Remembering Elkmont

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I came to see the fireflies. I was visiting my parents, who had recently relocated to northeastern Tennessee, minutes from the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. I had never heard of them: Photinus carolinus, synchronous fireflies that blink together in unison. My parents had learned of them on their last trip hiking in the park. The phenomenon occurs for two weeks in June, and the only place in the western hemisphere you can witness such a show is a little area in the park called Elkmont.

We decided to check it out. We arrived at the Sugarlands Visitor Center parking lot at 7 pm and rode the trolley shuttle to the trailhead at Elkmont. Little River Trail is the most popular trail from which to view the spectacle. We were greeted by volunteers offering colored cellophane to dim the glare of patrons' flashlights. We had not brought any so we continued on. The scene was reminiscent of a holiday parade. Lawn chairs lined the path and filled in clearings for the first half mile or so of the trail. Children ran about, playing with their friends as they awaited the show. Hidden among the spectators were old, crumbling houses, remnants of the resort town that was bought out by the park service, we were told.

We continued along the trail, partly to pass the time until nightfall and partly to find a more private viewing location away from the two thousand visitors that flocked to Elkmont that mid-June evening. We followed the wide gravel path along the Little River, winding around mountain bends and passing fewer and fewer onlookers. As dusk drew in, we took a seat on large boulders in the river bed. The valley carved out by the Little River left sloping mountainsides around us. We peered across the way, looking for flashes of light in the impending darkness that was beginning to settle in. We saw one flash. A few moments later, another lit. Within minutes we could see about a dozen beetles lighting up on the opposite bank. We watched for a pattern but could find none. We made our way back onto the trail. Almost

instantly, darkness flooded the mountains, and only the dim light of the moon allowed us to make out the path.

It started gradually. A few fireflies turned into dozens. Dozens slowly became hundreds and then thousands until what seemed like millions of fireflies glittered all around us. The sheer number of beetles was impressive enough; the brush on the sides of the trail twinkled more than the starriest night I had ever seen. As slowly as the fireflies emerged, a pattern began to take shape. The forests sparkled around us for minutes at random until suddenly it was dark again. A few seconds later, the blinking began again, scattered across the mountainside. As we slowly made our way back toward the trailhead, we watched as flashes of lights intensified in waves, six seconds on, six seconds off, creating a sparkling tunnel through which we passed in awe.

The hour-long wait in line for a trolley amidst two thousand spectators did not lessen our satisfaction that evening. I did not think of it then, but I now realize that everything around me in Elkmont— the trees, the trail, the decaying buildings, the Little River and the road back to the visitor center— had a story to tell. Changes in market forces, land uses, and ideals of nature had shaped the area over many years. I came to see the fireflies, and I left with a lasting curiosity for Elkmont's rich environmental history.

The Elkmont region had been inhabited for years before the last of its residents moved out in 1992. The Cherokee Indians dwelled in the Smoky Mountains for centuries before Euro-Americans settled the region. A few still remain in a Cherokee Reservation on the North Carolina side of the park. When the Irish, Scottish, and English settlers populated the area, they too subsisted on the resources of the land. They tended small farms and kept livestock where the land was amiable.[1] These "mountain people" were isolated from the cities and towns of the valleys due to the lack of convenient transportation through the rugged mountains. Foot, horse

and animal-drawn wagon travel was the only way to traverse the region. The harsh geography of the land kept settlement sparse and maintained vast tracts of virgin forests, as very little of the land was cleared for farming.

