

9 a many-splendored forest

The sound of the axe is gone from the forest and the cowbell is no longer heard on the mountain slopes. Humans no longer live here. Whether corn or cattle lived on this hillside in John Ownby's day is past history; oak, pine and hickory live here now. Man's influence has become secondary and the natural order of the forest is again returning.

The nearby white pines and pitch pines are among the first trees to establish themselves on the low-elevation, warm south-facing slopes that man has left abandoned and bare. In time, as the surrounding hemlocks and hardwoods mature, the pines will no longer be able to reproduce themselves because the forest will have become too shady. Then a forest of more shade-tolerant trees, including oaks and hickories, will gradually develop. In nature only change is constant.

10 wildlife comes back

As the Smokies were settled, wildlife diminished. By the 1920s deer had become very scarce and bears had retreated to the high rough ground. Under the protection of the national park the populations of both these animals increased rapidly. In the 1940s the European wild boar arrived. Escapees from a defunct game preserve in North Carolina, southwest of the park, they interbred with local stock to start a population of non-native wild hogs that has spread throughout the Smokies. The Park Service attempts to control their numbers because they destroy native plants and animals and disrupt the natural communities.

If you sat on this hillside some evening you might see deer, fox, bobcat or even bear or wild hog. But these animals mostly stay hidden. Smaller wildlife such as squirrels, chipmunks and many kinds of birds are much more common and more easily seen.

Much of the animal life that may have shared the

land with the families that lived here has been replaced by different kinds of wildlife. In the 1920s along this

trail you would have found birds and mammals adapted to open country, such as bobwhites, meadowlarks, rabbits and groundhogs. Now, in addition to the return of some of the larger animals that were heavily hunted, you can find a host of smaller species that are adapted to forest conditions. Northern

Cardinals, Carolina Wrens and Tufted Titmice are some of the most common birds; gray squirrels and white-footed mice are common mammals. Barred Owls and gray foxes are two of the larger predators.

These animals are all typical of low-to-middle elevation forests in the Smokies. Just as trees and smaller plants vary with altitude and the direction of slopes, animal life also changes from one kind of environment to another. In spruce-fir forests atop the mountains live Red-breasted Nuthatches, Winter Wrens, and red-backed voles—animals not commonly found in the lowlands.

Generally speaking, larger animals such as deer, bear and wild hog are less particular. Their range includes all elevations, where they seek whatever food is most plentiful at the time.

11 agents of change

Natural processes constantly change the forest. Some are very dramatic, others are subtle and frequently overlooked by the casual observer. They play an important role. From here, looking upslope, you can see the remains of pine trees on the ground that have been killed by the southern pine beetle, an insect that increases rapidly after a succession of mild winters. Very cold winters severely reduce their numbers. Periodic outbreaks of this native insect are a natural part of life in southern

forests. In a national forest where production of timber is a major objective, an attempt might be made to control such outbreaks. In a national park, however, control of the pine beetle is considered neither necessary nor right where the unhindered functioning of nature is the prime value.

Wind is another agent of change; here and elsewhere along the trail you can see it work. Though usually light in the Smokies, wind sometimes strikes with great force, blowing down trees by the hundreds. Fire, flood, disease and landslide are also part of the natural scene. While destroying some life, all these agents may be an aid to others. For example, opening the forest makes room for sun-loving plants, which in turn provide food and habitat for different kinds of wildlife. In time, however, the forest will close in again.

12 home of the rhododendron

The slopes of virtually every cool ravine in the Smokies has thickets of rosebay rhododendron, the big broad-leaved evergreen shrub you see close by. In June and July its clusters of white flowers grace streambanks and shady slopes up to an elevation of 5,000 feet. Its smaller relative, Catawba rhododendron, puts on massed displays of purplish-pink blossoms on balds and high exposed ridges during June. The brilliant yellow and orange of flame azalea, another member of the heath family, can be seen any time from late April at lower elevations, to early July on the highest grass balds.

