

Many people are surprised to find out that much of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park had once been harvested to fuel a growing nation and economy. In the early 1900s, these mountains were filled with hundreds of loggers cutting trees and massive steam engines transporting logs to mills in the valleys. This article briefly describes the railroad communities that helped shape both the landscape and the lives of families during the first half of the 20th century in eastern Tennessee.

STRINGTOWNS: EARLY LOGGING COMMUNITIES IN THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS

BY ROBIN BIBLE

At the beginning of the 20th century, as the great timber resources were exhausted in the Lake States forests, attention turned to the Southern Appalachians where massive trees such as yellow poplar, ash, basswood, cherry, and chestnut grew. Fueled by an increasing demand for lumber, industrial logging arrived in the southern mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina. During this era of extensive logging, lasting about 40 years, entire communities were founded, flourished briefly, and then disappeared.

Prior to the industrial revolution, settlers hand-hewed timber from the forest for log cabins, barns, and other outbuildings. As communities became established in the mountains, simple portable sawmills began sawing timber into boards and beams to meet the needs of the local population. When the timber was “cut out” of an area, the “mill” was simply moved to another site.

Industrial logging in the area, early in the 1900s, was highlighted by the establishment of Champion International’s paper mill in Canton, North Carolina, in 1908, when wood began being used for pulp and chemical manufacturing. Also, with the coming of World War I, reaching the high-elevation stands of virgin red spruce along the crest of the Smokies

became a national priority in order to build military planes. But access to many of the forests of the Southern Appalachians was not well developed. The following is a brief account about the experiences of one lumber company to transport logs out of the Great Smoky Mountains.

THE LITTLE RIVER LUMBER COMPANY

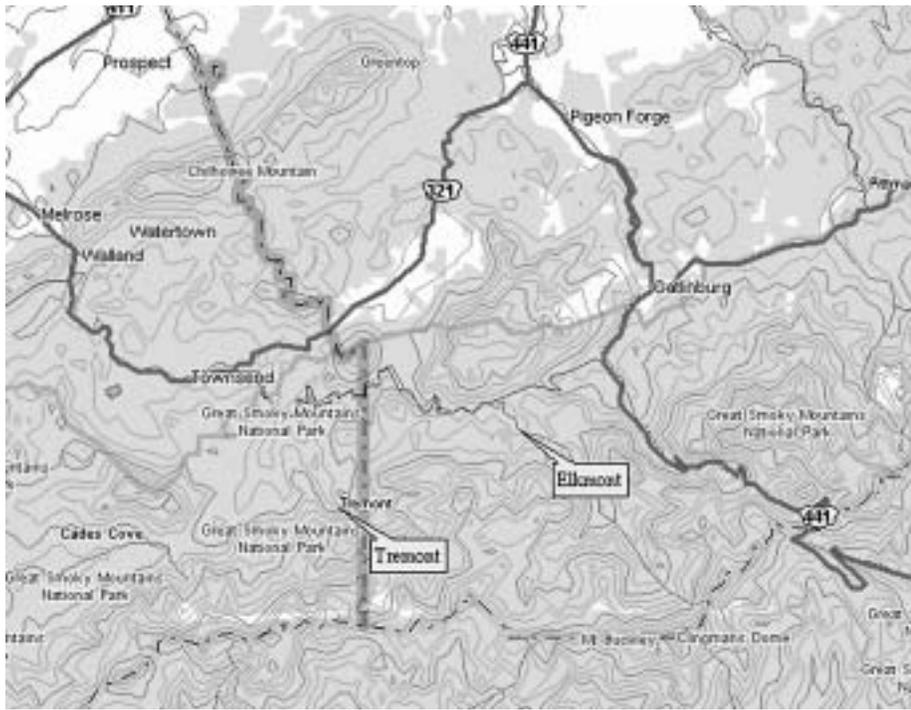
In 1900, having had experience with modern methods of logging in the Pennsylvania mountains, Colonel Wilson B. Townsend moved south and established a large leather tanning industry around Tennessee’s Millers Cove in the Walland community, located in the shadow of the Smokies. Colonel Townsend had founded the Clearfield Lumber Company in Pennsylvania, along with several smaller mills, in 1886. In addition, he had formed two railroads, the Clearfield Southern and the Black Lick and Yellow Creek, to serve the loggers and lumber producers of that area. He had a keen understanding of the forest products market leading him to extend his market into the Southern Appalachians.

