

# Hazel Creek: A Place of Pilgrims, Progress(?)

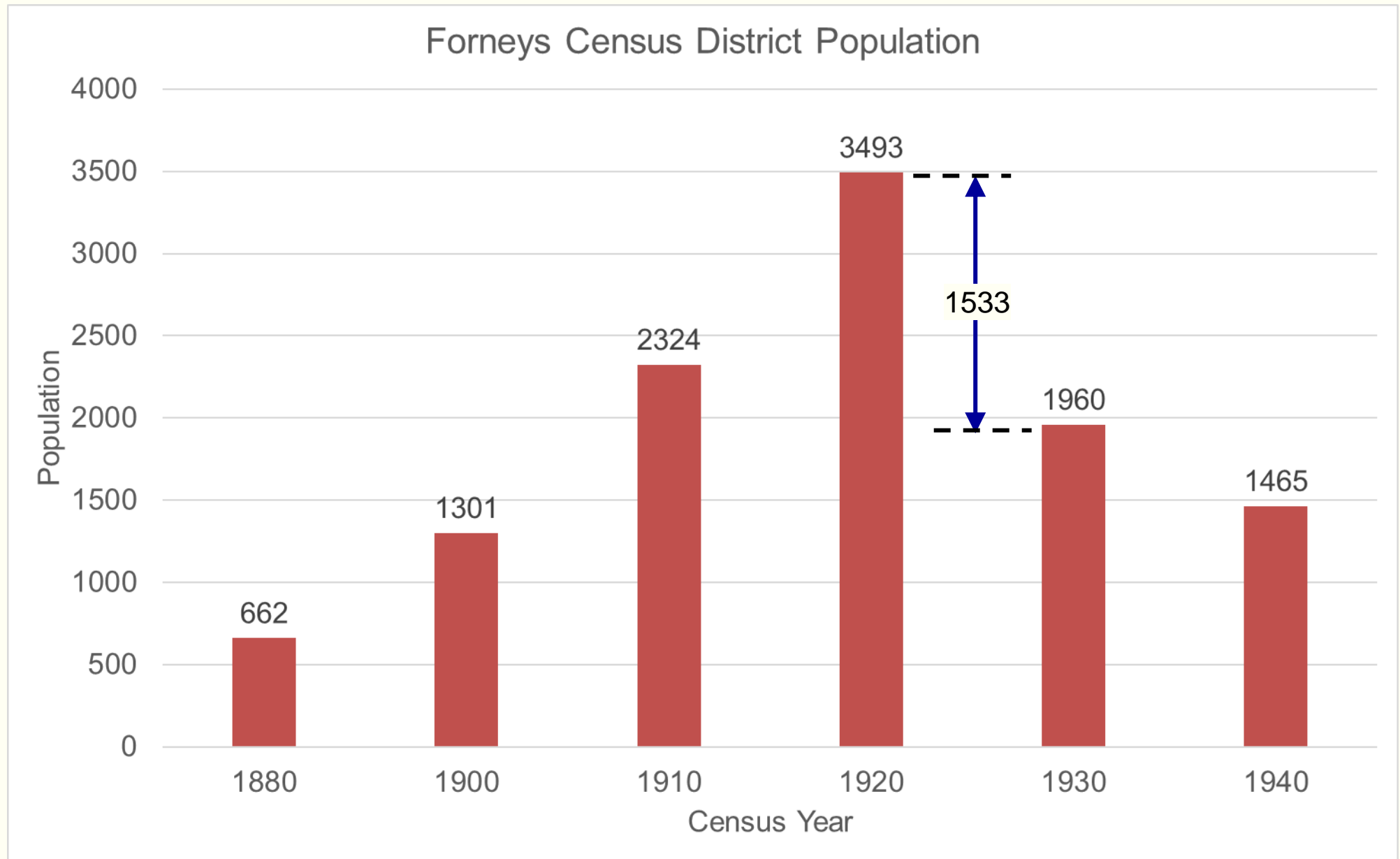
For: SEOPA Reunion, May 17, 2024



# Human presence on Hazel Creek, in brief

- Prior to ~ 1830, occasional use as hunting camps by Cherokees (and those before); there were no Cherokee towns on the entire north shore of Fontana.
- The entire area north of the Little Tennessee River (now Fontana Lake) was ignored when it became available for white settlement, per an 1819 Cherokee cession treaty.
- Moses and Patience Proctor, with one son in tow, were on Hazel Creek by the time of the 1830 census. According to family lore, they came from Cades Cove and settled on Shehan Branch (Possum Hollow).
- Within the following decade, Samuel and Elizabeth Cable arrived in the area; although some have them settling on Cable Branch, there is strong evidence that they initially settled along the Little Tennessee River, a short ways upstream of the Hazel Creek mouth.
- It is unclear that any other families settled on Hazel Creek prior to the Civil War (some claims to that effect are readily refuted).
- In the two decades after the Civil War, the population grew significantly, although the creek was still sparsely settled.
- There was steady growth in the population. By 1906, when the North Carolina Geological Survey completed a map of the area, there were 21 homes from Matt Branch (below Cable Branch) to what would later become Proctor and 31 on Sugar Fork, Bone Valley and upper Hazel Creek. These were effectively two different communities; it is five miles from Proctor to Sugar Fork.
- Beginning in 1903, W.M. Ritter, as an individual, began acquiring property on Hazel Creek. His purchases went through Hazel Creek Land Company before being acquired by Ritter Lumber, which began operations in 1910. Paying jobs were available for the first time for many Hazel Creek residents. Ritter built a town at Proctor which included electric power, running water, stores, and a movie theater.
- Population boomed from jobs at the mill, building and operating the railroad, and logging timber. It was relatively short-lived; In 1926, Ritter was finished, and promptly sold the bulk of the property to David Strain of Asheville. His purchase was as trustee for a consortium from Asheville. The following year, Strain sold his interest to one of the other owners, J.G. Stikeleather.
- Ritter moved both people and equipment from Hazel Creek. The population of the entire north shore area declined by 43% between 1920 and 1930. By 1940, it had declined to just over the population in 1900.
- The Great Smoky Mountains National Park was formed in the early 1930s. It had a relatively small effect on the Hazel Creek population, since almost all of the affected area was unpopulated.
- The nature of life on the creek for those left was changed dramatically in a multiplicity of ways; the terrain was badly scarred and the formerly thriving speckled trout population decimated.
- The construction of Fontana Dam in the early 1940s again provided jobs, but ultimately put an end to permanent human habitation on Hazel Creek.