13 small wonders

Within the magnificent forests that mantle the Great Smoky Mountains is a profusion of life nurtured by the temperate climate and abundant moisture. Much of this life is small and beautiful. Here at this streambank and farther along, look for such things as leaf shapes and the intricate patterns of ferns and mosses on the rocks and trees. Throughout the park, you will see a marvelous variety of lichens on tree trunks and rocks and all shapes and colors of fungi. Stop to look at insects closely. They too have an infinite variety, sometimes bizarre. Perhaps the wonder of creation is most apparent in the small things at our feet.

14 the future forest

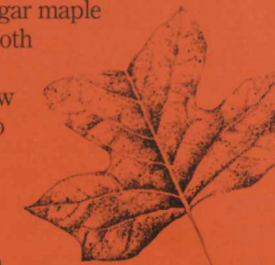
Along this trail we have seen signs of the past; the present has been everywhere. Now here are some signs of the future: a young

hemlock and a young sugar maple side by side. These are both species that can tolerate shade, so when they grow up and drop their seed to the ground they will continue their kind in this forest along Fighting Creek.

Elsewhere along the trail are sapling yellow buckeyes, basswoods, beeches, Fraser and umbrella magnolias, as well as some larger butternuts. These are all members of the cove hardwoods community, the type of forest that develops in stream valleys of the Smokies. At the moment the larger trees along Fighting Creek are mostly tuliptrees, pines, sycamores and sweetgums, but gradually these species will be replaced by the cove

hardwoods. In time we may expect a forest of giants here.

Perhaps a century from now John Ownby's cabin will be the only clue that man lived along this trail.