It did not take long for Townsend and his associates to discover the vast timber resources of the Great Smoky Mountains. The potential commercial sale of lumber

and other timber products from the mountains of East Tennessee was great incentive and, within a few months he had acquired almost 80,000 acres of timberland, primarily in the Little River watershed on the Tennessee side of the Smokies. Townsend’s operation soon became known as the Little River Company.



Colonel Wilson B. Townsend.



the mill to the upper reaches of the drainage “within shouting distance” of the North Carolina state line along the crest of the mountains.

ELKMONT

In 1908, the community of Elkmont was established as a satellite facility for both railroad and lumbering operations, and to serve as a base of operations for harvesting the upper watershed of the Little River.

Elkmont was in all respects a “company town,” providing basic, simple service facilities for the Little River Lumber Company’s rail and timber operations. There was a post office, church, hotel, commissary, and houses and cabins for management and workers. The company also constructed a large machine shop capable of repairing and rebuilding locomotives, skidders, and other railroad loading stock.

With rail access now available into the heart of the mountains, the Little River Lumber Company began offering a special passenger “excursion” train to Elkmont. Visitors discovered the cooler air and mountain beauty of the Elkmont area. In 1912, the Wonderland Hotel was constructed, and the Little River Company made land available for summer home sites.

As logging progressed up the Little River watershed, additional facilities for

Construction of the Little River Lumber Company’s mill began in 1901 and was completed by 1903. The community that sprang up around the mill became known as Townsend, becoming the center of operations for the company as well as for its employees and their families.

COMING OF THE RAILROAD

In the Southern Appalachians, much of the farmable land had been cleared, and large forested areas too steep and rocky for farming remained. Yet, selective logging with horses and oxen brought timber down to local mills on all but the most inaccessible places. Roads that crossed the mountains would often wash out in bad weather, and timber harvesting would be delayed until the snows melted or the roads dried out.

Railroads transformed the way timber could be harvested. The invention of the geared locomotive proved to be ideal for steep grades, heavy logs, sharp curves, and uneven irregular track. After the construction of the Little River mill, Colonel Townsend founded the Little River Railroad, which he intended to be a “common carrier” to serve not only the needs of the lumber company but the public as well. Chartered by the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), a federal agency, common carriers in those days had the right of eminent domain, permitting

condemnation proceedings to acquire property for their right-of-ways from unwilling owners whose reluctance to sell could otherwise retard or prevent construction of the railroad.

Although narrow gauge logging railroads came to be common in the Southern mountains, the Little River Railroad was built on standard gauge from



Early tourists and sightseers on the Little River Railroad. This is a Compound Baldwin Mallet pulling the Elkmont Special excursion around the Little River Gorge (circa 1909–1914).

workers were constructed above Elkmont. On Fish Camp Prong, the Little River Company established a commissary, complete with a passing track to permit box-cars of goods to be unloaded without delaying other traffic on the main line up and down the river.

Most loggers and other woods workers lived with their families in small cabins or houses in camps along the railroad close to the felling operations. When harvesting an area was completed, the whole camp would, literally, be picked up and moved to the new harvesting location. These portable houses could be lifted with a hook or a sling by a log loader and transferred to an empty flat car on the adjacent railway for transport to the new location. Most camps, especially in steeply sloping terrain, were arranged in a line or “string” along the railway and were commonly known as “stringtowns.”

Daily life in these wood camps was mixed with regular intervals of noise interspersed with the mountain quiet. Loaders, skidders, supply cars, and other equipment would rumble through with the typical scream of whistles, screeching brakes and wheels, and the exhaust of the engines. “Speeders” (small, motorized rail cars used for transportation by railway workers), would travel up and down the tracks, carrying men and tools.

Loggers worked six days a week and usually 10 hours per day. Sunday was the only day of rest, unless the week had one of the two officially recognized holidays, Christmas and the Fourth of July. The nature of the work tended to move individual workers from one job to another in the woods and into and out of the camps and towns. Most loggers were locals with family ties in the region.

