s voice on my left saying, "He's gonna be all right I believe. Seems as if he is coming around."

Merritt opened one eye and saw “a little man not more than 18-20 inches tall. He had long hair and a long beard. He was wearing a hat and clothing which looked to have come from animal skin. I then opened both eyes and sat up. The small woman was on my right and the small man on the left. They were standing up and only reached my shoulders.”

Assured that Merritt was well, the two rescuers disappeared. At times of their choosing, they continue to meet him. He has learned that they had come to North Carolina from Scandinavia, by way of Vinland, in the tenth century. At the time, they were belligerent people searching for people to fight. Luchorpans have given up their barbarous ways, however, and now appear to Big People only
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when Big People are in danger of losing their lives. The fact that Bartram does not report on the time the Luchorpans saved the botanist’s life is a matter of consternation for LeLoos.

Cherokee myths also speak of “Little People” who live beneath the surface of the mountains. Merritt says he had never heard of the Cherokees’ Little People until I mentioned them to him. He asked LeLoos if he had ever met any of them, but the Luchorp said that he did not, which may confirm the theory that they are one and the same. Such are these lands, so remote and rugged, that an elan vital, lying deeper than the surface, has revealed itself to those who work its soil.

Tales of the Luchorpans may be the most creative feature of The Burningtowner News, but the electronic sheet gives more bytes to stories of everyday life in the valley. One day late in June, the News broadcast details of work on the cane patch, a community effort that begins with planting in April and ends with a harvest in October and an all-day “surp making” event:

I arrived at the patch on Tuesday afternoon around 1:30. Marshall was just beginning the ninth (last row). That was the row I had last week so there wasn’t much to have to do to it this time, but I fell right in there to help him. What a thrill it was to be out there hoeing cane in 85–90 degree weather. Sweat was pouring off both of us. About all I could do was think about next winter when the snow was on the ground and me eating biscuits and surp. That cooled me off about 5 degrees. Then I thought about the icebergs in Alaska which took me down another 4 or 5 degrees. If I had kept on thinking about the coldest places on earth, I might have frozen to death.

It didn’t take us long to get through that row and then we went to the house. I had to go on down to the garbage dump and then came on back home.

The cane patch is laid by now. Jim put fertilizer on it Tuesday afternoon and sprayed it on Wednesday afternoon. Marshall said we would not have to do anything else except get the morning glories out of it if any come up.

Merritt, George, and I sit in the living room, in front of the television set whose screen remains dark. Laughter from the kitchen lets us know that Lucille, Sharon, and Maria are getting well acquainted and enjoying the final dinner preparations. Lucille appears in the doorway and invites us to the table. White hair surrounds her sunny face. She has set a table with mountain cuisine: tender
beef roast, casseroles of vegetables she picked from the garden, hot rolls covered by a white napkin.

Sharon had described her mother as “less gregarious than [her] father,” but, after the kitchen work is done, Lucille joins us in the wide living room and shares stories of life in Burningtown. Her family operated the mill that once was the economic and social center of Burningtown. She trained in cosmetology, raised two daughters with Merritt, and worked as a florist.

“Worked as a florist?” I say, turning my head toward Maria and smiling. She grins in response. “Then I’ll bet I won an argument. That was your bouquet in church, wasn’t it?”

A shy smile crosses Lucille’s face as she admits that it was her work.

“The dahlias were from my garden,” she says, gesturing toward the plot across the driveway that splits the broad lawn that slopes down from the house.

“I cut some leaves from a hosta.”

“And did a very artful job of it,” says Maria.

Here is a family that would have sheltered and fed Bartram. He would have felt at home here and written glowingly of their appreciation of their place on the edge of the wild mountains.

Merritt is more than a retired educator, community volunteer, and droll editor. He represents an important feature on the American landscape, a gentle wave on a bay of the national sea. But if I ever ask Merritt whether he thinks of himself as part of a movement or even as a representative of one, I expect a flat denial. Community-building for him is not a job or an obligation. It is a natural outgrowth of his life, no less spontaneous than a lobe of lichen clinging to a boulder on the mountain above his spring.

Merritt, Lucille, Sharon, and George are among a handful of people, scattered across America, who have bowed their backs over the plow that maintains communities and values that support human life and natural environments. Their efforts are local, microscopic in contrast to “regime changing,” replacing the World Trade Center, or merging mega-corporations. They never make cable news headlines. The only front pages they may occasionally grace are in local weeklies.

These people certainly would not see themselves as part of what Morris Berman has called a “monastic class.” In The Twilight of American Culture, Berman recalls that religious recluses preserved classical literature and ideas during the Dark Ages. He sees an America overwhelmed by “the culture of McWorld, in which everything is drowned in the universal solvent of kitsch and consumerism” and thinks the only way that traditional, core American values may be preserved is through a new wave of “monks” who will work quietly and out of sight (6).
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Merritt and others in Lower Burningtown are not recluses. They have not cut themselves off from American culture. They communicate by e-mail, find treatment in the operating rooms of hospitals, and eat at the Sunset Cafe. They enjoy the benefits of the power grids that reached their communities after the middle of the twentieth century. But, by quietly maintaining and propagating interest in families, traditional crafts, and sustainable environments, they contribute immensely to the richness of America and to its future.
Standing on the crest of the Jore Mountains, the lonely naturalist took a deep breath and turned slowly in his saddle, scanning the view. Among the peaks he saw in the massif we know as the Great Smoky Mountains was Kuwahi, the “Mulberry Place” known to the Cherokees as the councilhouse of the bears, where the White Bear chief presided. To the left rose Tsistu’yi, the “Rabbit Place,” where the rabbits had their councilhouse. It would be about a hundred years before maps named them after Europeans: Clingman’s Dome, Gregory Bald. A land of mystery, the Smokies were the Cherokee Garden of Eden. Their majesty silenced everything except Bartram’s soul. “I beheld with rapture and astonishment a sublimely awful scene of power and magnificence, a world of mountains piled upon mountains,” he later wrote (Travels 362).

A stone tower, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps on Wayah Bald, gives easy access to the spot where he may have stood that day. Travelers can walk an asphalt path in mid-summer and climb the tower to look down on soft clusters of rhododendron blossoms, great pompons in shades of pink and lilac. Raising their eyes to look at the horizon, they can, on clear autumn days, see the distant ridges of the Smokies, Balsams, and Cowee Mountain.

On too many days, however, they see only a world of shadowy mountains wrapped in haze. Except under the rarest of skies, when the winds of a cold front rustle the leaves of the Southland, layers of smog cover the peaks, turning them into blue-gray ghosts of their majestic selves. Over the years since Bartram beheld them with rapture, timber companies have stripped the forests, miners opened sealed layers of rock, farms and towns appeared and vanished.
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As have thousands of others, I tried to find the pristine, primeval America in the backcountry of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Weekend day hikes and backpack trips took me to rare pockets of virgin forest, glistening waterfalls, and high vistas. I heard bears sniffing the edges of my tent, watched shiny salamanders slide into streams, and exposed rolls of film in the flame azalea thickets of Gregory Bald. But the story of the twentieth-century Smokies unfolded itself most clearly during “The Great Crossing.”

“The Great Crossing” was the four-day, three-night hike that my sons James and John took with me in 1984. Sturdy lads of twelve and thirteen, their legs and backs toughened by day hikes, soccer games, and chases through the neighborhood, they were more fit than I to climb the North Carolina trails and descend into Tennessee.

On a Monday morning in June, we got a ride from Maryville, Tennessee, following a winding highway that tested our ability to hold a breakfast of bacon, eggs, and biscuits in our churning stomachs. We parked beside Fontana Dam at the head of the trail to the Lost Cove backcountry campsite, pulled our backpacks from the trunk, and hoisted them to our shoulders. Loaded with a three-man tent, sleeping bags, a one-burner stove and fuel, food, and a change of clothes, we told our anxious driver, “See you Thursday at Cades Cove!” and plodded up the path.

The trail once supported a railroad bed. Later, the Army Corps of Engineers practiced mountain road construction along its rolling pathway. Hiking easily, disturbed only by the usual summer freshet, we crossed the hills on Fontana’s north shore. At the designated campsite, where Eagle Creek flows into the lake, we dropped our packs and set up our tent. A swim in the little inlet cooled our bodies and washed most of the day’s sweat from our backs.

John drew a pan of water from the rushing creek. I mixed drops of iodine with it. He asked, “Why can’t we drink the water straight from the creek? I mean, how could this water, so far back in the mountains, be polluted?”

“That’s what I used to think,” I said, recalling the time I was sickened by water from a spring high on a mountain ridge. We talked of microbes and parasites and drank the sour mixture, wondering how the mountain water would taste, free of iodine.

