

THE GORGEOUS GORGE OF THE ROCK CASTLE

By Susan Roquemore

There is grace in walking a downhill trail. There is joy in not climbing today. There is a lot to be learned about this Rock Castle Road-- these Rock Castle People.

This is not a “trail.” It is the “main drag” of a bustling little community of farmers, merchants, a miller, soldiers and schoolteacher. There’s a school, a burying ground baptismal pool. Ghosts. The road jumps up to slap us in the face with stories. Historian Mike Ryan knows tall and long tales. We begin with the Cherokee Nation in the colonial era on our five- mile stroll into yesterday.

Settlers from Europe and the British Isles filtered into the area beginning in the late 1700’s. By the mid 1800’s there was a general merchandise store at the head of the Rock Castle near the Slate Mountain Rock Church built by Robert Childress. The Rock Churches are tales unto themselves as is their builder: the reverend Mr. Childress. There are two houses remaining from the 19th and 20th Century. The Worley Cabin, (in National Park Service ownership), is being rapidly reclaimed by the forest. Using our mind’s eye and Ranger Mike’s information we can reconstruct some of the others: chimneys and foundations remain along with piles of timber and tin. Clearings belie the dooryard gardens of the past with yucca and boxwood that would have been planted to decorate the porches. One industrious family had electric power. Dayton Electric Company (now Delco) employed traveling salesmen who hawked battery-powered generators door to door in early in the 20th Century. One resident was not to be denied his light (and the envy of his neighbors.) As batteries tended to explode back then, the system required a building of its own.

Rock Castle’s grist -mill was built to accommodate smaller quantities of corn and shallower stream water. It was of a “tub” style rather than the more familiar overshot and undershot wheels. Neighbors bartered goods for the service.

There was drama here in the Rock Castle. Virginia was engaged in the Civil War with alliance to the Confederacy. Some soldiers drifted home when they found war was not all glory—and the crops needed tending. These soldiers were labeled “deserters” and were hunted by the army. They might have hidden in the glacial boulder field called Bare Rocks (Bear Rocks) area of the Rock Castle Gorge.

Our eyes see a different Rock Castle than those 19th Century residents did. Their forest had a canopy of giant chestnut trees—think Giant Redwoods-- Each autumn a rainfall of fat nuts blanketed the forest floor. Wild hogs were “branded” and left to forage by the residents and rounded up and sold at market. With the chestnut blight of the early 1900’s, the trees died and fell. No more timber; no more free hog fodder!. There was another thriving industry in the area: making “spirits.” Most people think of “moonshine” being corn based: hereabouts the favorite was apple brandy. Rye Liquor and Corn were also produced—legally. It didn’t necessarily stop after the Volstead Act was made law.

The Rock Castle's heyday was over. The CCC (Civil Conservation Corps) had a large camp here for building the Blue Ridge Parkway and highway work 1938-42. The Great Depression of the 1930's clearly sealed the fate of this once thriving valley community. Now we have only her stories to tell and her beauty to share on a summery Saturday morning.

Susan Roquemore is a member of the Rocky Knob Chapter of the Friends of the Blue Ridge Parkway and has hiked the Rock Castle Gorge Loop Trail (10.6 miles) with husband David the section from Rock Creek Church Road past the CCC camp with Ranger/Historian Mike Ryan July 18, 2009