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Cataloochee

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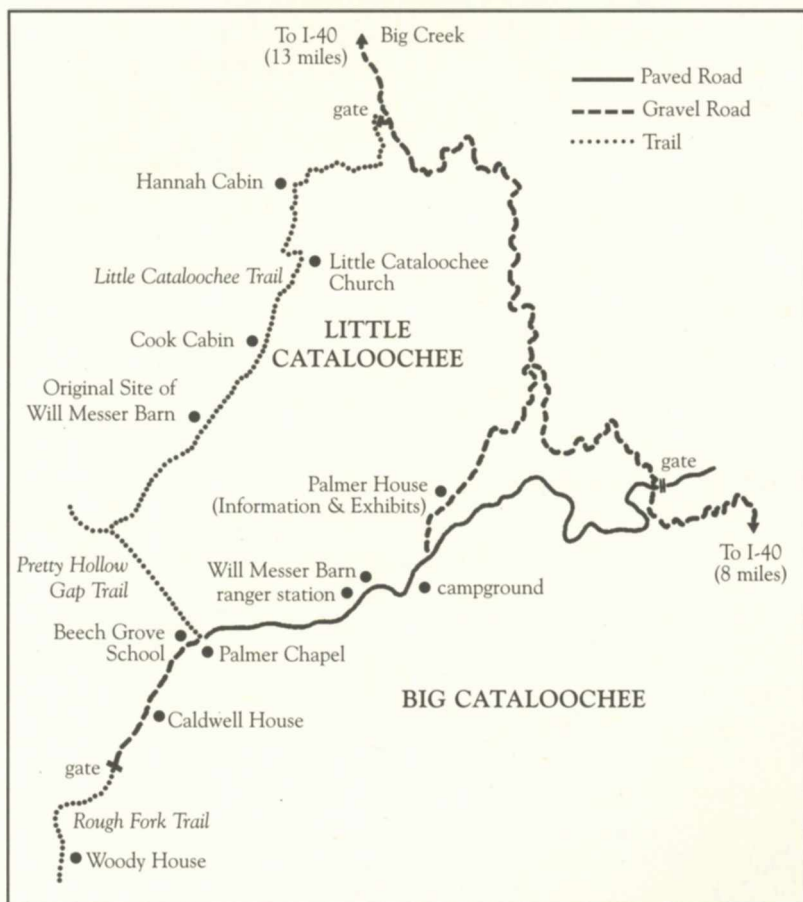


CATALOOCHEE

Native Americans were the first people to visit this beautiful valley. Archeological evidence suggests that the Cherokee hunted and fished here for abundant game, but did not settle permanently. They named the area "Gadalutsi," meaning "standing up in a row," referring to either the numerous mountain peaks surrounding the valley, or to the row upon row of trees growing on those high ridges.

Following Indian trails, white settlers pushed into the valley in the early 1800s as older settlements on the outside became more crowded, and family holdings were subdivided among heirs to their smallest limits. Young adults had to go somewhere else to start a homestead.

At that time, all of the valley belonged to Colonel Robert Love, a post-Revolutionary War land speculator who granted homesteads to those who would



settle and improve the land. The earliest known entries on this part of the Love estate were made by the Caldwells (1814), followed by the Hannah, Bennett, Noland, Palmer, Franklin, Woody and Barnes families. By the 1850s Cataloochee was well populated, but not full.

The U.S. agricultural census shows a steady increase in property values, and livestock and crop production. Much of the produce went to outside markets in Tennessee and the Carolinas. Big and Little Cataloochee were becoming communities in their own right, no longer mere outposts of older ones.

WILL MESSER BARN

Built by Will Messer about 1900-05, this barn stood on his farm in Little Cataloochee. It was moved here and restored in 1977 to better preserve this example of Messer's craftsmanship. Except for the ornate roof design, it is typical of many such outbuildings that once clung to the hillsides of Big and Little Cataloochee.



Palmer Chapel was the only church in Big Cataloochee. Circuit riding ministers conducted church services once a month, but Sunday school was held every week.

PALMER CHAPEL

Religion entered Cataloochee with the Indians, but the white settlers preferred their own brand. Land for this Methodist Church was deeded by Mary Ann Palmer in 1898, and the building went up in the same year. Preachers were supplied by the Western North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Most of them were circuit riders who visited about one Sunday each month. Services consisted of prayers, singing and sermons. Revivals held each fall rekindled the spirits of the faithful and brought in new members.