“Tomorrow we hike up Eagle Creek,” I told the boys as we looked over the topographic map I carried in a plastic, zip-up sheath. “The Sierra Club Hiker’s Guide says there are lots of fords. The first is the deepest. After that, it should be easy.”

The guidebook was right. Almost. It failed to say that the trail crosses the rushing stream eighteen times—we counted—in the first five miles. At the first crossing, John struggled to keep his pack out of the water as he stubbed his
toes on unseen rocks beneath the swirling current. Weary and wet, muttering about the Chamber of Commerce trail description, we dropped our loads on a bed of hemlock needles in the late afternoon, set up the tent, and cooked our freeze-dried supper.

Soggy socks and damp T-shirts hung from sticks around the campfire. I pulled the map from its case and opened the trail guide. “The good news: no more fords. We leave Eagle Creek behind. The bad news: we have to climb 2,700 feet tomorrow.”

“Doesn’t sound bad. We’ve hiked more than that in a day,” said James.

“Not with full packs,” I said, poking the fire. “And the last 1,500 feet are almost straight up.”

The crackle of burning logs was the only sound in the campsite.

Our trail was gentle for the first hour. Shallow slopes rose on both sides of the wide trail. Hemlocks and tulip poplars shaded us. Laurel blossoms lit our way.

The trail began to rise, skirting the side of Mount Squires. While we sat on a log to let my heart slow, James poked the leaves with his walking stick and hit something hard. He scraped the mud, found a heavy iron spike and wiped it clean.

“This was a railroad bed,” John speculated, “way up here.”

“This spike once held a rail to a crosstie of one of the railroads that hauled black walnut, chestnut, and oak from the heart of the mountains,” I told them.

Although I had read about the corporate logging and the rail lines that pierced the heart of the Smokies, James’s iron spike and John’s quick analysis were my epiphany. We had hiked hard for more than two days to reach this place. Few spots in the Smokies are more remote. Yet we cradled in our hands the rusting testimony of the stripping of hundreds of years of tree growth. We had thought of this forest as primitive. Now we had an iron reminder that, only half a century before, it was gouged and burned.

Centuries before Bartram, Native Americans burned patches of forests to make room for crops. Still, when he arrived, Bartram saw “magnificent high forests, extensive green fields, meadows and lawns.” The earliest white settlers who moved into Macon and Swain Counties four decades later cut trees for houses, barns, and fences. They damaged the land only slightly with their hand axes, crosscut saws, and wooden and cast iron plows.

By 1900, however, the population of the Southern Appalachians numbered 318,000. When their farming techniques exposed the ground to erosion and they cleared forests to gain more crop land, they opened wounds that could not heal. As they moved from eroded farms to forest land to establish new homesteads, they systematically released the ancient, deep humus from the lower slopes of the mountains.
Footprints across the South

About a hundred small sawmills operated in the area around the Smokies in 1884. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, several large lumber and paper companies began cutting walnut and cherry and other trees in the mountains. The heavy-duty devastation of Bartram's "magnificent high forests" came in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Then, in 1901, Horace B. Ayres and William W. Ashe examined 10,000 square miles from Virginia to northern Georgia.

They reported to federal agencies on the "forest conditions" of the Southern Appalachians. Most of the area was original forest, they said, populated with 137 species of trees: "For the most part the lower slopes had been only selectively cut for the most valuable species and the upper slopes were pristine..." (Camuto 251).

They saw the land in board feet and cost per acre. The mountainsides around Cataloochee would yield 161,280 board feet per acre; "fifty cents an acre is considered a good price for mountain land." (Camuto 251) Millions of board feet of valuable lumber were "wasting away" on the stump, they said.

The lumber didn't "waste away" for long. Eight large companies bought land in the Smokies. Employing bands of men from the area, they cut into the deepest recesses of the mountains. Railroads snaked along cuts on edges of steep slopes. Skidders, systems of cables run by steam-powered boilers, pulled the logs down the hills, ripping up smaller trees in their paths. Splash dams on small creeks stored enough water to float logs. When the ponds were full, the lumbermen broke the dams and the water propelled the woody harvest downstream. The dams were rebuilt for another load of logs and the cycle continued. By 1925, the corporate timber companies increased their wealth by cutting seven billion board-feet of lumber out of the forests each year, shipping most of it to the lumber-hungry markets of the Northeast. Hemlocks and spruce went to local mills to be ground and processed into paper.

Cutting was only part of the damage. Sparks from the boilers and railroads set fires that moved rapidly across the fallen limbs left by the stumps of massive trees. Floods followed the fires, washing deep layers of topsoil into the creeks, killing fish.

While a few large timber companies flourished, the people of Appalachia did not. For their grueling work in the logging camps, loggers received no more than ninety cents a day—usually in scrip which could be spent only in company stores—plus lodgings and meals. Bunkhouses were frame shacks, moved from one camp to another across the rugged ridges. Michael Frome says that, in some camps, the logger "packed his own bedroll and blankets, was not permitted to talk at meals in the cookhouse. He worked as long as it was light enough to work, continually facing the threat of accident and loss of life or limb. Despite all the legend and lore, the man with the crosscut saw... was cheap and expendable" (164).
Duane Oliver collected memories of the Ritter Company’s operation at Proctor, on Hazel Creek, in the first decades of the twentieth century. Proctor was a tiny pioneer settlement of a few log cabins, a small store, and a post office when Ritter’s operation turned it into a “modern town with a considerable number of up-to-date houses, streets, sewers, board sidewalks, picket fences, running water, telephones and electric lights” (79). The company built a large school, churches, a movie theater, and a pool hall. “The economy, almost overnight, changed from one of self-sufficiency, subsistence and barter to one where there was a considerable amount of ‘real’ money,” writes Oliver (79).

Although the residents of Hazel Creek, enjoying the temporary gains, did not protest the stripping of the forests, they recognized that the mountains would never be the same. Thousands of buckeyes up to 125 feet tall, along with chestnut, oak, and hemlock almost as lofty, splashed down the creeks and into the waiting jaws of the sawmill to be loaded onto waiting trains and carried to New York, Boston, and Chicago. The largest poplar, felled in 1919, measured six to seven feet in diameter and rose fifty-four feet to its first limb and 190 feet above its roots. Ritter got 18,000 board feet from this single tree.

And then it was over. After eighteen years, the company moved on to other forests, taking with it some of its workers, leaving others grieving over the loss of a way of life, a source of income, and many friends. Proctor was a ghost town in an eroding ruin of a magnificent forest.

When the mountain families were removed from the mountain coves, they lost a way of life. According to Margaret Lynn Brown,

the loss of the bountiful old-growth forest eliminated the means for traditional subsistence life. Although wage employment and consumer goods surely pulled mountain people away from subsistence, the loss of the forest made it impossible to return. Daughters forgot which herbs their mothers hunted in the woods . . . Sons did not carry on the tradition of bear hunting, because the mountains supported fewer bears. Environmental catastrophe, from this perspective, also brought death to communities, as deforestation, a decrease in farm size, and an end to woodland pasture accompanied the loss of the forest. (71)

As a result of the feverish stripping of the mountains, the area covered by virgin stands of timber, scattered across the Southern Appalachians, can now be numbered in a few square miles. The most accessible example is the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, a stand of ancient hemlocks and poplars, some over 400 years old, 100 feet tall, and up to 20 feet in circumference that the loggers didn’t reach before the Great Depression quieted their saws.
Footprints across the South

Logging, fires, and the erosion that followed are not the only destructive forces that have plagued the southern highlands. The haze that hangs over the mountains contains more than the fog exuded from vegetation that gave the Smokies their name. Rain in the park is ten times more acidic than unpolluted precipitation. These acids undermine soil fertility, pollute stream water, and can make trees more vulnerable to stresses of all kinds, including insect pests, disease, and cold. In addition, they endanger brook trout, the native species that the Park Service has worked hard to restore following the devastation of the 1920s and '30s.

Breathing the air can be harmful to hikers. Air quality is unhealthy one out of three days in the summer. During the summer of 1999, ozone pollution in the Smokies violated federal health standards on fifty-two days; skies were dirtier on the Appalachian Trail than in Washington, D.C. Visibility on some “clear” days was measured in feet instead of miles.

For years Southerners laid the blame on the power plants and factories of the Midwest. Big, industrial, and far away, they pumped out tons of pollutants that rocketed along the jet stream and hung up when they crossed “our” mountains. As it turns out, a latter-day, industrial Sherman is not entirely the culprit. The South has defiled its own mountains. Extensive investigations over a decade found that old coal-fired power plants and vehicles in the Southeast cause most of the smog and acid rain in the Smokies and surrounding areas. Atlanta’s drivers and other Southerners air conditioning their homes and office towers were not only polluting their own air but also the mountains to the north where they take refuge from summer’s heat.