tuliptree



destroying angel

hemlock

sugar maple

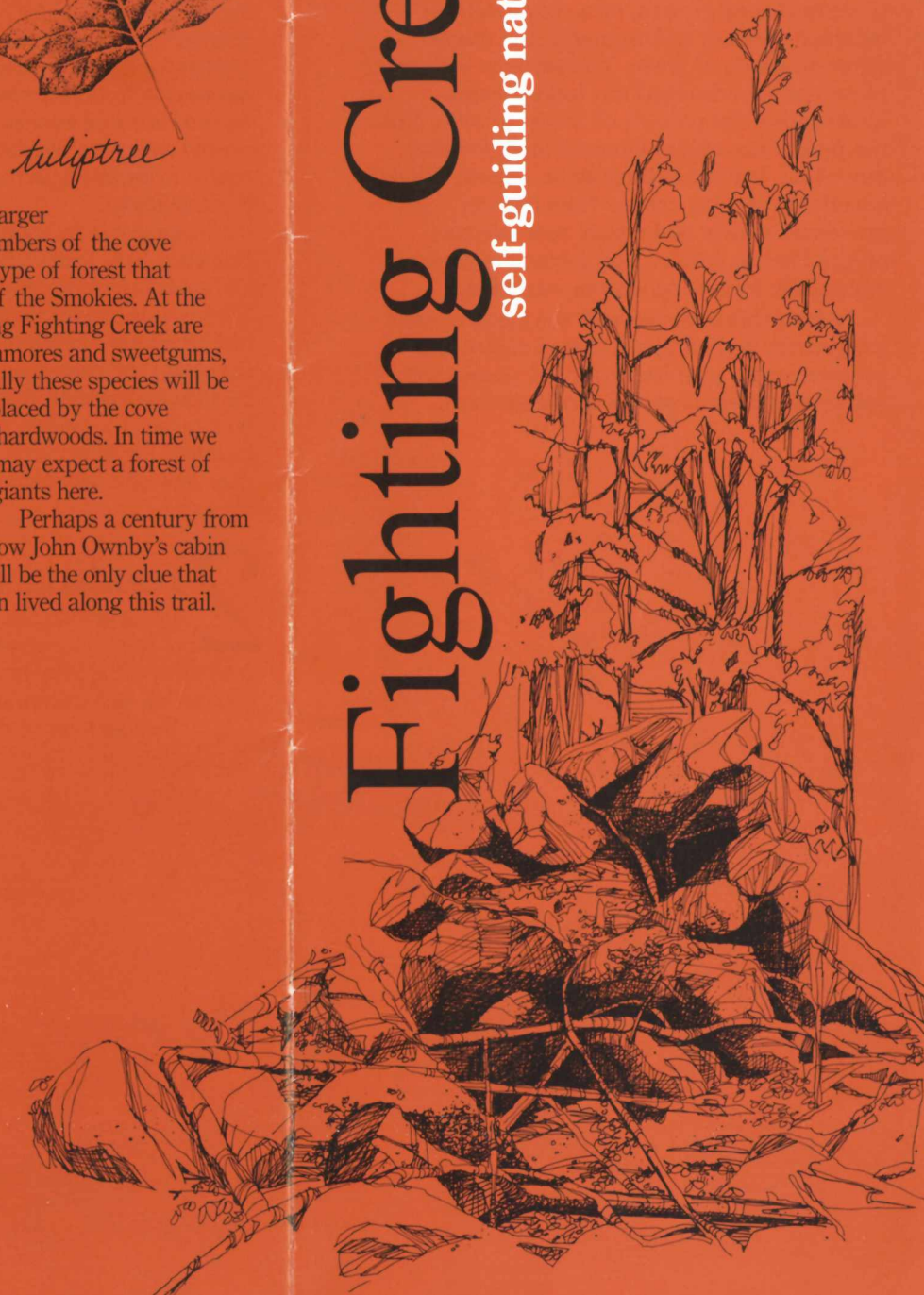
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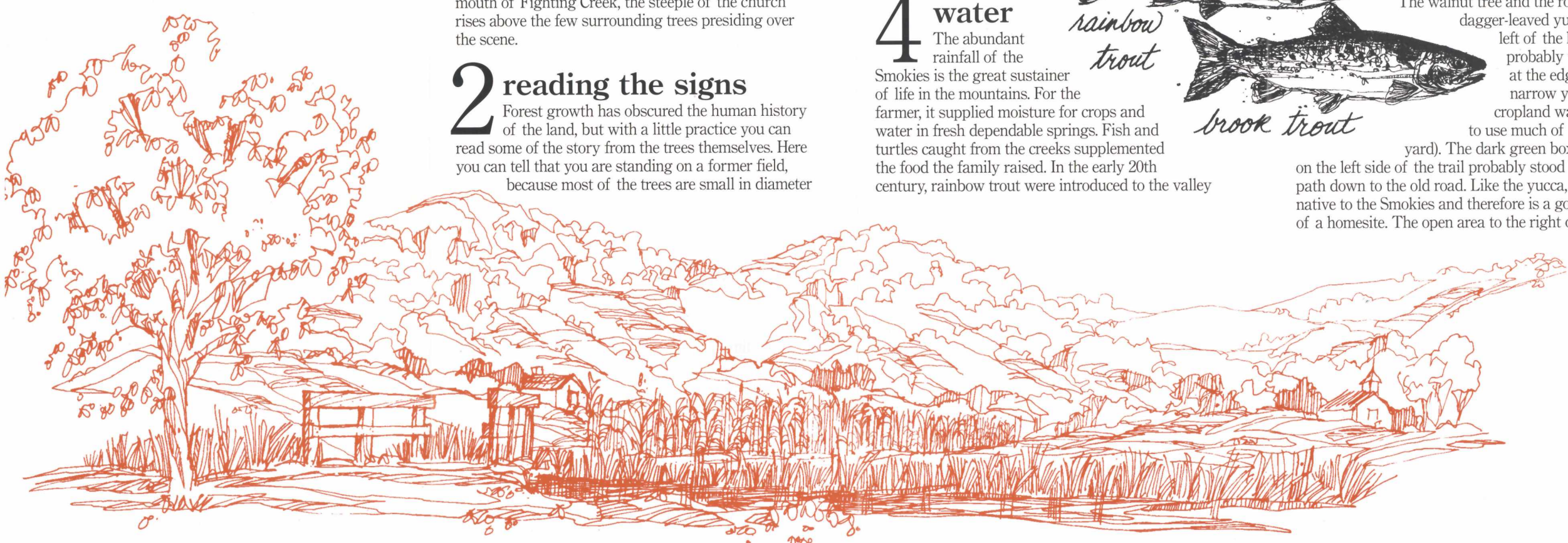
Fighting Creek