Camp communication was primitive. The Company constructed and maintained a telephone system from Elkmont to Fish Camp. In case of accidents or serious illness, the company physician was called and often arrived by speeder or inspection car to administer to the ailing. The company covered injury or illness of workers from work-related causes. Care of other infirmities of the workmen or their families were privately compensated to the physician, sometimes in barter.

As the timber reserves finally “played out” in Elkmont in 1926, the company sold off, gave away, or moved out the facilities and equipment, which had formed the



The “Elkmont” observation car owned by the Little River Railroad. This is a No. 9 Shay Locomotive on a Knoxville Elks Club excursion (circa 1911–1912).



The logging community of Elkmont, circa 1918.



A logging camp or “stringtown” above Fish Camp Prong.



A swinging railroad bridge at the mouth of Meigs Creek swings across the Little River. These portable bridges were used to lower cars loaded with logs down the mountain.

base of operations for the past twenty years. The rails were then pulled up, steel bridges were replaced with wooden ones, and gravel covered the rail bed.

TREMONT

Harvesting the Middle Fork watershed of the Little River was the Little River Company's last major timber harvesting operation. A second logging town called Tremont would become the wood's operational center for the remaining twelve years of the company's existence in the Smokies. Tremont was substantially smaller than Elkmont; however, the company created substantial infrastructure for its operations at this location—it had equipment, supplies, and personnel for servicing and maintaining the engines, logging cars, and other rolling stock as well as skidders, loaders, and other logging equipment. A commissary was also available for food, clothing, hardware, animal feed, and other necessities. Scattered along the branches of the Middle Fork of the Little River were more than twenty camp houses. Some of these were the standard one-room variety and others were more elaborate two- and even three-bedroom structures.

In Tremont, there was also a two-story, 22-room hotel, which served as a boarding house for more permanent residents

of the community (the schoolteacher had a room on the second floor for years). The company also initiated one of the first community health plans by making the services of the local doctor available for a fee of \$1.70 per month.

There was a unique building nicknamed the "House of Education, Salvation, and Damnation." It was a multi-purpose structure, which jointly served as a school, a church, a movie house, and a recreation facility. First through eighth grades were taught by two teachers. Those who wanted to attend high school went by train to Townsend. There was even a baseball field adjacent to the school.

COMING OF THE PARK

By 1924, the East Fork of the Little River had yielded just about all of the timber that could be economically removed. At the same time, interest in establishing a national park in the Appalachian Mountains was gaining momentum. Colonel Townsend was actually a leader in the Eastern National Park movement, becoming the first timberland owner of a company to offer lands for sale for a park. Townsend felt that when the timber was gone, there would have to be other employment for the locals in the area.

Close associates of the Colonel were

strong advocates for establishing a national park and eventually convinced the Tennessee State Legislature to contract with the Little River Lumber Company to purchase the land and to donate it to the federal government for the park. That agreement, authorized in 1925 by legislative act and consummated in 1927, transmitted immediately much of the land in the East and West Forks of the Little River, but reserved the right to remove any timber 16 inches and greater from the Middle Fork for 15 years. The full payment was \$273,557 for 76,507 acres. When these lands were purchased by the Company between 1900 and 1910, they paid between \$1.00 and \$3.00 per acre. The agreement with the State of Tennessee for a park purchase paid an average of \$3.58 per acre. So, the Little River Lumber Company was able to buy the land, remove the timber resources, and sell the land at a price 50 percent greater than the purchase price.

In 1939, the last trainload of logs was delivered to the mill and it ceased operation. The railroad was taken up in 1942. The National Park Service took advantage of the railbeds by converting them into roads and trails to serve a growing recreational demand in the park. In the Little River Lumber Company's history, over 400 miles of rail had been constructed. Colonel Townsend did not live to see the Park's dedication in 1940. He died in Townsend on February 23, 1936. He was 81 years old.

During the past 70 years, the transition from commercial timberland to National Park has proceeded quietly. Large second-growth stands of yellow poplar, oak, and hemlock have quickly reforested the slopes of the Little River. Today, visitors to Great Smoky Mountains National Forest drive the Little River Road from Gatlinburg to Cades Cove over much of the original bed of the Little River Railroads. Hikers walk the trails that these loggers built, catching glimpses of this logging legacy – old foundations, pieces of logging cable, and other equipment overgrown with vegetation and rusting away in the woods. □

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