The big surprise polluter, however, was the pork industry. Hog farming in distant counties in North Carolina and Kentucky emits large quantities of ammonia into the air, gassy sludge that rides the winds that blow across North Carolina in the summer.

Agricultural valleys have been damaged as have the mountains and their air. Farmers cut trees growing along the creek sides and riverbanks to use every square foot for grazing, row crops, and truck farms. As the rivers flooded after major rains along the “Tannase,” their waters gouged banks that were no longer protected by the roots of walnuts, oaks, and sycamores. Chunks of alluvial soil dropped into the streams and washed over rocks, plugging with minute particles of silt crevices that once were the nursery of fish and covering the eggs of trout and tiny darters, and bringing a silent, unseen death. In addition, mines opened the earth, permitting acids to flow unhindered into the creeks and rivers. Power companies met the demand for electricity by damming the Little Tennessee and Tuckasegee Rivers.
"A World of Mountains Piled upon Mountains"

The arrival of large numbers of residents and vacationers, who often build their houses to gain vistas of the broad valleys and wooded peaks, has studded the mountainsides with houses and small subdivisions that are visible for miles. To each of the dwellings a road is carved into the rocks and soils. Not only is the appearance of the mountains scarred by such developments, the stability of the forests is also injured.

As a result of the development over the centuries, wildlife within the streams and along their banks has shrunk in numbers. Some species hang on by slender threads. Two shellfish, the little-wing pearly mussel and the Appalachian elktoe are listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The spotfin chub is considered a threatened species. Other species that depend on the wetlands along the valley floors are threatened or endangered.

While building, lumbering, and mining have whacked away the mountainsides and altered the flows of the rivers, other forces, some of them microscopic, have crept along the leaves and roots of plants, wiping out large communities of trees. Parasite and fungus infections, introduced unknowingly on imported plants, have gobbled up several of the most important species in the Southern Appalachians.

Until recently, the most devastating outrage in the southern mountains was the chestnut blight. Known as "the queen of the eastern American forest," the chestnuts rose, unhampered by insect enemies, to heights of a hundred feet. Their wide-spreading crowns shaded vast forest groves, parks, and lawns. Chestnut lumber—lightweight, easy to split, resistant to decay—provided frames, milled banisters, and fine furniture for thousands of homes. These trees provided strong fiber for telegraph poles, railroad ties, shingles, paneling, and musical instruments. Cherokees and Europeans joined the deer, squirrels, and chipmunks in eating their large, sweet nuts.

Death came as a result of a fungus that arrived in America on nursery stock imported from Asia around 1904. By the 1920s it had spread from New York to the Southern Appalachians. Reddish brown ghosts of the great trees lay across the floor of the southern forests by the 1950s.

Those of us who came along too late know the taste of an American chestnut only from descriptions in songs and stories. And, to see the high arching shade of a grove of these "queens," we are left with a few faded black-and-white photographs.

Other diseases from afar ravage the forests of the Appalachians. Dogwoods are disappearing from the Southland as a result of a fungus that may have been introduced with imported Chinese dogwood trees in the late 1970s. Sightseers will miss the beauty of their large, white blossoms brightening the southern
Footprints across the South

forests each spring. More important, the forest will lack an important resource, as the leaves of the dogwood provide richness for the soil, and their berries an important source of high-protein fruit for birds.

From Europe has come the balsam woolly adelgid, a tiny sucking insect related to aphids that has attacked and killed mountainsides of Fraser firs throughout the Southeast. Trees on the once-lush dark peaks of Mount Mitchell, Mount Sterling, and Clingman’s Dome began dying in the 1970s; by the end of the century, their gray trunks spike the sky, long-since bereft of foliage, leaving the peaks looking like a battlefield after an artillery barrage. Ninety percent of the Fraser firs in the Smokies have died and, by 2000, the insect was attacking Christmas tree farms along the Appalachian slopes.

More recently, the hemlock woolly adelgid arrived on shrubs from China or Japan. This insect attacks and kills hemlock trees. It appeared in Virginia in the 1950s, then near Fontana Dam and Cades Cove in 2000. Within a few months, it was found in more than forty different locations in the Smokies and, by 2002, had appeared in northern Georgia.

Although the mountain forest has regrown, “ecologists do not know how long it will take to create an old-growth forest, and they no longer feel certain that these forests will recapture the diversity they supported before corporate logging. The beech groves or beech gaps that once prospered on Newfound Gap, for example, never returned,” writes Margaret Lynn Brown. Only half the species diversity and one-third of the canopy have returned to the Smokies. “If anything, both richness and cover appear to be decreasing,” she says (66).

Bartram’s world of mountains continues to inspire and impress visitors and residents in the Vale of Cowee and Jore Mountains. That wild habitats and stunning views remain is a tribute not only to the persistence of the earth but also to thousands of individuals whose concerns reach beyond their own comfort and financial well-being. The hills of western North Carolina are full of them. Theirs is a story of uphill battles against armies of financial interests, political forces, and even nature itself.
Sweat soaks the T-shirt of the muscular mountain man as he fastens a cable to the trunk of a slender walnut tree. “Let ‘er go!” he yells over the chug of the idling front-end loader that has dragged the tree to the riverbank. Branches splash as the swirling waters of the Little Tennessee River catch and press them into the muddy bank. The tree is joining a tangle of logs and limbs as the latest revetment in the bank restoration efforts of The Little Tennessee Watershed Association. In time, this conservation effort may to some degree return the stream to its previous condition.

When Bartram followed “the rapid Tanase gliding through as a vast serpent rushing after his prey,” he found “Azalea, Kalmia, Rhodendron, Philadelphus, &c. beautifying his now elevated shores, and painting the coves with a rich and cheerful scenery” (Travels 346-48).

Doug Johnson, the association’s stream bank expert, steps away from the backhoe to explain how farm practices have changed the river. He explains the effects of aggressive cutting and tilling, of sedimentation, of the harm to the life of the river.

“And, how do these cut trees help?” I ask.

“We bundle them together and anchor them. They protect the bank from further erosion and then, over time, they catch sediment and restore the bank. When we are done setting the revetment, we’ll plant trees along the river. Their roots will restore the natural order and complete the conservation.”

Doug and his revetment builders are soldiers in armies of volunteer groups and official agencies that have worked in the thickets and streams of the Southern Appalachians to assure healthy forests, clean water, and lively wetlands. Led by visionary activists who believe in the precious vitality of the
Footprints across the South

highlands, they have restored ravaged mountains and conserved land and life up and down the ridges and valley. Over the past seventy-five years they have committed lifetimes to their chosen projects. Many have worked with one hand on a grubbing hoe and the other on a typewriter or computer keyboard, planting trees and raising millions of dollars.

The boulder-strewn road they have traveled has risen before them, steep and rutted. Whether citizens' groups or state or federal agencies, they have grappled with the interests of politicians, businessmen, and corporations. Scarce funds, social values, and the mysterious obstinacy of nature have bogged them down but not prevented them from reaching significant goals.

Names on a map offer clues to the work of those who tended the birth of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Through-hikers on the Appalachian Trail along the crest of the Smokies follow a broad trail to the crags of Mount Cammerer, named for Arno Cammerer, director of the National Park Service during crucial days of the fight to establish the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Farther on, they cross Mount Chapman. Colonel David Chapman, a wholesale druggist from Knoxville, led Tennessee's effort to establish the park. Near the center of the park, at 6,217 feet, they may camp at Icewater Springs on the eastern slopes of Mount Kephart, named for writer Horace Kephart whose turn-of-the-century Our Southern Highlanders and sheaves of articles about the Smokies stirred interest in the mountains and, by association, the park. Farther west, beyond Clingman's Dome and Thunderhead, they cross Mount Squires, bearing the memory of North Carolina State Senator Mark Squires, a lawyer from Lenoir who rallied North Carolina support for the park and argued its case before state and federal officials.

The vast park in the Smokies is the keystone of the many efforts to conserve the southern mountains. Early in the twentieth century, as they watched the corporate loggers plunder the slopes of the mountains, foresters and civic boosters around the base of the Smokies thought it important that land be set aside and protected from exploitation.