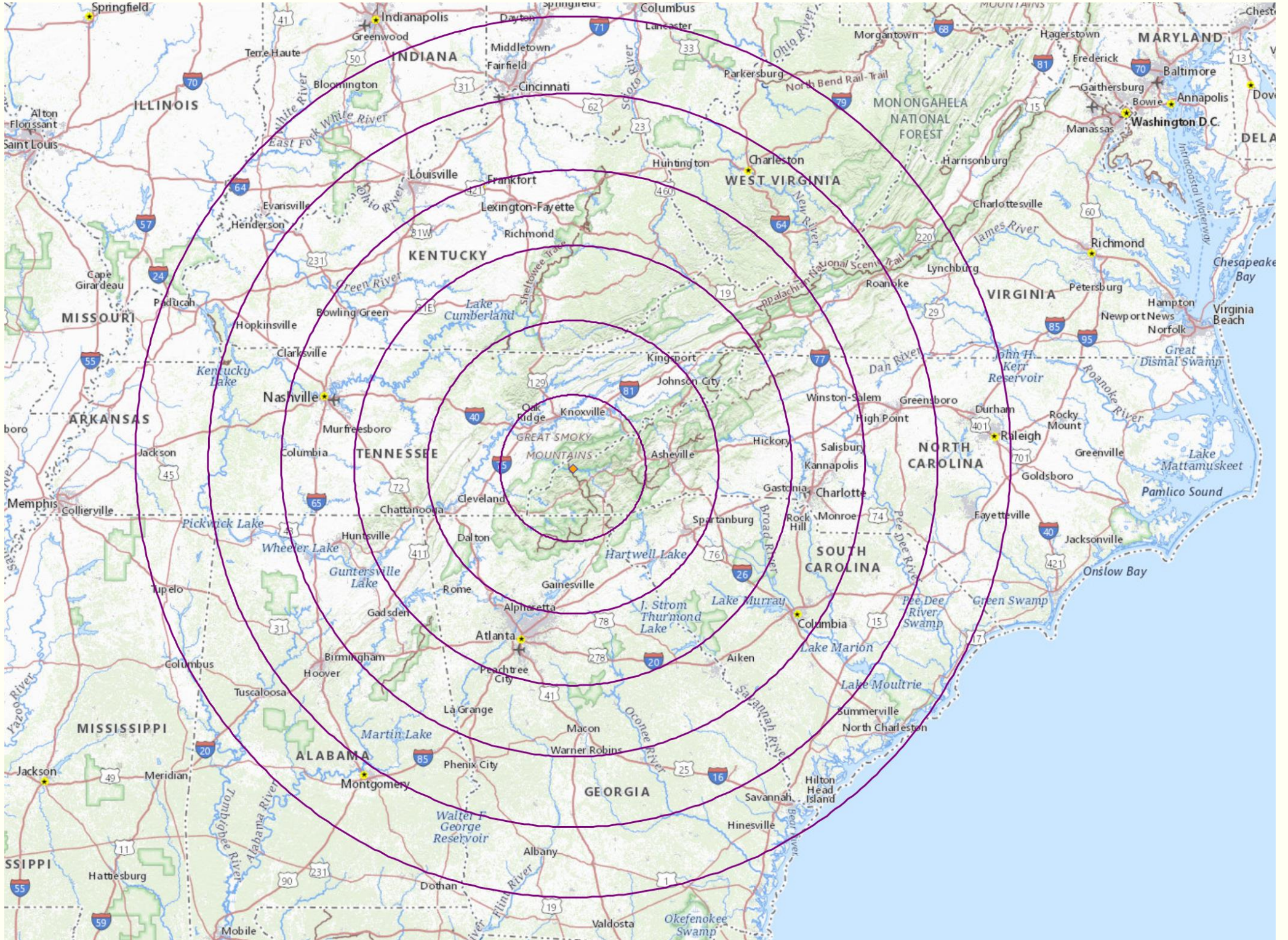
# Population Boom and Bust on the North Shore



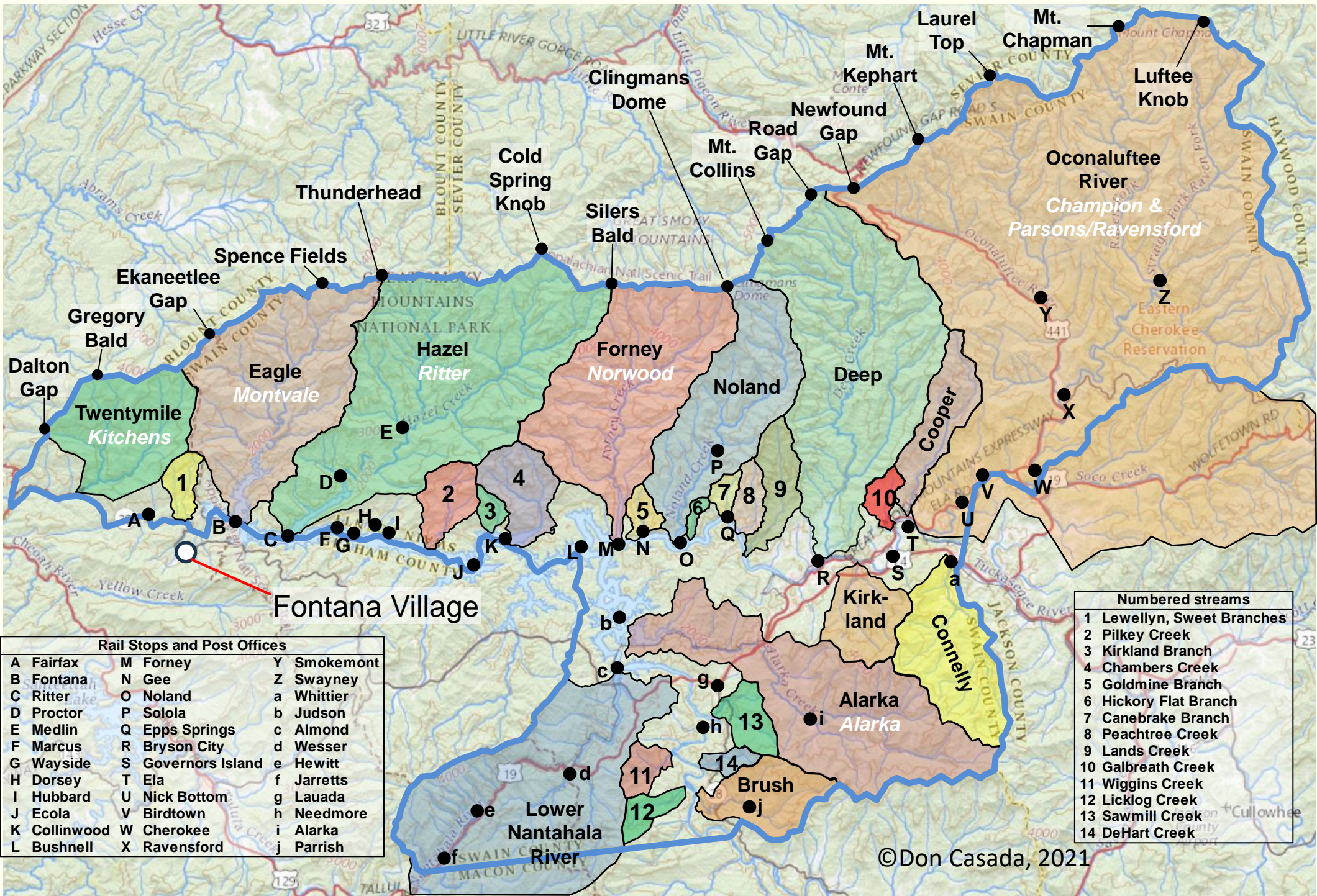
Population decline due to end of logging was greater than Fontana's forced removal.

# Geographical perspectives

Hazel Creek is further from its own state's capital, than to the capitals of six other states.