Even today a reunion is held each year at the church. Friends and families return to clean the cemeteries, attend services and have dinner on the grounds.



The students of Beech Grove school in 1908. The young woman third from the right in the back row is teacher Lillie Ferguson. School attendance was usually good, since Cataloocheans respected education and supported the teachers' efforts.

BEECH GROVE SCHOOL

As the wilderness gave way to settlement, Cataloocheans provided schooling for their children. Three school districts built and operated schools in the valley: Big Cataloochee, Little Cataloochee, and Caldwell Fork. Big Cataloochee's Beech Grove School is the only one of the three that remains. It was built in 1901 to replace an older log building.

Schooling followed the laws and curriculum prescribed by the state. By the 1920s the term varied, but normally it ran from November through January. If sufficient local funds could be collected (subscriptions), it continued through February and March.

School began at 8 a.m. and let out at 4 p.m., with two recesses and a lunch hour. Children usually ate in family groups, the older ones being in charge of the little ones. The lunch bucket was usually jammed with sweet potatoes, cornbread, beans, applesauce, biscuits, ham and a jar of milk.

Subject matter included reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, geography and grammar. Friday was parents' day. They came in the afternoon to see what the children had accomplished that week. Spelling bees, recitations and singing were both a test and an outlet for the pupils' pride.

School days ended in Cataloochee soon after the park was established. Relocation of

families to communities outside left the desks empty, the black-board dusty and the building a lot quieter than it used to be.

CALDWELL HOUSE

Hiram Caldwell and his family lived for a long time in the old Levi Caldwell log house here on Rough Fork. In 1903, he decided it was time for a new home. Typical of houses to come, his new place (completed in 1906) was a modern framed structure with weatherboarding, as well as interior paneling "imported" from Waynesville, NC, about 25 miles away. The shingled gables reflected the nationally popular Eastlake style of the day. Hiram's stylish home was comfortable, and its beauty enhanced by handmade furniture from Cosby, Tennessee.

Old traditions persisted in the new home. The warping and quilting frames, spinning wheel and loom stood ready upstairs. The family's sheep yielded wool that padded quilts, was woven into cloth, and was sold or traded for goods on the open

market. While the women did their household chores, the men and boys farmed and managed livestock on the high mountain pastures.

By the 20th century, Cataloochee was changing, and that change was reflected in the Caldwell home. Business affairs, tourists, and renters added variety and interest to the daily routine of family life.

WOODY HOUSE

Jonathan Woody entered Cataloochee before the Civil War, moved out for a while, and returned around 1866. A widower in his early 40s, he married Levi Caldwell's widow, Mary Ann, and moved into her cabin

Hiram Caldwell moved his family from this old log cabin into the stylish frame house now preserved by the park. Built in the 1840s, this cabin was thought to be the oldest log home still standing in Cataloochee when the park was established.





Steve Woody's large frame house started as a log cabin. During the early 1900s, as his family grew, several framed additions were built, and the cabin was covered with weatherboarding.

with his five youngest children. Nine of Mary Ann's 12 children were still living at home, creating one rather large family.

When Jonathan died in 1894, his son Steve Woody became head of the household. Starting with a one-room log cabin, Steve enlarged the home between 1901-1910 with framed additions, including several bedrooms, porches, and a kitchen.

His eight children slept upstairs in the "old soldiers' room" and awoke each morning to the sound of their mother grinding coffee. The usual farm and household work was relieved by supplemental tasks: gathering

chestnuts, robbing beehives, hunting and trapping.

Like many Cataloochee families, the Woodys took advantage of tourism that spilled into the lovely valley. They stocked the streams on their property with rainbow trout, and charged fishermen for the privilege of taking them. Sightseers and boarders slept in the house and barn, and ate in the home. The extra income was welcome. The Woodys, like their neighbors, saw the times changing and changed with them. The house is a good example of that: a progressive 20th-century structure with a log cabin heart.