Michael Frome (Strangers in High Places) tells the stories of the writers, advocates, and citizens whose fifty years of efforts brought a national park into being. The Reverend C. D. Smith of Franklin floated the idea of a park in the Southern Appalachians in the 1880s. Others on the North Carolina and Tennessee sides of the mountains moved the dream forward. By 1925, businesses and private individuals were raising money to purchase land. School children in Knoxville pooled pennies, nickels, and dimes to donate $1,391.72. In 1926, President Calvin Coolidge signed the law that established the park. Congress promised no money, however, and advocates in both states raised funds for land
purchases. John D. Rockefeller Jr. pledged up to $5 million in 1928 if the local boosters could match his gift. Eventually, the people and governments of North Carolina and Tennessee contributed $4 million. President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw to it that the federal government gave $3.5 million. And the Laura Spellman Rockefeller Memorial Fund contributed $3.5 million.

On Labor Day 1940, President Roosevelt rode in a motorcade through the steamy Tennessee River valley from Chattanooga and into the chilly air of the gap to dedicate the park. And the nation noticed. By the 1960s, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was drawing more visitors than any other national park. In 1999, more than ten million visitors prowled the roads and pathways of the park, fifty-five percent more than showed up in Yellowstone and Yosemite combined.

The fund-raising is not done. A collection box stands on a post beside a one-lane gravel road in the Cataloochee Valley. Lettering on its face asks for donations for projects in the park. The box belongs to the organization “Friends of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.” On an evening in June, our family drives into the remote valley on the eastern edge of the park.

Cataloochee is the least-visited section of the park accessible by road, which is the reason I’ve been coming here for more than a quarter of a century. No Dollywood attractions bring tourists, and the campground is relatively primitive by national park standards. But what Cataloochee lacks in amenities, it makes up for in serenity. A church building, an old school, houses maintained almost in the condition of the 1960s, the last years of their habitation, sit in grassy fields surrounded by steep, wooded mountains. Hikes through these hills lead past ruined farmsteads, cemeteries, and thick-walled stone apple houses.

This evening, we’ve come here not to hike but to watch elk. Driving to the end of a pasture, we park near several cars and pickups, pull an ice chest from the back of our car, and walk through the grass at the edge of the field. Two hundred feet up the slope, four wild turkeys stretch their necks to peer over the grass, then resume their feeding.

Tyler spreads a poncho on the ground. Maria lays out wedges of cheese, bagel chips, and grapes on it. As we munch, Maria points toward a dark, shadowy shape under an apple tree two hundred yards up the pasture. “Is that an elk?” she asks. I pull binoculars from my day pack and slowly sweep the rim of the field. A massive bull elk is browsing on the grass. Around his neck is a brown collar. A tag on his ear bears the number “2.” He is one of about fifty elk who have found a home in the Smokies over the past two years.

Elk once roamed as far south as Georgia. Bartram reported seeing elk bones near the Savannah River (Travels 322), but the herds had disappeared before the flintlocks of the European settlers. They had disappeared from the Smokies
not long after his visit in 1775. In February 2001, the Park Service transferred two dozen elk from the Land Between the Lakes in western Kentucky and released them into the Cataloochee Valley. A few of the cows gave birth that year. Another herd of elk was imported from Canada in 2002. Few deaths have occurred. With the birth of more calves, the herd appears to be thriving.

Friends of Great Smoky Mountains National Park assisted the Park Service in bringing the elk back. Besides the reintroduction of elk in the Smokies, the group has donated funds to stop the ravages of the hemlock woolly adelgid, restored a log cabin, and conducted conferences.

But the health and beauty of the Smokies require more than local action. North Carolina's legislature and governor passed stringent clean air legislation and Atlanta strains to bring its smog emissions under control. Georgia Power has cut its contribution to the smog by reducing its plants' nitrogen oxide emissions by eighty-five percent throughout the smog-producing summer months, and factories in Georgia are under tighter laws on emissions into the air. These measures will reduce the wheezing of North Carolinians and Georgians. They will also give the trees of the Southern Appalachians more breathing room.

While the creation, restoration, and enhancement of the big park draws national attention, smaller efforts quietly save chunks of wild habitat and beauty. In the Little Tennessee River Greenway in Franklin, thirty miles from the southern edge of the national park, families stroll through sun-drenched fields of grasses and planted seedlings. A jogger passes them in the shade of oaks hanging over boulders on a bluff. His feet thud on the plank floor of a vintage steel suspension bridge that crosses the river. The walkers step onto a timber overlook, watching deep green currents move slowly from the Georgia mountains beside the path Bartram rode on his way to Watauga and Cowee.

Local environmentalists who dreamed of the Little Tennessee River Restoration and Greenway Project found support from Duke Power, the State Department of Transportation, city and county governments, and local businesses. Grants and donations flowed together. The Watershed Association set revetments on the banks of the river along the greenway.

The greenway and the revetments don't stand alone as environmental projects along Bartram's "Tanase." Five miles upstream of Franklin, a young woman, her dark hair pulled into a ponytail, parks her car in the driveway of a small house that looks out over pastures to the winding banks of the Little Tennessee River. Her hiking boots, jeans, and loose-fitting blouse give her a more casual look, but serious business brings her to the little farm. She walks on well-worn stepping
stones toward the front porch, passing gladioluses and head-high hydrangea
bushes whose white blossoms bounce in the summer breeze. Mounting rock
steps, she greets the frail, white-haired woman with stooped shoulders who
stands behind a screen door.

“Good morning,” she says, a broad smile lighting her face as she greets
the homeowner by name. “Remember me? Sharon Taylor. From the Land
Trust. I called yesterday.”

“Sure, I remember you. You’re Merritt’s daughter. And I knew all of
your grandparents.”

They sit on rocking chairs on the front porch and talk of life in the valley. The old
lady knows Sharon’s father and knew her grandfather, as well. They’ve eaten barbecue
together, attended the same funerals, stood around bubbling vats of sorghum.

Sharon heads the Rural Land Protection Program of the Land Trust for the
Little Tennessee. Her job has taken her into the homes of the owners of all 120
tracts that lie along the river that the locals call “The Little T.” Born and reared
in the valley, Sharon has an education and experience in forestry and a zeal to
preserve the land to which she has returned.

An old mule rolling in the dust across the road amuses them as they sip sweet iced
tea. But today is not a social visit. Sharon explains the importance of maintaining the
rural community and historic sites in the valley and lays out the alternatives offered
by the Land Trust while her hostess listens, nodding her head.

The Land Trust focuses its attention squarely on Bartram’s “Vale of Cowe,”
the entire valley, from the Georgia line to the tailwaters of Fontana Lake. It
works with private landowners, citizen groups, and local governments to “help
identify, preserve and manage important heritage lands in the area.”

Sharon Taylor and Paul Carlson, Executive Director of the Franklin-based
group, have their work cut out for them. Carlson, a professional forester with
experience in Ecuador and the United States before he came to the Land Trust,
says, “Macon County is under the greatest pressure of any county in Western
North Carolina in terms of population growth.” Higher land values and increased
property tax assessments have followed in the wake of the immigration. Attracted
by developers’ lucrative offers, owners sell their land for subdivisions and other
projects. The cycle of development and taxation exerts increasing pressure on the
rich natural diversity of the area.

A major strategy of the organization is the creation of conservation easements
that preserve natural or historic sites and afford tax benefits to landowners.
Owners convey the development rights to their land to the Land Trust. Sharon
explains that officials of the Land Trust periodically inspect the properties to
assure that the owners’ wishes are being followed. The landowners receive a tax
benefit: the development potential of their property is deducted from the tax value of their land, thus reducing their estate and property taxes.

“This land goes back five generations in my family,” says the old woman. “My brother Bart owns the woods. Mine is the pasture and this house. When we are gone, we want the place to stay as it is. We’re with you.”

Beyond the enlistment of landowners who have agreed to easements, the Land Trust has enjoyed other successes. With funds granted by the North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund and the Lyndhurst Foundation, the organization purchased and restored the Tessentee Farm, a tract some ten miles upstream of Franklin. Bartram had lodged with a trader and his Cherokee wife not far away from Tessentee. Armies camped here in 1760 and 1776. Today, under the Land Trust, birds and waterfowl migrating to and from the valleys of the Tennessee and Ohio rivers find food and haven.

Another tract became the property of the trust following a dispute between the community and an entrepreneur. In 1999, a developer bought a piece of land with 2,700 feet of riverfront. Situated near two roads leading to Franklin less than four miles away, it seemed a perfect location for cabins and a campground. What he didn’t see, as he stood on a wooded bluff and looked out across the grass growing on his thirty-six acres, were the powerful concerns of the people of the valley. Residents cherish the fact that the river is one of the cleanest and least developed in Southern Appalachia. When they learned that the RV park’s wastewater-treatment system would pump almost 27,000 gallons of treated sewage into the river every day, they feared that the park would set a deadly precedent for more development and the pollution that usually accompanies it.