# Excepting Oconaluftee River, Hazel Creek is Swain County's largest drainage



Drainage area = 45 square miles  
 Perimeter = 54 miles

Maximum elevation = 5607 ft (Silers Bald)  
 Minimum elevation = 1709 ft (Fontana)

# Topography

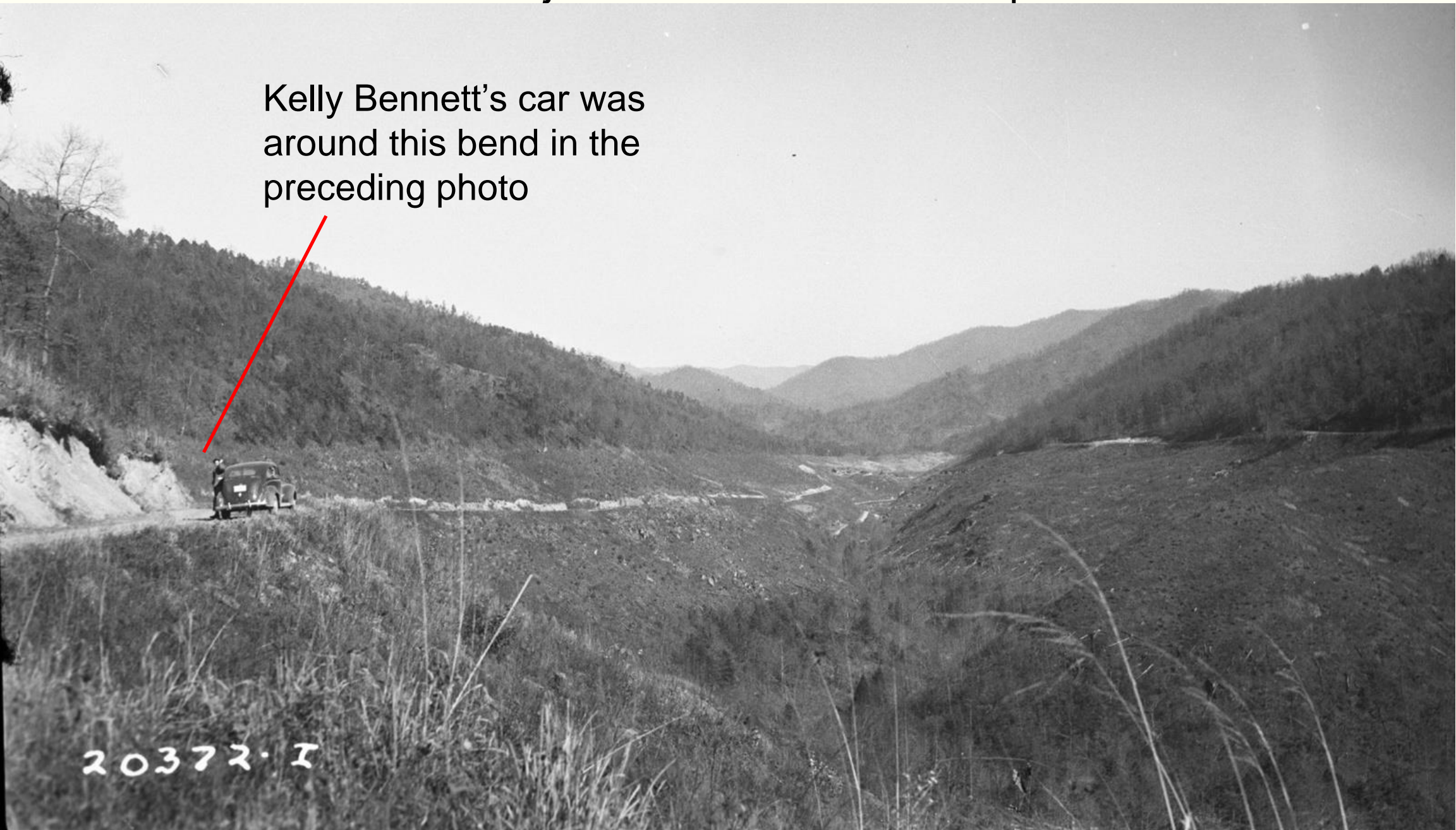
# Looking northeast up Hazel Creek from NC 288



This photo, taken from NC 288 just south of Matt Branch (the hollow toward which the car is pointing is Matt Branch) and looking up Hazel Creek illustrates the nature of much of the drainage – approaching a gorge. There were three primary populated sections on the creek itself. Other distributed communities, particularly after the arrival of Ritter Lumber, looked to the Proctor section as a source of storebought goods. The car would now be about 75 feet underwater when Fontana is at full pool level.

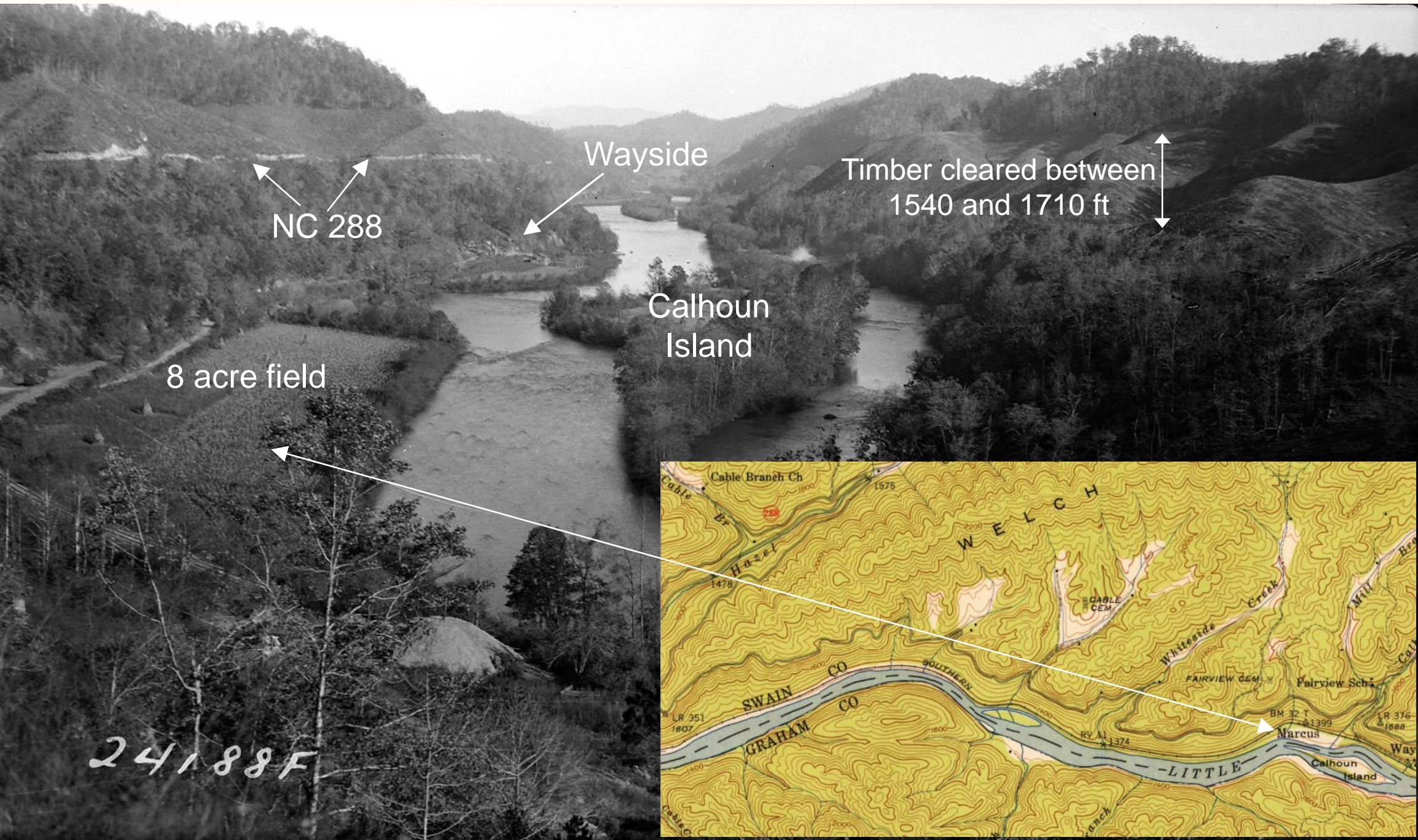
Looking up Hazel Creek from near the mouth. The upper part of the cleared area is just above Fontana's full pool level.