self-guiding nature trail



Settlers penetrated the surrounding mountain barriers and began moving into the Great Smokies around 1800. The forests they found in this new country were a development of centuries of growth, of a relationship between climate, soil, animals, and many different kinds of trees. The settlers with axe, plow, and gun changed the forest scene, interrupting the pattern of forest growth. But the pause was only a moment long, for they moved on, leaving behind stone fences, tilled cornfields and log cabins. Now natural processes slowly and surely recreate the original forest pattern and forest life goes on, apparently forgetting human intrusion.

Along this trail you will see signs of past settlement, including a restored cabin, the present forest with its variety of plants and animals, and signs of the forest to come.



1 the scene in 1925

This valley has known people for a long time. The Cherokee hunted and may have farmed here. With the arrival of white settlers around 1800, most of the big trees, including many sugar maples that prompted the name Sugarlands Valley, were removed. By the mid 19th century there was a thriving community known as "Forks of the River." About 25 farmsteads, a church, school, store, post office, grist mill and saw mill were located here. This community existed until around 1935 when the land was purchased to become a part of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Imagine you are standing here at Ash Hopper Branch in 1925. Joel Kear's cornfields surround you and stretch ahead to the road along Fighting Creek. Through the trees along the creek you glimpse Noah McCarter's weatherboard house on the far side. Cornfields and pasture extend up the steep slopes of the mountain beyond, from which drifts down the faint tinkle of a cowbell. Off to your right, near the mouth of Fighting Creek, the steeple of the church rises above the few surrounding trees presiding over the scene.

2 reading the signs

Forest growth has obscured the human history of the land, but with a little practice you can read some of the story from the trees themselves. Here you can tell that you are standing on a former field, because most of the trees are small in diameter

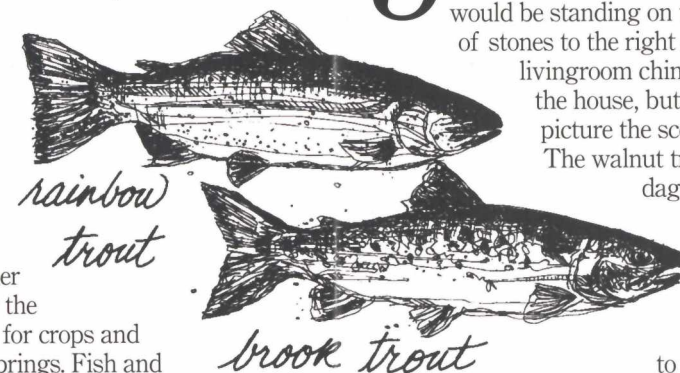
and are kinds that can get started only in open, sunny places. Stands of tuliptrees, some of which grow next to the trail here, and pines which can also be seen, are common indicators of formerly open ground.

3 lifting the road out of the creek

The earliest settlers sometimes used creek beds for transportation routes, but as you can see these were mighty rough. The next step was to lift the road out of the creek and run it along the bank, taking as little good corn land as possible. You can still see the trace of the road that ran along Fighting Creek down to the school and church at its mouth. Many a barefoot child and many a family in their Sunday best traveled this road. The road you are standing on was built later to avoid flooding.

4 water

The abundant rainfall of the Smokies is the great sustainer of life in the mountains. For the farmer, it supplied moisture for crops and water in fresh dependable springs. Fish and turtles caught from the creeks supplemented the food the family raised. In the early 20th century, rainbow trout were introduced to the valley



streams to replace the native brook trout, which had disappeared from all but high elevation waters. Stonerollers, or horny heads, are another common fish of the lower elevations. About 88 species of fish are found in the Smokies.

If a downpour dampens your spirit, remember that it also contributes to the natural beauty and great variety of life you enjoy here. Heavy rainfall has also made possible development of one of the richest aggregations of plant life in North America, including this large, gnarled sycamore tree standing beside the bridge. Salamanders, too, a moisture-dependent group of animals, flourish as nowhere else on the continent.