PALMER HOUSE

In the 1840s George Palmer was living some miles away in Buncombe County. Succumbing to poor judgment and bad luck, he partook of a game of chance and lost a considerable sum of money. Ashamed to face his friends and relatives, poor George packed his family and belongings on the wagon and went in search of a new home. A few days later (the year was 1848) the Palmer family landed in Cataloochee, then sparsely populated and seemingly a good place to start anew. Apparently, the lesson stuck, because George, his wife and their descendants became one of the most prosperous families in Cataloochee. George died in 1859, the victim of a heart attack while cutting a fallen tree out of the road.

George Lafayette Palmer (Uncle Fate, in later years) was 23, single and living at home when his father died, but he eventually started a family. His brother Jesse was already married and living on his own property. By 1870 the brothers had accumulated considerable wealth through hard work and good management. The census of that year reveals large acreage, significant farm production, and a net worth of \$800-\$1,000 each. Some of their market crops

included corn, wheat, oats, rye, apples, honey, molasses, butter, eggs, pigs, sheep, cattle, tobacco, potatoes and cordwood. Both were informal bankers, lending money at interest and securing it with livestock and land. Jesse and Uncle Fate were also public-spirited, each serving as land assessor, justice of the peace, election judge, road trustee and church official.

The brothers built similar houses around 1860; this one belonged to Uncle Fate. It is a classic "dog-trot" house—two log structures side by side, an open area between, and covered with a common roof. It was nice enough as a double log house, with cooking/eating space on one side and living/sleeping space on the other. About 1901-05, Uncle Fate and his grown son Jarvis weather boarded the outside and ceiled the inside with hand-planed paneling. When Uncle Fate died in 1910, Jarvis inherited the place. Outbuildings included the large barn, blacksmith shop, springhouse, and now-absent canhouse and smokehouse.

Jarvis was an early entrepreneur in the tourism business. Members of his family owned land and controlled the fishing rights along almost three miles of Cataloochee Creek. They stocked the stream and charged



Nancy Jane Colwell Palmer and George Lafayette “Uncle Fate” Palmer. Several Palmer men were named George, necessitating the use of nicknames. In addition to Uncle Fate, the family included “Creek” George and “Turkey” George.

50¢ per day to fish. An angler who paid the daily fee was given a large metal “Palmer Button” to indicate the fee had been paid. The button was displayed prominently on the fisherman’s hat. Harley Palmer patrolled the creek to make sure visitors were in compliance.

The Palmers allowed people to camp on their land while fishing. Around 1917 Jarvis built a two-room bunkhouse that would sleep 8-10 people. The bunkhouse was located near the barn that is still standing on the property. A second, larger bunkhouse was soon built near the first one and was furnished with 20-24 beds. In 1924 Jarvis built a cabin that would sleep 6-8 people. This structure still stands

across the road.

The Palmers charged 50¢ a day to stay in one of the bunkhouses and an additional 50¢ per day for meals served at the Palmer house.

To accommodate diners, Jarvis added a two-room kitchen and dining wing on to the south end of the house in about 1924.

Those two rooms

now house the park’s visitor information display and audio visual program. Jarvis’s wife Velma and his sister Maria handled the cooking and housekeeping.

When the park was established, Jarvis’s family moved out and a ranger moved into their home.

A GATHERING PLACE

The post office and general store served as a daily gathering place for Cataloochee residents and were the centers of community life in the valley. Here residents could mail a letter or exchange gossip.

Several post offices operated in the valley during the early 1900s. The Nellie Post Office,

named after a daughter of "Turkey" George Palmer, operated out of one side of a general store near Palmer Chapel. The Ola Post Office in Little Cataloochee was named after the daughter of Will Messer, and also operated out of a general store.

A third post office was located in the Palmer house. As you face the Palmer house today, the room to the left of the porch was the Cataloochee Post Office from the early 1900s until the time the family moved away from the park. Aunt Maria Love Palmer acted as postmistress.

LITTLE CATALOOCHEE

Little Cataloochee developed as an offshoot of Big Cataloochee. Separated geographically by Noland Mountain, the two communities were nonetheless joined by blood and marriage. Young adults from the Palmer, Hannah, Caldwell and Bennett families moved there in the 1850s to establish their own homes. By 1910 there were 1,251 people in both Cataloochees, a fair share of them in the smaller settlement.

Until about 1910 farming formed the economic base of the hamlet. After then, large-scale apple growing opened a new window, admitting the profitable breeze of commerce to blow into

Little Cataloochee. Apples commanded the energy of most of the inhabitants for years to come, and rewarded them with store bought clothes, modern machinery and general prosperity.