More than 200 people attended a Department of Environment and Natural Resources hearing on the proposal. Fifty people spoke against granting a permit for the water treatment plant. Biologists said the plant would further endanger the spotfin chub, Appalachian elktoe mussel, and little-wing pearly mussel that reside in the river.

Despite the concerns, the state announced it would grant the permit. The Land Trust persisted. In a last-ditch attempt to save this fragile wetland from development, Sharon approached the developer. With no money and very little hope, she asked him, “Will you sell this land to the trust for $300,000?” When he agreed to the offer, the Land Trust was faced with negotiating a deal and finding more than a quarter of a million dollars. Holding only loans, pledges, and the cash donated in a rapid fund-raising effort, they closed the deal.

Restoration began within weeks. Crews of volunteers moved the farm road from along the river to the toe of the bluff. They eradicated invasive exotics such as multiflora rose and privet. Where the road crossed the route of salamanders
that move between the river and the bluffs, they built a bridge that permits the little amphibians to migrate.

Far downstream, where the river spreads its cold waters into Fontana Lake, is the crown jewel of the wetlands the Land Trust wants to conserve. I stumbled onto this stretch of beautiful wildness when a canoeing buddy told me about a shortcut from the Nantahala to Franklin. Following his directions, I found myself driving a winding gravel track that passed through forested hills and into pastures in the river bottom. I stopped at a well-beaten clearing under hemlock trees where fishermen camp to wade into the river, seeking smallmouth bass, rock bass, and rainbow trout. The river dropped swiftly over rocky shoals, frothing into white water. A great blue heron rose from the opposite bank, sharing the sky with an osprey soaring leisurely overhead, searching for fish. Near my feet, gentle waves lapped the silt where empty mussel shells glistened beside the tracks of a raccoon who had feasted on them the night before. Resuming my drive, I watched cattle munch rich grass in pastures in the bottoms. The only houses were on the mountainsides, away from the river.

Later I learned that this is the “Needmore Tract,” a rare, biodiverse environment that surrounds twenty-six miles of river frontage. Carlson calls it a “veritable Noah’s Ark of life.” A series of power companies owned these 4,500 acres for almost a hundred years with plans to build a dam. They found the dam unnecessary but held the land, unintentionally preserving its wildness.

In 1999, when Duke Energy wanted to sell the land, local citizens, the Land Trust, and the Nature Conservancy began to raise public awareness of the potential impact the sale would have upon the rural, forest, and river environments. Duke Energy struck a deal with the Conservancy. They sold land to the organization, and the state then purchased the tract in January 2004. Within a month, volunteers came in pickups to carry away trash and rusting appliances discarded in the thickets and along the banks of the stream, and, in the spring, barbecues and picnics celebrated the passing of a key environment into the public trust.

As environmentalists toil on the land and in the courts, the earth persistently and quietly presses its own rights. As Margaret Lynn Brown has shown, those who wrestle the Southern Appalachian environment have seen nature raise its own fist of protest, thwarting the “best laid plans” of professional foresters and fishery experts. The rainbow trout blunder is an example.

When brook trout nearly disappeared from the Smokies after corporate logging silted the streams, the champions of the national park pressed for
the release of rainbow trout. The park gladly imported the rainbows from the American West. Businessmen in North Carolina and Tennessee were pleased: trout bring fishermen; fishermen bring money.

Rainbows took well to the pools and waterfalls of the mountains. In fact, they took too well. The native brookies did not compete well with the newcomers. Soon brookies survived only in the uppermost sections of the streams. The imported species was driving them out. In the last years of the twentieth century, the National Park Service experimented with costly projects to protect the brook trout. To bolster the brook trout population in the mountains, the Park Service brought in fish from streams in the central Appalachians only to find that the stocked trout are of another subspecies and do not do as well in the Smokies as the native brookies.

If fish chromosomes aren’t frustrating enough, look toward the conflicts between forest management and tourism interests. I became aware of the “Smokey the Bear” debate around a campfire in the mid-1960s. Jan (my first wife) and I had pulled a pop-up trailer from St. Joseph, Missouri, to the Chimneys Campground in the heart of the Smokies. There, under towering hemlocks, black bears ambled up the grass along the asphalt driveways, knocking lids from trash cans and probing the contents for fast food. At night, as we gathered with folks from neighboring tents, we heard kids claim to have sighted “Smokey.”

Grownups were just as excited. “We saw two bears on the highway, near Alum Cave parking lot,” said a man from Kentucky.

“Well, we saw four,” said Harvey from Virginia, not to be outdone, “two big ones and a mother and cub. Between the loop tunnel and the next tunnel. Myrtis fed them potato chips.”

A ranger who had stopped during his evening stroll through the campground gently told Harvey and Myrtis that feeding the bears was not only dangerous to people but to the wildlife. “They become panhandlers,” he said. “They lose their fear of humans and develop a preference for people-food. They cluster along the roads, picnic areas, and campgrounds, looking for handouts and garbage. Every year, we have to take several people to the hospital to get stitched up when a bear claws or bites them.”

Park managers began trapping the bears and relocating them deep in the forest. And, thereby, bears became an ecological, political, and economic issue for the Park Service in the 1980s. Tourists who drove U.S. Highway 441 to the crest of the Smokies with the goal of seeing black bears “up close and personal” began to ask, “Where are the bears?” Tourist-related businessespeople echoed the concern. “People come to the park to see the bears,” they boomed.
Animal management won out. The Park Service now conducts an aggressive campaign, trapping bears that panhandle and transporting them into the deep recesses of the park. Many of the bears, memories of easy living and refined sugar imbedded in their brains, hasten back to the human side of the mountains, however. One has been trucked as far away as Kentucky and has returned to the park to forage on the scraps left by unwary campers and picnickers.

A similar controversy has pitted wilderness purists against business interests. Promoters advertise easy drives to the doorsteps of pioneer cabins, houses, and churches in the pastures of Cades Cove. When environmentalists argued that natural forces should be allowed to return the park to its primeval state, tourism prevailed. On an eleven-mile loop road, sightseers drive bumper-to-bumper, counting deer and turkeys grazing in the fields.

Restoration of wilderness and the cleansing of streams are not the only goals of environmentalists in Bartram’s “Cherokee Mountains.” Some have a vision of wise, productive use of the land and its resources. About halfway up Cowee Mountain, a small wooden sign marks the location of an environmental experiment. Here, at Waldee Forest, Walton Smith followed his convictions and showed how a forest could be salvaged, managed, and used for multiple purposes.

Waldee’s 150 acres rest along the ancient Indian trail that crosses Leatherman Gap, the route from Cowee to the Tuckasegee Valley, the road a British army traveled in 1761 to war against the Cherokees, and the path Bartram and the young trader from Cowee followed on their trip made famous by the frolicking Cherokee maidens.

White pines, yellow poplars, and oaks rise among old rock terraces. The trees are the legacy of Walton Smith; the terraces are artifacts of the determined, sweaty effort of the Leatherman family who farmed the steep slopes for a century, beginning in 1850.

On an August afternoon, Walton’s son Ramsay leads Maria and me through the two-story house that his father built from rocks and lumber found on the old homestead. His mother, Dee, greets us on a rooftop terrace where a cool breeze rises out of the valley, crosses the lawn below, and continues up the mountain to Cowee Bald. A gleaming smile and white hair light her copper-colored face. She is an heir of the Cherokee women Bartram described as “tall, slender, erect and of a delicate frame, their features formed with perfect symmetry, their countenance cheerful and friendly, and they move with a becoming grace and dignity” (Travels 484).

We sit on comfortable wooden chairs around a picnic table, beneath eaves of a moss-encrusted wood-shake roof, to hear Dee spin the epic of Waldee. Dee’s
connection with this mountain began in 1850, when her great grandfather, a German immigrant, built a two-story frame house on the spot where we are sitting and began removing the trees, building terraces, and planting apple trees and row crops on the gentler slopes. The farmers hauled their corn and apples across the mountains to the east, selling them at Walhalla, South Carolina. It was a three-week trip along the same track that Bartram rode into the “Cherokee Mountains.”

Dee went to a business college in Athens, Georgia, then took a job as a secretary for the Forest Service in Franklin. “A young ranger,” she says, her dark eyes twinkling, “was making the rounds, dating the mountain girls, ‘playing the field.’”