Kelly Bennett's car was around this bend in the preceding photo



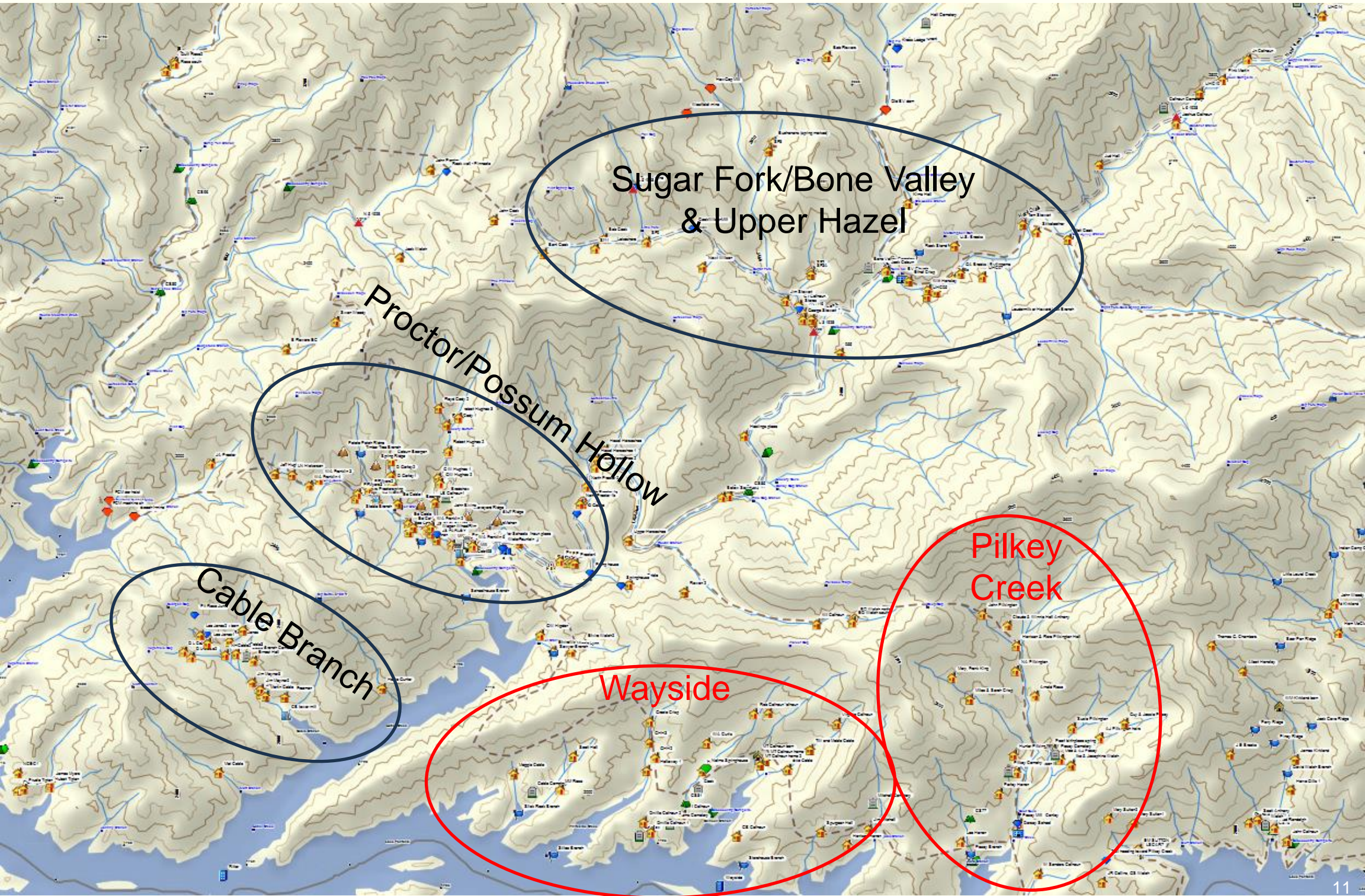
This photo was taken from a bit further down the drainage fifteen years later (Nov 17, 1943) near NC 288 just above the mouth of the creek.

# The Little Tennessee was itself largely gorge-like



Looking up the Little Tennessee from near the mouth of Calhoun Branch, about three miles above the mouth of Hazel Creek. The photographer was on NC 288 at about 1600 ft elevation. Marcus and Wayside are sometimes cited as lost towns or villages. But the fact is that they were a post office location (Wayside) and rail stop (Marcus); neither had more than a handful of structures. The vast majority of homes were – as was the case with Canebrake – well away from the river gorge, along feeder streams and small branches. The eight acre field shown here at Marcus was among the largest level areas along the river from the junction of the Tuckasegee and Little Tennessee Rivers to the state line.

The nature of the terrain dictated separate communities both on Hazel Creek proper and in surrounding areas



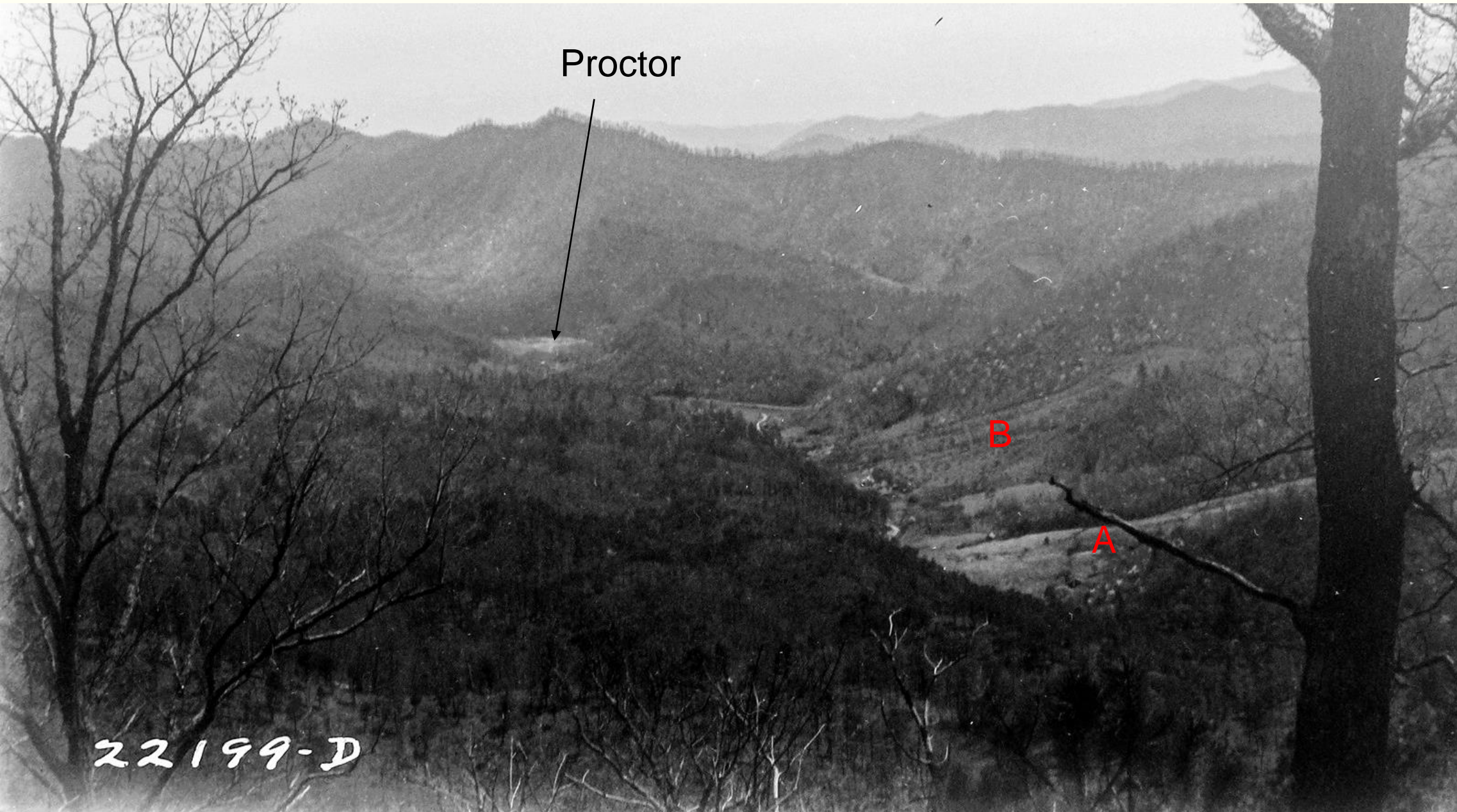
# Part of 1941 Proctor Quadrangle

Note the absence of homes along the Little Tennessee and the small proportion of land which is clear and under cultivation or some other use (the light sections). Also note the tightness of the elevation lines along the river. It was so steep that there wasn't room for the railroad and the narrow dirt road, NC 288.

