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Abandoned Homesites in Jackson County

Merilyn Osterlund Dabbs

High on the mountainsides and deep in the remote coves of Jackson County are the remains of long abandoned homesites. Some of these sites were occupied as long ago as the 1820s and some as recently as the 1930s, but no one lives on them now. Throughout the Cumberland Mountain area of the county are: log houses and out buildings in all stages of repair; piles of stone that were once chimneys or foundation piers; sections of split rail fences; rows of daffodils; clumps of Spanish bayonets; even aged stands of black locust or cedar trees; non-native trees such as apple, pear, pawlonia or empress, and tree of heaven; and rusty tin cans, tools, buckets, and enamel ware—all signs that people lived here at one time.

I first observed abandoned mountainside homesites more than twenty-five years ago while hiking on Nat Mountain which is located just above the town of Paint Rock and east of Keel Mountain. My curiosity was aroused because the homes were on the sides of the mountain, on fairly wide, flat benches, more than 100 feet below the top and more than 600 feet from the bottom of the mountain. Access to the homesites is difficult because the benches are at the base of steep escarpments, good roads are either on the mountain tops or in the broad valleys, and very few roads go over the mountains.

On other cross-country hikes in Jackson County, I came across more abandoned homesites on other mountainsides and in other difficult to access areas such as the remote areas of Maynard Cove, in Devers, Matthews, and Tate Coves, the upper reaches of Reid Hollow, and McAllister and Cunningham Sinks. I believe that abandoned homesites can be found in just about all remote coves and on all large mountainside benches in the county. But, why were homes built in these difficult areas? Who built them? When were they built? Why were they abandoned?

In attempting to answer these questions, I found that cove and sink homesites are older than mountainside homesites. Many of the cove and sink sites were occupied before 1820, possibly as early as 1800, but all were before the Civil War; whereas, the mountainside sites were not settled until the 1890s. Settlers, originally from the mountains of North

Carolina and east Tennessee, moving downstream from the headwaters of Estill Fork, Larkin Fork, and Crow Creek in Tennessee, came into the Jackson County area at the turn of the 18th century. These settlers, also known as mountain men or hill people, were more interested in hunting than agriculture. Their main concern in locating a home site was not the fertility of the soil nor access to roads or market towns, but the quality of the hunt and the range for stock and 'elbow room'.

Their choice of a homesite invariably was at a 'year-round' spring on the lower slopes or foot of the mountain, and the home was built as close as possible to this spring. The spring was improved by removing boulders and digging it out to make a pool of water deep enough to easily fill a bucket. Sometimes a spring house was built over the pool to keep large animals and plant debris out of the water. The spring house was also used for storing foods, such as milk and butter, that needed to be kept cool.

The homesite generally contained some flat, well-drained land that could be used for a vegetable garden and a field of corn. A plot of land was cleared of trees and large rocks and planted with beans, turnips, sweet and white potatoes, tomatoes, squash, onions—all the vegetables a family would need for the year. A larger area was cleared for a crop of corn. The corn was grown mainly for animal feed, but usually more corn than the farmer needed was produced and this extra corn was used as a cash crop. Many of the mountain men used the extra corn to make whiskey, which provided an additional source of income for the family.

The homes were either single or double pen (one or two rooms) built from trees felled on the land. The floor joists and sills were oak, the walls yellow poplar or cedar, and the roof cedar shingles. The fireplace and chimney were hewn limestone. The wooded mountainsides not only provided building material for homes but also ample sustenance for livestock, and plenty of game to hunt.

These settlers were also known as squatters, that is, they did not plan to buy the land; they merely wanted to gain a subsistence from the land. Even if they had wanted to buy it they could not, because the land belonged to the Cherokee Indian Nation until 1819 and after that to the United States government which did not open the land for purchase until 1830. About 31 percent of the land in Jackson County was

purchased between 1830 and 1847 at the standard price of \$1.25 per acre. Between 1847 and the onset of the Civil War in April 1861; the standard price was gradually reduced to 12-1/2 cents an acre, and approximately 24 percent of the land area was purchased at reduced prices. As the population increased and more land was purchased in the county, some of the squatters abandoned their homes in the coves and sinks and moved further west. Other squatters stayed and some even purchased their homesites, but with time most of the remote cove and sink sites were abandoned as life styles changed.

The mountainside homesites were not occupied until the late 1800s, most of the homes being built between 1890 and 1905. Since farming was about the only occupation open to young men and all the easily accessible farm land in the county was taken, only approximately 33,000 acres of public land were available for entry. Jackson County is one of the most mountainous counties in the state, and the available public land was either on the tops of the mountains or the sides of them.

The mountain tops in this area are capped with sandstone, which does not make good farm land because rain water percolates too rapidly through the sandy soil. On the sides of many of the mountains relatively flat, wide (approximately 150 feet) areas or 'benches', developed on limestone bedrock, which weathers into rich soil that absorbs and retains moisture. It is on these benches that many young men acquired land through homesteading. Under the Homestead Act of 1862, a man could claim public land by building a home on it, clearing some of it for a crop and garden, and after living on the land for five years it became his.