The ranger was Walton Smith. He could have pursued the family banking business in Charlotte, but his passion was the outdoors, not finance. Besides, the Depression had wrecked the bank. He worked his way through North Carolina State University using his skills in taxidermy. After he graduated, the Forest Service employed him to scout the mountains for timber and to find the best places for fire towers. “He’ll ask you out, date you a few times, then move on to someone else,” Dee’s friends told her. On a wintry evening in 1935, a young man in a uniform appeared at the door of Dee’s boarding house. A boy found Dee and told her, “They’s a government man here to see you.”

“Oh, my,” she thought. “Someone has come to tell me I’ve lost my job.”

Walton Smith leaned jauntily with one hand on the door frame. “Would you care to go to a picture show with me tonight?” he asked.

She expected that, after two dates, her friends’ predictions would be proven true. Instead, he appeared one evening at her home in the mountains and asked her for a third date. Three weeks later, he asked her to marry him. “He wasn’t in love with me. He was in love with this mountain,” Dee grins.

During stints in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Wisconsin, Walton became an expert in forest products. When the Forest Service moved him to its experiment station in Asheville, the couple renewed their love affair with the farm and the mountain. They built a cabin from chestnut logs, with hard maple floors, a stone fireplace, and water piped from a spring up the mountain.

Properly managed, he thought, the old farm place could become a model forest. In his retirement, Dee and Walton moved to the mountain. He planted white pines and let the yellow poplars grow. Although the wood products industry had little regard for poplar, Walton convinced corporations that it is a valuable resource. A visit to a home supply store, where poplar lumber (sometimes called “white wood”) is well-represented and most plywood contains a core of poplar, shows the results of his effort.

Walton believed in selective cutting as opposed to clear-cutting. His convictions led him to oppose the Forest Service’s policies of “even-aged forest”
management. When he learned, in the early '80s, that the service planned to sell mixed hardwood (cherry, poplar, oak) on a nearby tract called “Little Laurel” and to permit clear-cutting, he led a movement of citizen action. Along with the Western North Carolina Alliance, he became a spokesman for “responsible forest management.” Forests should be cut selectively, he said, allowing large, healthy trees to reach their full potential while other trees are harvested. He believed not in a policy that promoted free growth, but in the wise human use of forests, sustainable forests. His “Green Papers” circulated amongst forestry and environmental leaders. His words reached the ears and eyes of decision makers. The Forest Service reversed its policy; “uneven-aged forests” prevailed.

Waldee became a demonstration tract for Walton’s theory. Using machinery that made little impact on the forest floor, he harvested lower-grade trees and left the best to reach their maximum potential. He planted seedlings to grow into trees that others would cut and mill into useful products. After he died in 1996 at the age of 86, Dee and their son Ramsay continued to work toward Walton Smith’s goals. Steve Lerner, writing at the time of Smith’s death, named him among the world’s “eco-Pioneers.” Smith’s contribution, says Lerner, was “demonstrating that homeowners can improve the environmental quality and economic value of their land by practicing a sustainable method of forestry” (7).

Had William Bartram encountered Walton Smith, they would, I imagine, have enjoyed long conversations about the use of America’s natural wealth, for Bartram came not only to praise the botanical treasures of the land but also to find good uses for them.

“Here on earth God’s work must truly be our own,” said President John F. Kennedy. If he was right, those who toil on riverbanks and in the forests, working against societal forces to conserve and restore the biological and cultural jewels of the Southern Appalachians, are the human expression of the divine mercy that Bartram begged for in his prayer at Mount Royal (Travels 100-101). In the face of the obstacles that long-term abuse and neglect place in their way, their efforts to restore the mountains have, overall, seen success. Roots cling to slopes once scorched and eroded. Flame azaleas bloom on Gregory Bald and Turk’s-cap lilies on Siler’s Bald. Elk roam. And fish and fowl join the salamanders enjoying the clear water of Bartram’s “Tanase” (Doug, Sharon, and Paul’s “Little Tennessee”). The “pristine forest” that James, John, and I sought in the Smokies during our “Great Crossing” was a legacy of fifty years of their hard work to liberate the “power and magnificence” of the mountains.
IN THE
“DREARY MOUNTAINS”

Clouds veil the trees in Burningtown Gap on an October morning, soaking the blades of grass in the open meadow where Cherokee cowherds once fattened their cattle. Gnarled limbs coated with pale green lichen grip four apples high above roots set by a farmer on a cool morning in an age long past.

Three pickup trucks, dog pens in their beds, stand along the edges of the ancient pasture. Two hunters carrying rifles and wearing orange caps walk down the mountain and disappear into tangles of laurel and dog-hobble. A young man with a three-day growth of beard stands beside his truck, holding a T-shaped antenna. Wires lead from the contraption to buttons stuck in his ears. I say hello and ask him how he is.

Thinking I asked, “What are you hunting?” he removes a plug from his left ear and says, “Bear.” The word is closer to “bar” but raspy, spoken from deep in his throat, a sound my vocal chords cannot imitate. It’s the dialect of Appalachia, maintained in mountain hollows by the descendants of the Anglo-Saxon yeomen and their families who migrated here in the 1800s and nurture their heritage in their language and Celtic-based mountain music.

He tells me that they turned loose their hounds around six-thirty and that the dogs have located a bear.

“How do you know?” I ask.

“All the dogs got radios on their collars,” he says. “We track ’em with these antennas. When three or four hounds git to the same place, we know they got a bar treed.”

“I don’t hear any barking,” I say, thinking of the sounds of the hounds on coon hunts in the rolling hills of northwest Missouri.
“Thar way over, crosst two ridges. Cain’t hyar ’em from hyar.”
“Think you’ll get him?”
“Hard ta say. Come up hyar every day. Get one or two in a week.”

I recall what a resident of Macon County told me: “Never plan any construction work during bear season. The carpenter or well digger will tell you he’ll be here ‘next Monday morning,’ but he won’t show up until after bear season.”

I thank him for the lesson, wish him luck, and join Ralph Preston and Gary Kauffman for a walk along a trail. Ralph, a video producer and photographer who lives in the Cowee community, has arranged this outing. We’ve asked Gary, chief biologist for the Nantahala Forest Service, to escort us.

“How did the apple trees get here?” I ask Gary. “Were there houses and farms up here?”

“People who herded cattle on the balds in the summer most likely planted them.” He points to a small stand of trees at the edge of the meadow. “White pines are also not native at these elevations.”

“So,” I ask, “what did this gap look like when Bartram crossed it?” recalling that the botanist-explorer from Philadelphia urged his horse into this gap along the Nantahalas.

“Probably more grass than now,” he answered. “The grazing kept down the growth of trees and shrubs. So it was sunnier, more open. Lots of wildflowers. But the plant communities haven’t changed much up here.”

Bartram had ridden up here from Cowee, through the valley of Burningtown, on his way to the Overhill Villages. The Nantahalas challenged Bartram’s body and grappled with his soul. Rarely in his Travels does he reveal adverse feelings. Yet his memories of these mountains abound with dark images: “I was left again wandering alone in the dreary mountains,” in a “situation [not] entirely agreeable.” The forest was dark, the trail steep and rocky. He later wrote, “I could not help comparing my present situation in some degree to Nebuchadnezzar’s when expelled from the society of men, and constrained to roam in the mountains and wilderness, there to herd and feed with the wild beasts of the forest” (Travels 360).

He recalls “wearisome ascents” that left him “over heated and tired.” A brook is “noisy.” He feels “shut up by stupendous rocky hills on each side” and sits down for lunch “beneath a high frowning promontory” (Travels 359–61). This is not the Bartram who sings paens at the rising of the sun over Florida’s Lake George and presses forward after a restless night of “persecuting mosquitoes” and roaring alligators.

Hikers find many ways to describe the ruggedness of these mountains. Eddie Nickens, writing in Backpacker, says, “the scramble up Wayah Bald is on a grade fit for a mountain goat, or at least a hiker with younger knees. In this 11-mile stretch the trail climbs 5,000 feet and descends another two grand” (82). From
the head of the valley of Burningtown Creek to the crest of Burningtown Gap, the trail rises 1,657 feet in less than two miles. So remote, craggy, and dense are the Nantahalas that Eric Rudolph, the religious zealot who confessed to bombing Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park and two abortion clinics, was able to elude 250 FBI and other agents, their bloodhounds, and a small squadron of helicopters for five years.

At Burningtown Gap, Bartram's fading spirit healed. He rode to the highest peak—some say it was Wayah Bald, others say Wine Spring Bald—and looked across the panorama of mountains.