Geographical barriers also protected the forests from logging for a limited time. But even the cedar and tulip trees of the Smokies were destined to fall with the growing demand for timber and wood products and the insatiable appetite of businessmen for profit derived from abundant resources, cheap land, and cheap capital. Once the easily harvested forests of the valleys and foothills were consumed, lumber companies moved on and upward. The biggest logging operation in the Smokies was the Little River Logging Company, supported by the Little River Railroad Company. The companies were established by Pennsylvania capitalist W. B. Townsend in 1901.[2] When the Little River Logging Company acquired the area now known as Elkmont, consisting of the Little River and Jake's Creek watersheds, the landscape began to change drastically. The company constructed railroads to bring workers up from the valleys and transport logs down to the mills. In addition, slides were built on hillsides and splash dams were built in rivers to send logs down the mountain slopes.[3] The company built camps to house lumber workers and their families. Homes were designed with a large steel ring on top by which a train could pick them up and move them on to new logging base camps.[4] Industrial technologies and construction to harvest timber, coupled with the scars of clear-cutting, created a much different scene in the early decades of the twentieth century than the remote homesteads and primordial mountains of the nineteenth century.

When the forests of Elkmont had been harvested and were beginning to grow back, wealthy residents of nearby Knoxville began to purchase plots of land from the logging company to build vacation residences. Outside of the mountains, urban life was becoming more congested

and city-dwellers began seeking refuge in the Great Smoky Mountains. The old logging town quickly transformed into a popular resort town, and the mountain people began referring to the area as "Clubtown".[5] The Wonderland Club and the Appalachian Club were formed and members built their summer homes around club property.[6] Other areas of Elkmont came to be known as Daisy Town, Society Hill and Millionaire's Row[7]. The railroad infrastructure built by the logging company served as an easy way to transport vacationers quickly to the mountains. Wives and children could spend the whole summer in the mountains and working husbands would ride the train in on weekends. Passengers ended their journey to Elkmont at the base of the steps leading to the Wonderland Hotel. Those steps still exist today, but all that remains to tell the story of the Wonderland Hotel is a single brick fireplace.

Once again, changing demands by the populace brought changes in land use. The establishment of the national park system in the United States marked the demand to preserve nature for recreation and enjoyment. As the story is told, a Knoxville couple by the name of Davis vacationed out West in Yellowstone National Park, admiring the park's beauty and the business it generated, and asked why there was not a National Park back home in the Great Smokies. After a weekend with the Davises in Elkmont, nature lover David C. Chapman took ownership of the movement to create that park. Chapman, a member of the Wonderland Club, faced opposition led by James B. Wright, an Appalachian Club member who had ties to the lumber companies. In addition to battling direct opposition, supporters also had to help the government raise sufficient funds to acquire land for the park. Once the government obtained enough money, it began making land purchases. Private donations, half of which consisted of a five million dollar grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, made the creation of the Great Smoky Mountain (GRSM) National Park possible.[8]

The creation of the GRSM National Park differed from that of parks in the West in that it was not created from federally owned land. Instead, private individuals and companies owned many separate parcels. By then, logging companies owned much of the land and the biggest tract was purchased from the Little River Logging Company.[9] Logging land was easy to acquire as parcels were large and uninhabited. By the time the park was created, 175 families lived in the park land, 80 of which were only summer occupants.[10] This private property was harder to obtain because the creation of the park would inevitably force people from their homes. The park service purchased some homes at their appraised value and allowed others to maintain a lifetime lease of the property in consideration for one half of the appraised value, the rest paid in cash.[11] According to one a park ranger whose family's land was bought out by the park, the poor were paid upfront and relocated, and the rich were able to obtain lifetime leases. Lem Ownby, whose desire to remain in the mountains brought him regional fame as the "old man of the mountains", was one of the last residents of Elkmont until he passed away in 1984.[12] The Wonderland Hotel remained in operation until its lease expired in 1992.[13]

In the years between the commissioning of the park in 1926 and its official establishment in 1934, the landscape, which was in the process of restoration after logging operations ended, was again sculpted by human land use demands. In order for tourists to enjoy the park, roads and trails were constructed throughout to offer mobility to patrons. Seventeen camps housed young Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) men as they constructed camping grounds, scenic overlooks, roads, and bridges though the park. The hiking trails were carefully crafted to maintain natural formations and lead guests to the grandest outlooks that the Smokies had to offer.[14] In Elkmont, a campground and several hiking trails, including Little River Trail and Jake's Creek Trail, were created which continue to offer visitors a glimpse into Elkmont's past.