The homes on the benches were similar to those in the coves and sinks, except that the fireplaces and chimneys were fieldstone rather than limestone. Fieldstone is sandstone boulders that are naturally rectangular with square corners. A plentiful supply of fieldstone exists because as the sandstone mountain tops weather the rock that breaks off comes to rest on the benches. The homes were built near springs and a plot of land was cleared for a garden. Because the soil on the benches was moist and rich, the farmer easily produced enough food to sustain his family and animals until the next growing season.

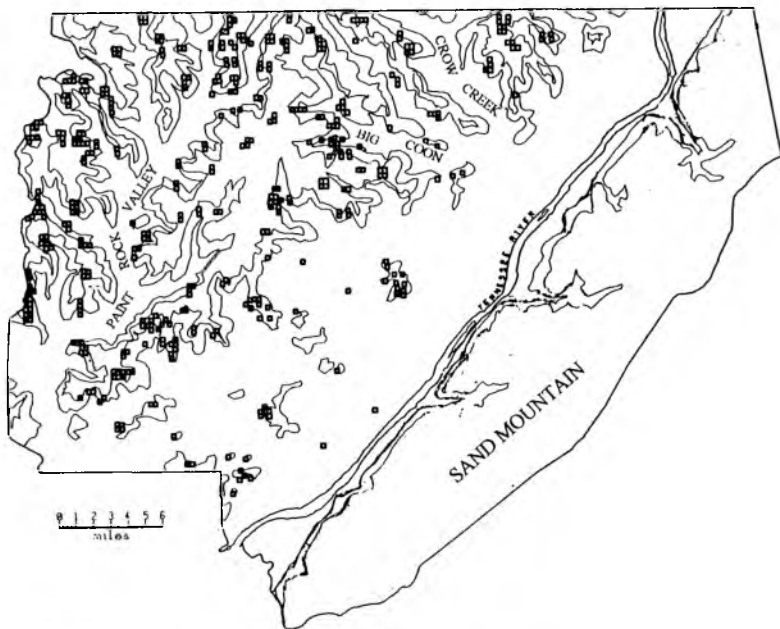
Some of the farmers increased the amount of level land by terracing. Rock walls from 2–3 feet high were built parallel to the contours of the mountain and parallel to other rock walls which were about 20 feet apart. The land behind the walls was either scraped off or filled in to make it level. At one home site eight parallel rock walls each about a quarter of a mile long can still be seen.

Since range laws were not enacted in Jackson County until the late 1930s, the farmer fenced in his crop and fenced out his animals—a milk cow, a few head of cattle, some hogs, and a couple of mules. Three types of fences were built: the worm, the split rail, and the cedar post and rail. Barbed wire fences were not common because of the cost and the difficulty of setting fence posts deep enough in the very shallow soil to properly support the wire. Another, rather unusual, fence was built from large trees (3–4 feet in diameter) that were cut in such a way that they fell end to top forming a fence.

In the early 1900s the benches on the sides of the mountains in the Paint Rock Valley provided a viable way of life for a young man and his family. As Mrs. Wilson, who was born and raised in a log house on the side of Miller Mountain said, “Life was good up there. There was always more than enough food.” Why are there only remnants of homes, a few intact fieldstone chimneys, piles of boulders that were once chimneys, scattered sections of fence just barely standing, and thick groves of even aged black locust, yellow poplar, or cedar trees where there had been cleared fields, and nobody living on the benches today?

When the children who were born on the mountain sides reached adulthood, farming was not the only occupation open to them. The Federal Government began building dams on the Tennessee River in 1918, providing job opportunities. Industries were increasing such as textile mills, metal fabricating mills, fertilizer and chemical plants. Many young men left the mountains to serve in World War I. Life-styles were changing with the increased availability of electricity and automobiles, neither of which were available to the mountain sides. It was the late 1940s before electric power lines were extended up the mountain sides, and even today there are only 3 paved roads up the mountains. The benches on the mountains were no longer viable home sites.

HOMESTEADS, CUMBERLAND MOUNTAINS JACKSON COUNTY



Source: GLO Tract Book

▪ 40 ACRES OF A HOMESTEAD ENTRY

CONTOURS:

NORTH OF RIVER -	~	1500 FT.
	~	700 FT.
SOUTH OF RIVER -	~	TOP OF BLUFF
	~	(VARIES 1100-1400 FT.)
	~	700 FT.

Marilyn Dabbs has an ABD in Geography from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her dissertation topic is Jackson County. A hiker, climber, and camper, Marilyn has stepped-off a goodly portion of the mountainous neighboring county. Married to Joe Dabbs who is recently retired from NASA, she makes her home on Monte Sano and teaches at Alabama A&M University.