The yellow raft spins to the left and comes close to the rock face that rises above a swirling eddy. A man balances his muscular, lean body on the stern, his feet wedged solidly beneath the seat in front of him while his father, son, and daughter glance at the water crashing into a foaming pool below them. Boulders funnel the river into a narrow, swirling, roaring stream. This is the big one, thinks the boy. The one we've been waiting for. Forcing the blade of his paddle into the eddy, the younger man leans backwards, over the side, and pulls hard. Grandfather and grandson feel the raft groan and shift and plunge their paddles into the current when the stern man yells, "Now! Paddle!" The girl grips the grommet in the middle of the craft. Her eyes bulge as they ride over the drop toward the deep, green water below.

As the raft bounces onto the surface of the pool, the family shouts with one voice. They raise their paddles above their heads in a gesture of victory and look at the photographer on the right bank who has captured their moment on the river. At the foot of the falls, four young men in kayaks push back into the current to resume their play.

The "dreary" Nantahalas now attract a sizeable vacation crowd. Highways have opened much of the area to the masses. Some come to retire or vacation in secluded mountain cottages and luxurious houses around Nantahala Lake. Thousands more descend on the Nantahala River for water sports. Aside from the cities of Bartram's travels, this may be the most visited spot along his route.

The family and the kayakers are among the 200,000 people who test their skills and endurance and enjoy the Nantahala River each year. Most of these are thrill-seeking families, church groups, and summer campers who rent inflatable rafts. But a large number of masterful paddlers take to the river in kayaks and canoes.

Bartram may not have seen the section of the river that has become a recreational mecca. Descending the trail from Burningtown Gap on his way to
Footprints across the South

visit the Overhill Settlements near the Tennessee River, he probably crossed the Nantahala near Aquone, not far below the Nantahala Dam, well upstream of the paddlers' paradise. He then followed a trail that took him over Old Road Gap and into the area of Andrews. His route led him to cross “a large creek or river, where this high forest ended on [his] left hand, the trees became more scattered and insensibly united with a grassy glade or lawn bordering on the river; on the opposite bank of which appeared a very extensive forest, consisting entirely of the Hemlock spruce . . . almost encircled by distant ridges of lofty hills” (Travels 364).

According to popular lore, the name Nantahala comes from a Cherokee phrase meaning “land of the noonday sun.” Canoeists and kayakers have tried to befriend the wild river by calling it, affectionately, “the Nanty” or “the Nanny.” An earth and concrete dam ten miles upstream controls whitewater recreation on the river. Nantahala Power and Light built the Nantahala Hydroelectric Project in 1942. For forty years, power schedules determined when the plant would run, with no regard for downstream interests. Paddlers faced unpredictable water releases. A hopeful canoeist, dreaming of a day dodging boulders covered by tons of thrashing, rolling water, could drive mountain roads all morning only to arrive at a shallow, gentle stream, cut off from its source by the gods of the power grid. Since 1983, when the electric company began using a more predictable generating schedule, recreational use of the river has grown.

Icy waters released from the dam flow through generators and into conduits that return water to the river. Between the dam and the mouths of these pipes, the river bed carries little water. At the spot where Bartram crossed the “large creek or river,” it often trickles through pools where grasses and small trees grow in the silt of gravel bars.

Shortly after I bought my new solo canoe, I signed on with a Georgia Canoeing Association trip. Although we were meeting at the put-in at eleven o'clock, I left Atlanta before dawn, drove through the summer fog that cloaked the north Georgia mountains, and arrived at the put-in well ahead of my colleagues. In the cool air, beside the slow moving stream, I drank hot coffee from my thermos and ate the sausage biscuit I had bought in Andrews.

Then, around ten o'clock, a faraway computer flipped a switch. Generators in a concrete building up on Lambert Mountain began to turn. Water flowed through tunnels and giant pipes. Within a few minutes, the river was “on”; the current increased and water began to rise into the little bay where paddlers would soon line up to slip their kayaks and canoes into the stream. The parking lot filled with pickups, cars, and SUVs. Kayakers, rubber skirts flapping from their waists, hoisted their boats to their shoulders, picked up their paddles, and walked to the stone-and-mortar walls of the put-in.
The moment a whitewater boater settles into his craft and grasps the paddle, fear, awe, and anticipation move blood faster through the veins. Senses grow keen. Knees and hips feel the thrust of water from beneath the hull. Eyes see details. With an easy stroke I turned the bow into the current. The surge of the river carried me over rocks that had, an hour before, stood six inches above the surface. My speed increased. Skirting rocks in midstream, I felt the irresistible flow pull me into Patton's Run, where the river turns ninety degrees and drops over robust, humped boulders. Riotous, spinning waves crested over my bow and filled my canoe almost to the gunwales. Water rose to my thighs; I struggled to control the yawing boat, beached on a gravel bar, and dumped my load of water. I had passed my initiation to the river.

On whitewater rivers, notable rapids have names. Patton's Run is named for Charlie Patton. No one in the canoeing association knows how Charlie lost his arm, but they do know that he was a postal carrier from Bryson City and that, in the 1960s, he was famous for negotiating the Nantahala “single handedly.”

Some stretches, like “Little SOB Rapid,” are dubbed for their effects on paddlers, others for their prominent features (“Whirlpool”), and a few, such as the “Quarry Rapids,” less imaginatively, for their location. Even rocks may have names. One broad, flat-faced boulder on the Nantahala is known as “Billboard.” Names enable river-runners to talk about the river: “I hit ‘Pop’N’Run’ too far to the right and got caught in the hydraulic.” “Dave took a swim at ‘Edge of the World.’” The monikers also mark the intimacy of paddlers with their fields of dreams.

At the far end of the eight-mile run, at Wesser Falls, the river funnels through a narrow canyon bounded by sheer rock walls. Sharp-edged rocks, dynamited into the river when the railroad was built, litter the bottom. Consequently, Wesser is not normally on paddlers' itineraries. One occasionally hears a legend of someone who ran it in a kayak or decked canoe, but the anger of this behemoth rapid is avoided by most. Nantahala Falls, also known as Lesser Wesser, gets the attention.

Classified as a Class III rapid, Nantahala Falls drops out of a broad, sluggish pool about half the size of a football field. The river picks up speed as it flows by a flat-faced boulder, compresses between rocky banks, and shoves boats toward the left bank. The current increases, passes rocks, and swirls through eddies until it narrows in a churning eight-foot fall, humps over more boulders, and enters a deep pool.

On a summer weekend, a dozen kayakers nose their crafts into the white water below Lesser Wesser, practicing maneuvers and rolls. They dodge armadas of rafts that plunge over the falls filled with screaming kids and their parents or camp counselors. On the right bank, crowds dressed in shorts and T-shirts stand along a split-rail fence watching the spectacle and cheering for those
who execute the currents well or sighing loudly when a raft or canoe brushes a boulder in midstream and sends its human cargo headlong into the pool below the falls. Photographers, employed by rafting outfitters, capture lasting memories of the run and sell them to once-a-year adventurers who emerge from the valley of the “noonday sun.”

The river itself has scarcely been altered by humans and their machines. Much of the riverside remains walled by large hemlocks, boulders, and pebble beaches. Its preservation owes much to Percy Fereebee, owner of a rock quarry on the river’s western bank, who gave five thousand acres to the federal government in 1971. This donation made the U.S. Forest Service the primary landowner along the river. A Forest Service recreational area along the river is named in his memory.

By 1980, recreational use of the narrow, eight-mile-long valley approached 90,000 users per year. Yellow and blue rubber rafts, unloaded from trucks and buses near the conduit from the dam, filled the river with families, college students, church groups, and summer campers. Kayaks and canoes snaked through the maze of rafts. Road traffic swelled. Roots along the river banks caught an increasing number of tennis shoes, plastic sandwich wrappers, and soda bottles.

In response, the Forest Service activated a management plan in 1984. They limited commercial users and established guidelines to restrict daily use. In 2001, they tightened the restrictions.

Private boaters have not escaped regulation. The Forest Service agency began charging them a fee in 1997. Paddlers in kayaks or canoes pay a dollar and clip a waterproof bracelet to their wrists or life vests. The Forest Service claims they use the money to improve facilities along the river—restrooms and changing rooms and river access ramps—and many paddlers have accepted the fees as a contribution to the well-being of the river. “It’s our share for what we enjoy,” they say. But vocal members of the recreational paddling community have conducted running verbal battles with the government since the plan to charge a fee was announced. “It’s double taxation,” say some. “The Forest Service doesn’t own the rivers, the people do.”

On scraps of land not owned by the Forest Service, campgrounds, a barbecue shack, and paddle sport shops, along with a handful of houses and mobile homes, intrude upon the wilderness. Cars, trucks, and buses roll close to the stream on U.S. 19/74 for the entire eight miles of the stretch normally used for boating. The Great Smoky Mountains Railroad runs a sightseeing train along the left bank.