5 Noah McCarter's place

If Noah McCarter's house was still here you would be standing on the front porch. The pile of stones to the right and the remains of the livingroom chimney are all you can see of the house, but other clues help you picture the scene here in the 1920s. The walnut tree and the row of dagger-leaved yuccas to the left of the homesite probably were planted at the edge of the narrow yard (good cropland was too scarce to use much of it for a yard). The dark green boxwood bush on the left side of the trail probably stood beside the path down to the old road. Like the yucca, it too is not native to the Smokies and therefore is a good indicator of a homesite. The open area to the right of the home-

site, where the soil is rich and moist, undoubtedly represents the vegetable garden. Beyond the walnut tree, behind the house site, is the spring, a common feature of most mountain homesteads. Surrounding these central elements of the farmstead were fields of corn, beans and potatoes, all staples of the mountain family's diet.

Life in the mountains on rough land called for hard work, self-reliance and a readiness to help neighbors in need. When the work was done, entertainment was home-grown too. Good storytelling and homespun music are treasured legacies of these times. Noah McCarter was a quiet man, but no doubt he spun a few tales while sitting here on his front porch in the cool of the evening.

6 how steep can a cornfield be

The size of this white oak, much greater than that of the surrounding trees, indicates that it once stood alone on open ground. Perhaps it provided shade for cattle pastured on this steep hillside. In later years, as forest grew around it, the shade killed the oak's lowermost branches.

Corn was grown on land this steep. The jokes told about people falling out of their cornfields are almost true. Most of the land along this trail was probably devoted to corn, with pasture only on the steepest slopes. Wooden sleds, pulled by man or beast, were used to haul out the harvest at season's end. Even if a farmer had the skill to make, or money to buy a wagon, it wouldn't do much good on a 45-degree slope. Along the trail, perhaps you can spot traces of old sled roads that wind up ravines and ridges.

When the corn was about three inches high beans were planted next to the stalks, which provided support for bean vines. In this way space was saved, as well as the work of putting up poles for the beans. Mountain farmers had to push their rough land to its limits in order to stay alive.

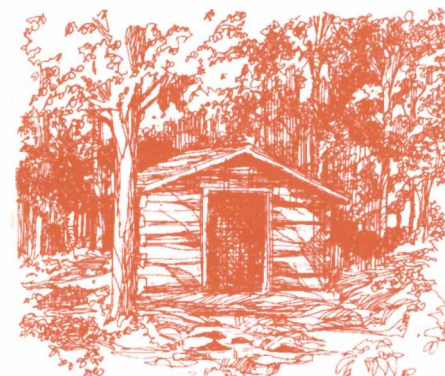
7 to build a fence

When rocky land was cleared for plowing, the stones were left in piles or used to build fences around the fields. Throughout the Park you can see the remains of stone fences which might have been as

high as your head. On the last half of this trail you will pass a much longer remnant of a stone fence, perhaps marking the boundary between the McCarter and Ownby properties. In the less rocky areas, fences were made of split rails, usually of chestnut, because it was handy, split well and lasted a long time. These were much easier to construct. During the several decades preceding park establishment, those few who could afford it used barbed wire, the most effective and easiest kind of fence to build.

8 John Ownby's cabin

Built of logs in a style little altered since pioneer days, this cabin was a much more modest home than Noah McCarter's two-story, weatherboard house. In 1963, using much of the original material, the National Park Service rehabilitated this historic structure, the last remaining in the Fighting Creek/Sugarlands area. The logs are of tuliptree and white pine. The clay mortar in the chimney comes from the banks of the nearby spring branch. As was commonly done to provide space for a growing family, a lean-to room was added on the side opposite the porch sometime after the original



the springhouse

construction. The lean-to is now gone, but its scattered foundation stones can still be seen. Walking inside the cabin you can sense the rough simplicity of living here. Beyond the cabin was the spring where a spring-house kept milk and other perishables cool. Around the cabin are the inevitable walnut trees, a source of highly valued nuts. The garden probably occupied a half-acre or so beside the stream below the spring. Corn fields extended up the steep mountainside.