Travel there today is limited to foot or horseback on Little Cataloochee Trail, accessible from the Pretty Hollow Gap Trail near the Beech Grove School in Big Cataloochee, or from the gravel road between Big Creek and Big Cataloochee (see map).

The Nellie Post Office was located near Palmer Chapel. The letter N was mistakenly painted backwards on the sign, but the postmistress liked the look of it and kept it.



The twists, turns, ups and downs of the trail accentuate the sense of solitude and beauty of the area.

HANNAH CABIN

Evan Hannah arrived in Big Cataloochee in the 1830s and may have been the first settler in the valley. Looking for land of his own, his son, John Jackson Hannah, moved here with his bride in 1857. After living in a smaller board cabin, he built this

Jim and Melissa Hannah lived in the log cabin built by Jim's father in 1864.



log house in 1864. The property passed to his son Jim, who remained here until national park days. Jim was a farmer, beekeeper, sawyer, justice of the peace and Sunday school teacher. Melissa was a hardworking farm wife.

A rail fence enclosed the yard; beegums stood on the hillside; and the garden, apple orchard and fields spread out around the house and barn.

The house represents dozens like it that used to be in Cataloochee. Logs hewn onsite form the crib. Inside, puncheons of poplar heartwood form the floor. The handmade brick chimney was a rare and fancy touch.

The lower end of the front porch was "Uncle Jim's" station in later years, the perfect spot to shout "Republican talk" to passersby on the road below.

LITTLE CATALOOCHEE CHURCH

Constructed in 1889 by local families, Little Cataloochee Baptist Church sits on a ridge top, painted white and wearing modest gingerbread trim. The tall belfry was added nearly 25 years after the church was originally built: Will Messer designed and built the steeple, and William Hannah donated the 400 pound bell that visitors can still ring today.



When a member of the Little Cataloochee community died, the church bell would be rung for several minutes to attract attention. Then after a brief pause, the bell would toll the age of the deceased.

Worship services were reverent, but informal, with a lot of running in and out by the men folk. Outside, they gossiped, whittled, chewed, and debated politics. Today at reunions they do the same, after cleaning the cemetery, decorating the graves, and enjoying a fine repast of homemade food.

COOK CABIN & MESSER FARM

The Little Cataloochee Trail follows Coggins Branch to the homesite of Daniel and Harriet Cook. At the Cook place, a restored cabin and the apple house ruins remain.

The trail then climbs to the site of Will Messer's upper farm. This is where the commercial

economy of Little Cataloochee began. In 1894, 24-year-old Will Messer married Rachel, one of Dan and Harriet Cook's daughters. In a few years they acquired several houses, 340 acres of the best land, and were running a sawmill, gristmill, store, blacksmith shop, wood working shop, stockyard and several farms. However, the apple house was the hub of business that brought wealth to Messer and others in Little Cataloochee.

During the harvest season from mid-September through early November, apples were gathered, graded and stored inside. Women and children cooked massive meals for the rest of the hands, and the many buyers and teamsters who came

to pick up the fruit. Apples went to surrounding lumber camps, and to urban centers farther away. Messer's crop alone averaged \$2,000 per year—an amount that would be around \$50,000 today. The neighboring Burgess family's apple crop was close behind.

The Messer barn was moved from this location to Big Cataloochee and the apple house was relocated to the Mountain Farm Museum at Oconaluftee Visitor Center for protection and preservation. Although no structures remain at this site, a trip up this old road is worth the effort because of the beauty of the returning forest, and the tantalizing remains of our brief occupancy of Cataloochee. A fencepost

here, a rock wall there, and occasional flowers marking old home sites.

A DEVELOPING TOURISM INDUSTRY

Beginning in the early 1900s, residents of Cataloochee saw an opportunity to earn some extra cash from the growing number of people who came to the valley for recreation.

In addition to the Palmers and the Woodys, other families developed tourist operations in the valley as sport fishing became a local industry. Will Hall created a small camp for fishermen near the present-day group camping area in the valley. Using mules and a drag he had scooped out a 3-acre pond beside Cataloochee Creek. He

Farming and logging operations left the land in Cataloochee much more open than it is today. The forest has reclaimed the hills surrounding the site of the Messer homestead.



and his wife provided lodging in their home and in two cabins he built. If fishermen had bad luck in the creek, Hall charged 50 cents a piece for trout from his pond.