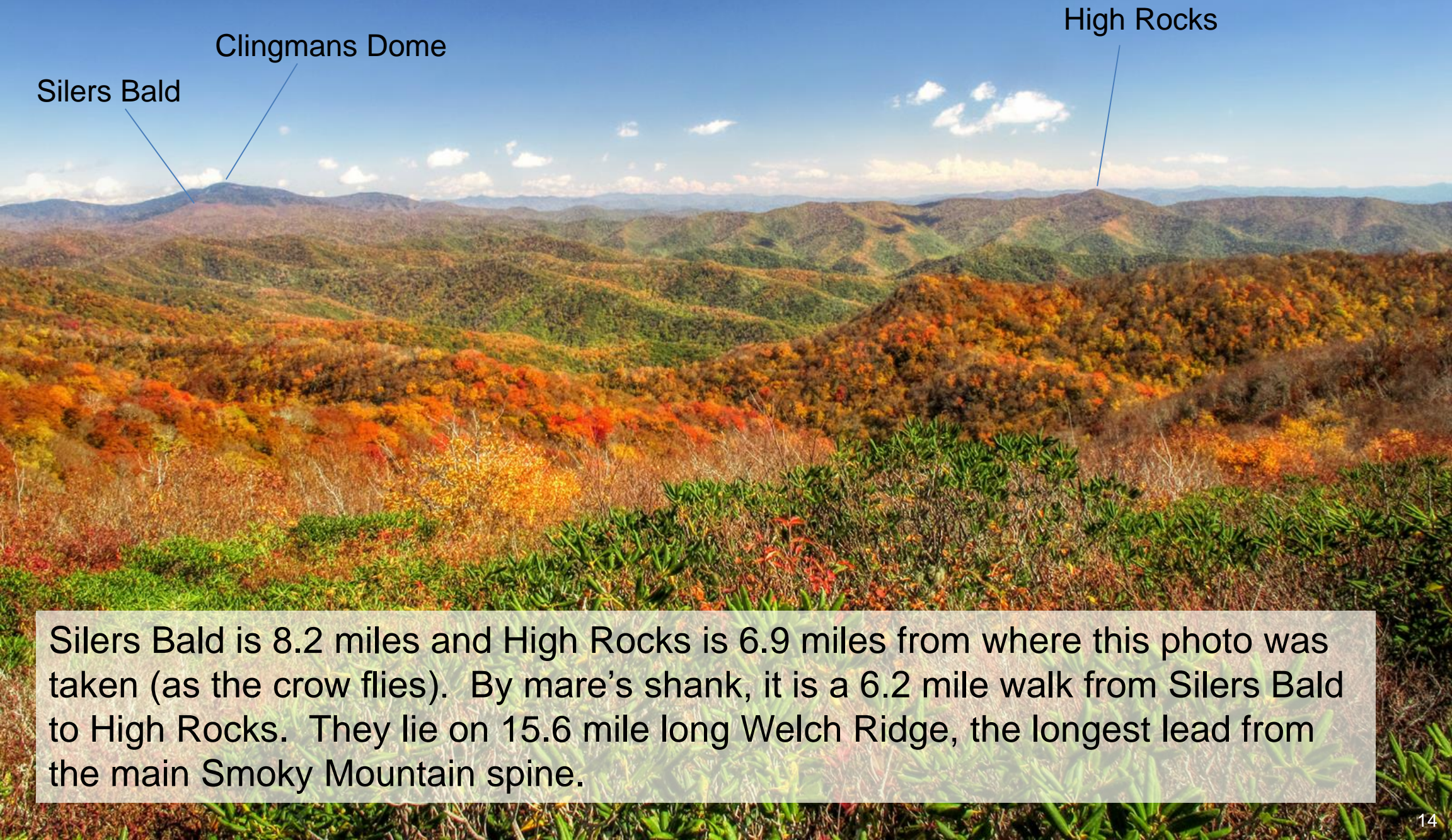


# Looking down Possum Hollow from Pinnacle Ridge

This TVA photo (undated, but likely 1943-44) is looking east down Possum Hollow (Shehan Branch). Even with the poor image quality, it is apparent how little of the land was under cultivation. See locations of A and B clearings on preceding slide.