The Nantahala Outdoor Center is the largest of the commercial establishments along the river. Recreational paddlers Payson and Aurelia Kennedy and Horace Holden founded the NOC in 1972. They operated a small convenience store and
motel on the right bank, hard by the highway below Lesser Wesser. Over the past thirty years, NOC has expanded into a mecca for paddlers, hikers, and off-road cyclists. If the river were a shopping mall, NOC would be the anchor store.

“Rhinos,” athletes who have trained with the NOC-affiliated Nantahala Racing Club, are well known in the circles of world-class competition. They have competed in every World Championships and Olympic Games since 1972; Scott Strausbaugh and Joe Jacobi won Olympic gold in the ’92 Barcelona Games.

Each spring, the Georgia Canoeing Association gathers at the river to sponsor the Southeastern U.S. Slalom and Wild Water Championship Races. On Thursdays before the races, a small cadre of club members begins setting up the slalom course. Ferrying wires and cords across the raging current above and below Lesser Wesser, they string twenty-five “gates” through which racers must pass. About half the gates are designed to direct paddlers upstream. The course is a test of paddlers’ ability to weave down the river, alternately paddling swiftly through downstream currents and straining to propel upstream, pivoting around the dangling plastic pipes.

By Friday evening, most of the volunteers and paddlers have arrived—an extended family. Cars, vans, pickups, and SUVs, garish kayaks and canoes fastened to roof racks, crunch the gravel of the parking lot. Old friends gather around tables set up under tents, catching up on “family” gossip, bragging about conquests of vicious rapids, and recalling their last trip together on rivers in Tennessee or Georgia or North Carolina.

“Did you get over that twisted knee you got on Bull Sluice?”
“I’m doing fine. I only wear my leg brace when I walk.”

By dawn on Saturday, the family is complete: graying, bearded men, dark-haired women in parkas and jeans, slender teens. Lean, muscular youths, wiry twelve-year-old girls and balding men pull numbered bibs over their paddle jackets and carry their boats upstream to the starting line. A master plumber works alongside a computer programmer to enter names on forms stored on a laptop. Volunteer judges gather around a professor of psychometrics who stands beside a plywood tote board to offer instructions on hand signals and scoring rules. After the orientation, they scatter along the wooded, rocky banks of the river to their posts, find rounded boulders for seats beside the gates, and await the first racer.

Among the rocks along the bank below Lesser Wesser, the sturdy men and women of the safety crew hold thick nylon rescue ropes and carry first aid kits. Trained and practiced in river rescue, this team retrieves from the water any hapless contestant who washes over the falls or pops from a canoe or kayak in the deep hole at the end of the rapid. Paddlers call these accidents “swimming,”
but that is too tame a word to describe the perils of plunging into convulsing, frigid water surrounded by boulders as large as minivans.

By 9:00 the radio communications have been tested, the stopwatches readied. A young man wearing a bright purple helmet paddles his fuchsia kayak to the starter’s station in the pool above the falls. A seventy-year-old veteran of thirty-three races grasps the strap on the stern of the “yak.” The timer, seated on the stump of a hemlock tree, punches the stopwatch as the starter releases his grip and shouts, “Go!” A paddle blade grips the water. The races have begun.

The objective of the slalom is simple: get from the starting line to the finish line as quickly as possible. While you are at it, pass through all of the gates. Oh, and pass through the gates in the correct direction. If the poles on the gate are green-striped, enter them from the upstream side; if the stripes are red, enter from downstream. And one more thing: don’t touch a gate pole. Not with your paddle, your helmet, your shoulder, your boat, or anything else you may have with you down the course. If you touch a gate, the scorer will add five seconds to your finishing time; if you miss it, fifty seconds.

By the end of the day, three dozen racers in kayaks, decked canoes, and open solo canoes will have slashed through the white currents, artfully dodged gate poles, and grunted through the upstream gates to the encouraging shouts of spectators crying “Up, up, up!” Another bunch of boaters will have competed in the Wildwater Race, paddling the eight miles from the put-in to Lesser Wesser.

On Saturday evening the “family” comes together for dinner and the awarding of the first day’s trophies. Competitors and volunteers wash down their barbecue with iced tea or beer while lampooning and praising would-be champions of white water. A member of the course construction crew finds himself scratching a reddening patch on his forearm—a commemorative badge left by a cluster of three shiny leaves on a vine that grows on a tree beside Gate 14.

More racers will test their skills Sunday morning. Then, after the final awards are given, the tents struck, the gates and wires withdrawn, the clan will scatter to Conyers, Savannah, and Atlanta. They’ll meet again on the banks of other rivers to paddle. But nothing in the tribe’s year matches the “potlatch” of the Southeasterns.

A historical marker alongside the highway not far from Patton’s Run says that, near this place, Bartram met Cherokee Chief Atakullakulla. The exact spot of the meeting is debated. Almost certainly, he was miles from this place when he encountered the Cherokee party and “turned off from the path to make way, a token of respect” (Travels 365).
In the "Dreary Mountains"

Atakullakulla, also known as "The Little Carpenter," was a Cherokee leader respected not only across the breadth of his nation but also by the British and colonists. He had been credited with saving the life of John Stuart, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and was instrumental in all the major negotiations of treaties with his people since 1730. Now he was on his way to Charleston to meet with Stuart.

The meeting was pleasant. Bartram demonstrated his skills in the art of diplomacy, assuring the chief that he came from the “tribe of white men of Pennsylvania” and that “we were united in love and friendship, and that the name of Ata-cul-culla was dear to his white brothers of Pennsylvania” (Travels 365).

Bartram proceeded into the mountains but, a day later, reconsidered and turned back. Some think he was weary of traveling in the rugged mountains and thought he had sampled their botany adequately. Others suggest that he was depressed by the loneliness of the long and arduous journey in the dark forests. Or perhaps he thought twice about the political prospects of arriving in the Overhill Villages before the completion of a treaty between the settlers and the Cherokees.

But Ian Marshall thinks that Bartram may have based his decision on broad ethical principles. Marshall thinks that the botanist, by withdrawing from Cherokee land, had taken a step toward what we now call “ecology,” a recognition of the interdependence of life: “welcoming and cherishing the encounters with the beryring Cherokee women, the singing hunter, the noble Attakullakulla [sic], maybe Bartram came to recognize his common bond with the Cherokee, not just their shared humanity but their shared love for the natural world. And maybe in respect of that bond he decided to give ground. Or rather, not to take it” (49). Whatever his reason, Bartram returned to Cowee, went on to South Carolina and Georgia, and linked up with a group of entrepreneurs heading for Alabama.

Had he gone a day’s ride farther, he would have traveled near the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. This preserve, remarkable in the twenty-first century for its rare stands of hemlocks and poplars the rampant timber industry never reached, would likely not have rated a footnote in his Travels, for its vegetation would not have been unusual to him.

Today, however, it is one of the few spots in the eastern United States where one can get an image of the land almost as it appeared in the late 1700s. Here, in a protected wilderness, stand hemlocks and poplars, some over 400 years old, 100 feet tall, and up to 20 feet in circumference, that the loggers didn’t reach before the Great Depression quieted their saws. Set well back in the Snowbird Mountains near Robbinsville, North Carolina, the Kilmer Forest (named for the poet whose verse “Trees” is memorized by thousands of school children) covers
Footprints across the South

3,800 acres. Paths and hiking trails cross clear, rushing streams and provide a view of a near-pristine forest.

Missing from Kilmer are the canopies of massive chestnut trees that once rose one hundred feet above the soft humus. These titans of the forest now lie prone across the forest floor, clad in moss, killed in the 1920s.

On his last day of westward trekking, Bartram entered the area now inhabited by a small band of Native Americans known as the Snowbird Cherokees. The Snowbird portion of the North Carolina Cherokee Reservation is a series of tracts in Graham County, North Carolina. The 1980 census counted about 380 Snowbird Cherokees here and around Andrews.

In times of war, such as the middle 1700s and early 1800s, Cherokees may have fled from the bottomlands into the more mountainous areas for refuge; the Snowbird region may have served as one of those refuge areas. In this harsh land, no more than six percent of which is considered suitable for agriculture, the Indians had little competition from white farmers in the 1800s. They were able, through the help of sympathetic whites, to purchase small tracts. (By law, Indians were not allowed to buy land themselves.)

In small houses beside roads that wind around man-made, power-generating lakes bordered by boat docks, campgrounds, and luxurious vacation homes, the Snowbird Cherokees continue their traditions. And each spring, under brush arbors, they gather for the "Trail of Tears Singing."