In order to attract anglers to the region, a fish hatchery established in Elkmont stocked the Little River with rainbow trout after logging destroyed its natural fish stocks.[15] Each of these improvements to the land was made to enhance recreation for the general public in this free, accessible park, open year round for enjoyment and retreat.

Today, many of the buildings that once defined Elkmont still stand amidst the recreation trails as deteriorating testaments to the past. Those that remain are closed to the public for safety reasons. The Wonderland Hotel sustained a fire, collapsed, and was removed a few years after the hotel closed. The National Park Service originally planned to remove all of the buildings from the area once the leases expired so the habitat could restore itself to a more natural state. Citizen groups began to voice their concerns and in 1994 succeeded in establishing 48 buildings and 12 structures in Elkmont as a Historic District, giving the buildings added protection from demolition.[16] Currently, groups are debating what should be done in Elkmont. The National Park Service released for public comment in 2006 a Draft Environmental Impact Statement and General Management Plan Amendment for the Elkmont Historic District. Under the preferred alternative of the proposal, the Appalachian Clubhouse and 16 historic buildings in the area known as Daisy Town, as well as one cabin in the area known as Society Hill associated with David C. Chapman, would be restored. All other buildings would be removed, leaving only chimneys intact if structurally feasible.[17] Differing ideas of nature are driving the differing opinions on how the land should be used. Some believe that wild nature should be experienced without evidence of human impact. Others believe that humans are very much a part of nature and their impacts on nature should be remembered by preserving the Elkmont district.

Visitors to the park today experience truly unique beauty. The Great Smoky Mountains offer spectacular waterfalls, lush green wooded mountainsides, abundant wildlife, and miles of

scenic trails. The average tourist enjoys the park for the recreational retreat it is today. Those fortunate enough to visit Elkmont will witness firsthand how changing market demands and ideas of nature influenced land use in the park and continue to do so to this day. The distant history, the recent past, and the present all contribute to the character and landscape of Elkmont. The forests are restored, and trout once again inhabit the Little River. Logging camps are now camping grounds, and the vacation homes of the former resort town are now crumbling relics being overtaken and veiled by new growth. The old railroad beds and logging roads have been converted to roads and trails. Now, trolleys bring thousands of tourists on those roadways to walk along those trails amidst those crumbling buildings in those restored forests for a night of leisure and retreat to view a special spectacle in a deservingly special place.

Notes

[1] Delmar, Dennis. *The Great Smokies Yesterday and Today*. Sevierville: Nandel Publishing Co., 1988. 242

[2] Schmidt, Ronald G. and William S. Hooks. *Whistle over the Mountain*. Yellow Springs: Graphicom Press, 1994. 11.

[3] Weals, Vic. *The Last Train to Elkmont.* Knoxville: Olden Press, 2001. 1-4.

[4] See Delmar, 198.

[5] Thornborough, Laura. *The Great Smoky Mountains*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1942. 47.

[6] Aiken, Gene. *Stories from the Great Smoky Mountains*. Gatlinburg: Buckhorn Press, 1990. 130-131.

[7] National Park Service Draft Environmental Impact Statement. 2006.

[8] Brown, Margaret Lynn. *The Wild East: A Biography of the Great Smoky Mountains*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. 88-89.

[9] Pierce, Daniel S. The Great Smokies: From Natural Habitat to National Park. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2000. 132.

[10] See Thornborough, 153.

[11] See Aiken, 131.

[12] See Delmar, 212-8.

[13] See Aiken, 132.

[14] See Thornborough, 109-111, 164.

[15] See Brown, 65.

[16] National Register of Historic Places. http://www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com/TN/Sevier/districts.html (Accessed November 23, 2007)

[17] National Park Service Draft Environmental Impact Statement. 2006.