# Looking east across upper Hazel Creek, from Rocky Top, NC



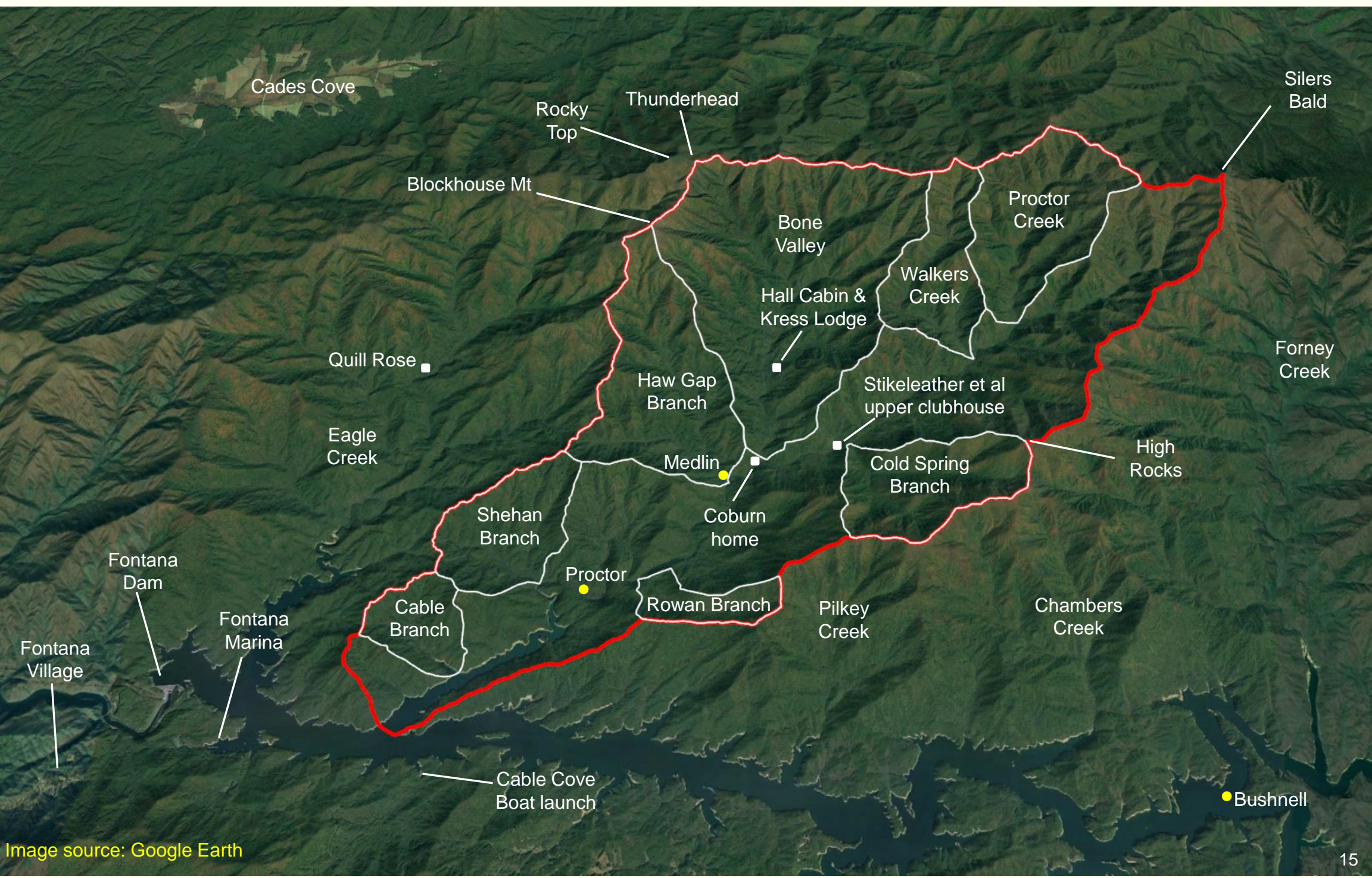
Silers Bald

Clingmans Dome

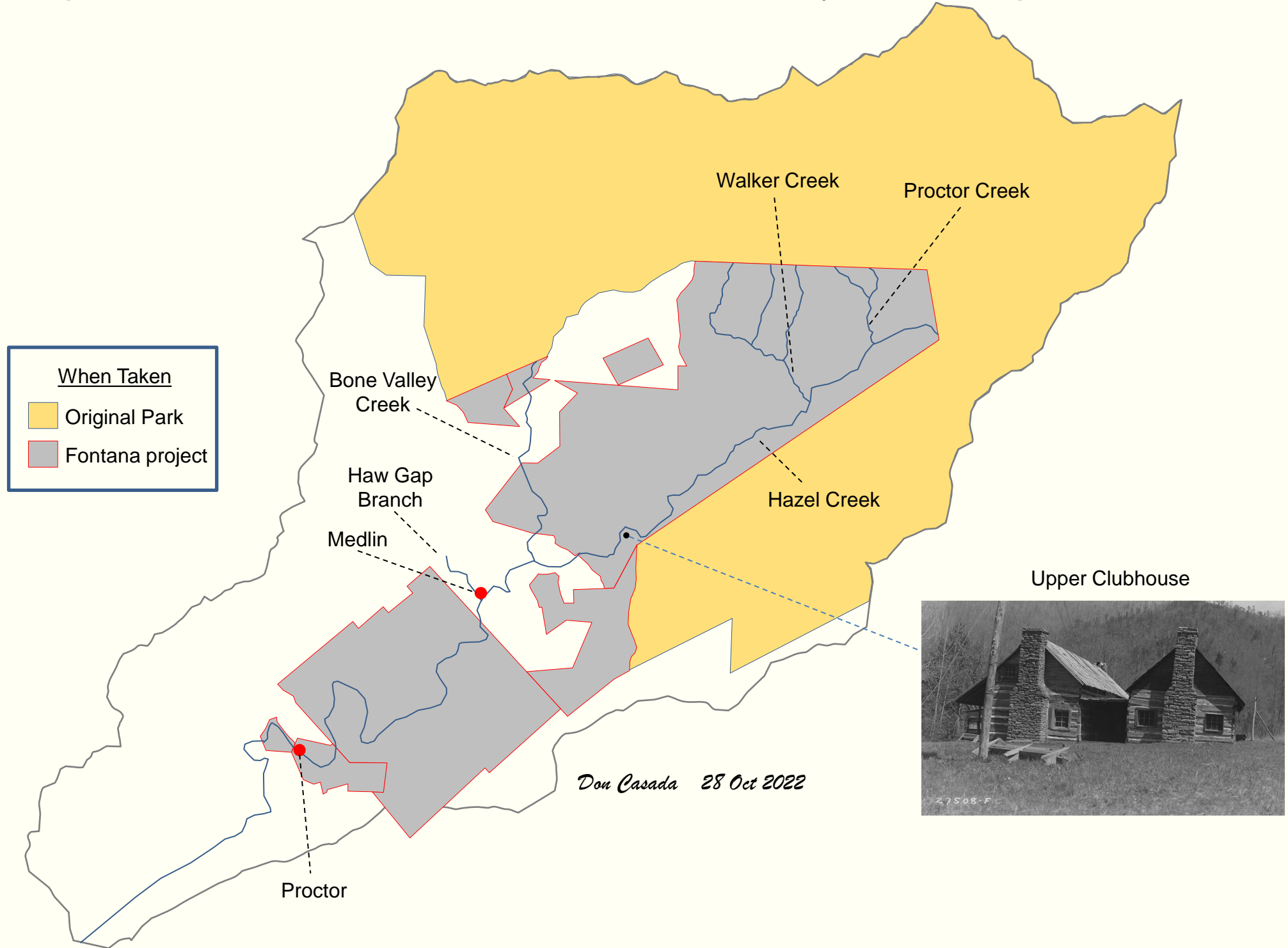
High Rocks

Silers Bald is 8.2 miles and High Rocks is 6.9 miles from where this photo was taken (as the crow flies). By mare's shank, it is a 6.2 mile walk from Silers Bald to High Rocks. They lie on 15.6 mile long Welch Ridge, the longest lead from the main Smoky Mountain spine.

The majority of Hazel Creek's waters are collected in the upper end of the drainage; this translates into a long stretch of water that varies little in size from Medlin to Proctor.



Portions of the Hazel Creek drainage owned by Stikeleather, Smathers et al. The gray strip which was retained until Fontana was clearly related to political influence.



# Stikeleather-Smathers upper clubhouse



# Clubhouse chimney remains, 2014



Proctor Baptist Church; Clubhouse and boarding houses beyond. This bridge was about ¼ mile above today's bridge at Proctor



The Hazel Creek road/trail now passes right through the middle of where the Proctor Church stood. Background buildings include the clubhouse and other Ritter lodging later used by Stikeleather et al.