In 1933 Tom and Judy Alexander moved to the valley from “outside” and opened a lodge. They offered horseback riding, fishing and hiking to their customers, but valley residents most fondly remember the square dances held at the lodge. All Cataloocheans were invited.

The Alexanders operated their business in the valley for five years before joining the exodus of families leaving to make room for the new national park. They reestablished the Cataloochee Ranch outside the park and remain in operation today.

CREATION OF THE NATIONAL PARK

At the height of their prosperity, Cataloochee communities evaporated. In 1928 rumors that the government would buy all their land to establish the Great Smoky Mountains National Park



Cataloocheans took advantage of the developing tourist industry by stocking streams with rainbow trout and building cabins to lodge visiting anglers.

amazed residents. By 1938 all but a few families had moved out to make way for the park.

Only fragments remain today of the once-thriving community of Cataloochee—bits and pieces that serve to remind us of what life here was like. This was the biggest settlement in the Smokies; at the beginning of the 20th century nearly 200 buildings were scattered around the picturesque cove. Only a handful are left, poignant memorials to a vibrant past.

The forest has now reclaimed much of Cataloochee’s farmlands and orchards. From wilderness, to civilization, to wilderness in little more than one long lifetime is unusual to us. To the deer browsing by the ruins of a stone chimney, things are perfectly normal. It’s just another pile of rock and fallen timber.



Elk were released into the park as part of an experimental reintroduction program. They may sometimes be seen in the open fields of Cataloochee valley.

ENJOYING THE PARK TODAY

Great Smoky Mountains National Park contains some of the largest tracts of wilderness in the East and is a sanctuary for a wide variety of animals, including 66 species of mammals, over 200 species of birds, and more than 75 types of reptiles and amphibians.

Viewing wildlife in the Smokies can be challenging because most of the park is covered by dense forest. Open areas like Cataloochee offer some of the best opportunities to see white-tailed deer, elk, black bear, raccoon, Wild Turkey, woodchuck, skunk, and other animals.

Because many animals are most active at night, it can be advantageous to look for wildlife

during the early morning and late evening. Scan the treetops along the forest edge—many animals spend their days among the branches.

Do not approach wildlife too closely. If your presence causes an animal to change its behavior, such as changing its travel direction or ceasing to feed, you are too close.

Carry binoculars, or if you're a photographer, a long telephoto lens.

Fishing is another popular year-round activity in Cataloochee. Please pick up a free copy of the park's fishing regulations at any park visitor center before heading out to the stream. You must have a valid Tennessee or North Carolina fishing license to fish in park waters.

ELK REINTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2001, the National Park Service released 25 elk into the wilds of the Great Smoky Mountains. It's the first time elk have roamed the Smokies in at least 150 years. Elk once ranged throughout much of the eastern United States, but were eliminated from

the region by over-hunting and loss of habitat.

Since the release, many of the elk have remained in the vicinity of Cataloochee valley. They are sometimes sighted in the open fields during mornings and evenings.

The release was part of a larger program to experimentally reintroduce elk to Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The Park Service released another

two dozen elk in 2002, and may release additional elk in the valley in future years.

This experimental reintroduction is part of the Park Service mission to preserve native plants and animals on park lands. If a native species has been eliminated from a park, the agency may choose to reintroduce it. River otters and Peregrine Falcons have been successfully reintroduced to the Smokies.



MARK HANNAH

Mark Hannah was one of the first park rangers in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Born in 1906 in Little Cataloochee, his family's roots in the area stretched back to the 1820s when his great-grandparents began farming in the valley.

When the national park was formed in the 1930s, forcing Cataloochee residents to leave

their homes, Hannah served as an important link between the displaced families and the government, smoothing the transition from private land to national park.

Hannah fought to preserve the history and heritage of the people of the Great Smokies. He was instrumental in the preservation of the buildings you see today in Cataloochee.

He also collected first hand accounts of the history of the mountain people, which are preserved in the park's archives. You can hear recorded stories of these early settlers in the visitor center at the Palmer House.

Mark retired from the Park Service in 1971, and is remembered as a man who spent his life working to preserve Cataloochee and its memories.

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