# Kress Lodge on Bone Valley



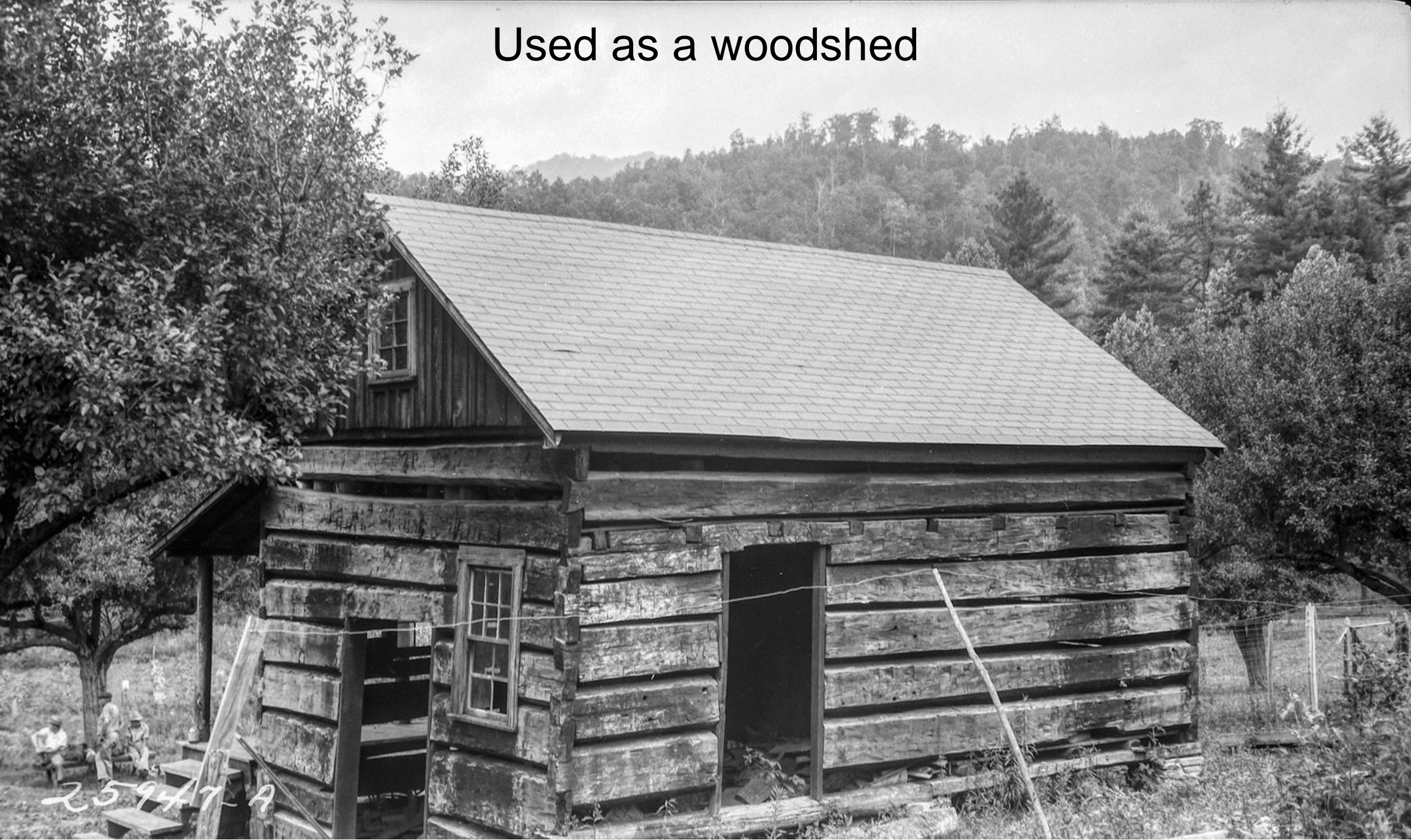
Hall Cabin

The Kress Lodge was erected by the family which owned the Kress five and ten cent stores. It was on property owned by the Calhoun family which, like the Stikeleather et al property, was for the exclusive use of the Kress family and guests.

The so-called Hall Cabin, which is on the National Historic Register today, stood next to the Kress Lodge and was.....



# Used as a woodshed



The Park Service saw to it that the “Hall Cabin” was placed on the National Historic Register in 1975 in spite of the fact that the only authentic part of it is the log walls. The application, completed by a Park bureaucrat, “Paul Gordon - Historian”, observed:

*“The area around Bone Valley, and its major water course, Hazel Creek, was characterised, as was much of the mountain area, by isolation. For generations contact with the outside world was limited, there was inbreeding, and much distilling and drinking of moonshine whiskey. Illiteracy was prevalent, and violence was common.”*

This sign was posted on Noland Creek, but is representative of the practices of the Stikeleather-Smathers group on Hazel Creek



Calhoun's Store in Proctor. The bridge is at about the same location as the bridge of today.



# Proctor elementary and high school buildings, basketball court



# Heath Hyatt at the left basketball goalpost remains, 2024



Proctor CCC camp buildings; church at left background, clubhouse at top center, another lodge at upper right.



Another view of a CCC barracks and lodging structures on the hill beyond.



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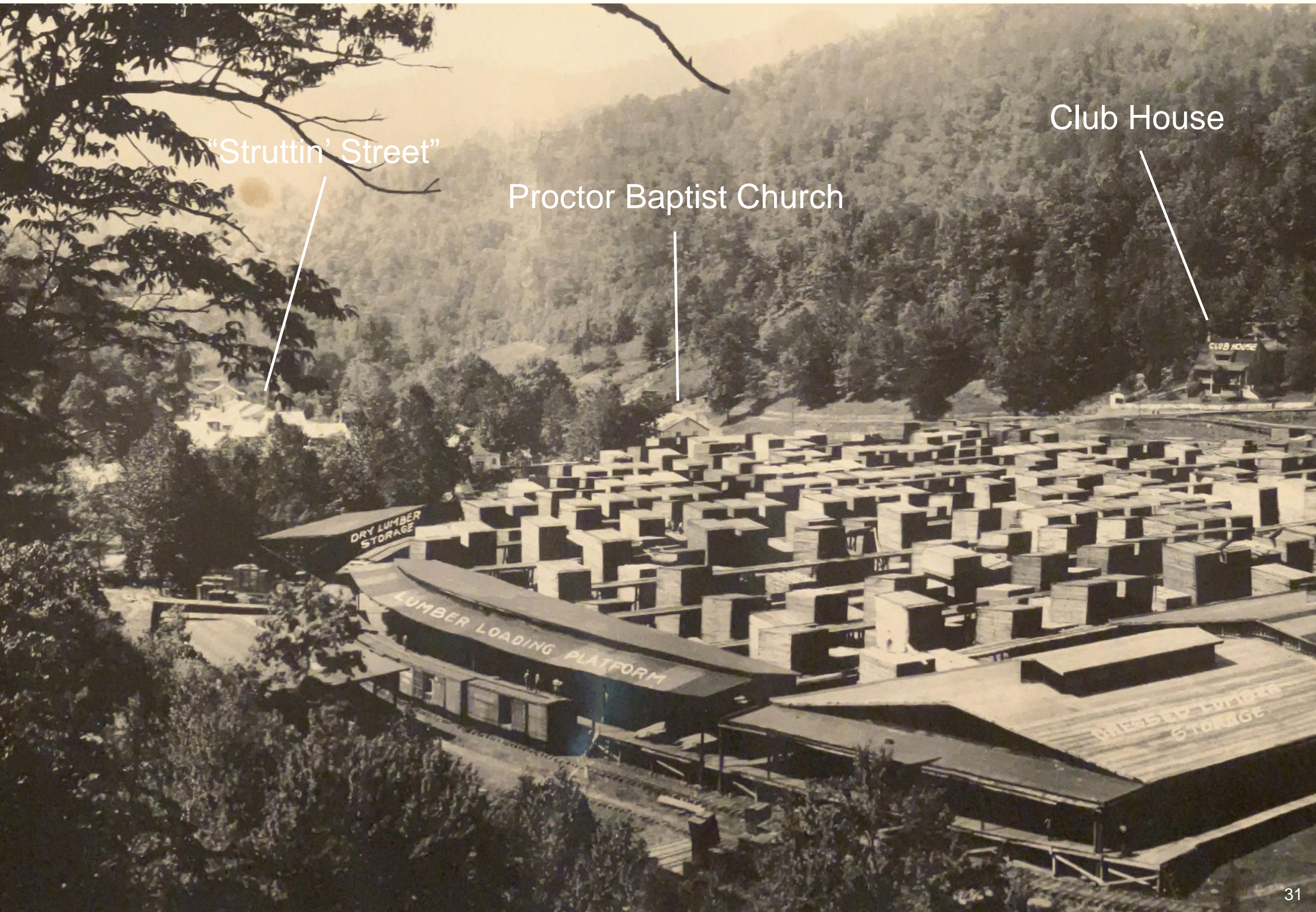
# Proctor Clubhouse remains, 2024





This panoramic shot, looking north from near a switchback in today's Lakeshore Trail, covers an angle of around 90°. Today's Hazel Creek trail follows the rail grade from below the mill to the left to beyond the mill at the right. Considerable detritus as well as some of the structures – notably the dry kiln – remain. The mill is shown in sections on the pages which follow.

Left portion of the photo (Hazel Creek follows the tree line below mill)



"Struttin' Street"

Proctor Baptist Church

Club House

DRY LUMBER  
STORAGE

LUMBER LOADING PLATFORM

MISCELLANEOUS  
STORAGE

CLUB HOUSE

# Central portion



Right portion; note train load of logs arriving at far right



Looking south from the copper mine on Little Fork of Sugar Fork;  
Almost bare-topped Horseshoe Ridge is in the Background



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# Horace Kephart (L) and Jack Coburn, around 1925

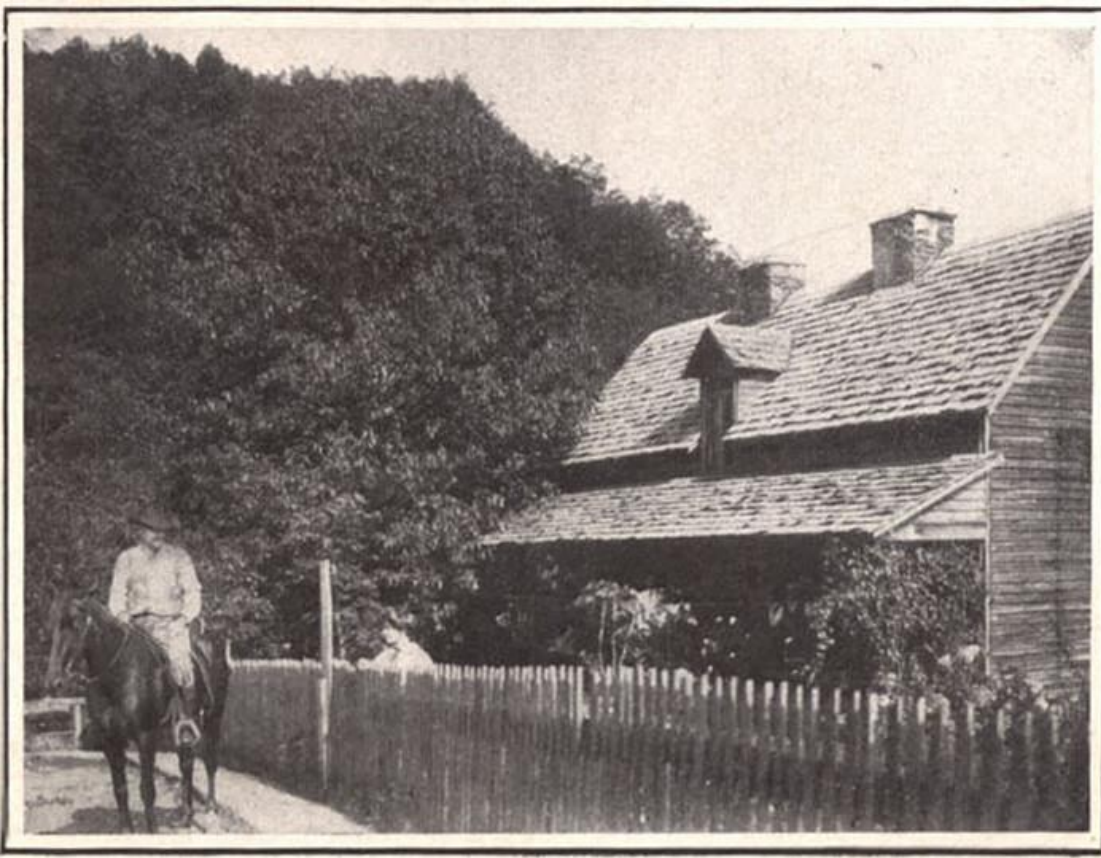
Horace Kephart left his job as librarian at the St. Louis Mercantile, his wife and family in St. Louis in 1904. Claiming to have found nothing in writing of this place, which he referred to as “terra incognita” and a “back of beyond,” he found his way to Hazel Creek in the fall of 1904 and remained there until early 1906 – just over a year duration, which he claimed to comprise three years. It seems likely that Jack Coburn made arrangements for Kephart to stay in a cabin at the Cooper mine on Little Fork of Sugar Fork (of Haw Gap Branch). Granville Calhoun met Kephart at the Bushnell train depot and carried him to Hazel Creek on the back of a mule; members of the Calhoun family aver that he was so drunk that he had to be lashed into place.



Granville Calhoun and his wife, Lillie Hall, nursed Kephart back to temporary sobriety. His book *Our Southern Highlanders*, first published in 1913, was clearly based, to a significant degree, on his regurgitation (bordering on plagiarism) of the offerings of several earlier writers about Appalachia, including James Lane Allen (*Through Cumberland Gap on Horseback*, 1886) and William Goodell Frost (*Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains*, 1899). Frost even published an article in *The Independent* magazine in 1912 entitled *Our Southern Highlanders*.

## Jack and Bland Coburn

Jack Coburn, a Michigan native, arrived in the area in the late 1880s. He wasn't from a privileged background, but by shrewd real estate work, became one of the county's wealthiest individuals. He and Bland together owned over 10,000 acres of what is now the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Their home, located adjacent to the Bone Valley campsite, is shown above left, courtesy of Western Carolina's Kephart Collection. The young married couple at lower left is courtesy of the great-grandson of Will Wiggins, Bland's brother, Bryan Jackson.



"JACK" COBURN, TIMBERMAN, HIS HOME ON HAZEL CREEK.



## Granville Calhoun at home on Bone Valley



I think it very likely that this was the very structure which was moved and referred to as the “Hall Cabin.” Lillie Hall Calhoun was raised in the Crate Hall homestead on Bone Valley. The Calhouns owned the place during the pre-Fontana days. Photo of Granville & Lillie from Calhoun family.

Photo by Hiram Wilburn, about 1938. Source: [Open Parks Network](#)

# Quill Rose, a good friend of Jack Coburn



No little interest was manifested in the proceedings yesterday when Quill Rose, of Swain county, having been convicted during the early part of the week, was called before Judge Boyd to receive punishment. This was the last criminal matter disposed of and Judge Boyd took occasion to get off some humor, lecturing the defendant, querying him and exchanging words for some time. As the defendant walked forth to learn of his fate, Judge Boyd referred to him as one of the pioneers of Abraham Lincoln's time. He stated that a number of Asheville citizens had spoken to him about the defendant, who has won the reputation of drinking his distilled product instead of selling it. When the court asked the defendant what was the proper thing to do with him, he replied that he did not have much to say but would leave the matter in the court's hands. Finally prayer for judgment was continued. Rose, it is said, is one of the oldest blockaders in western North Carolina, but he always managed to evade the officers until this time, when he was caught in the habit of carrying "slop" from the still to a trough leading to a stock pen. He is a well known character in the part of the state and is 72 years old.

Source: [Open Parks Network](#)

*Asheville Citizen*, Nov 10, 1911

# Headed for Bone Valley



# Bone Valley campsite



Baptism of Elizabeth Holt, 4<sup>th</sup> great grandchild of Moses and Patience Proctor, in the Hazel Creek Baptizing Hole



# Decoration Day Singing, Bone Valley Campground



# Sarvis in bloom at High Rocks



# High Tide on Hazel Creek, early May



# LiDAR trace evidence of trails, structures, and environmental stewardship self-interest: Phillip Myers place on Shehan Branch

Trail through a gap  
to Ramp Cove

Home site

Water brakes

# LiDAR imagery in the Proctor area

