THE OCONALUFTEE VALLEY, 1800-1860: A STUDY OF THE SOURCES FOR MOUNTAIN HISTORY

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In their efforts to reveal the struggles of the "average" citizen of times past, historians have long had to puzzle over the paucity of surviving primary sources on the lives of common folk. A sense of historical urgency on the part of rich and prominent figures, combined with diligent research among their papers by their biographers, has portrayed for posterity the circumstances from which have emerged our national and sectional statesmen, heroes, and entrepreneurs.

In more recent years some significant strides have been made in assessing the environment of the ordinary inhabitants of the South. The late Professor Frank L. Owsley led the way in scrutinizing the "plain people" of the antebellum southeast while Professor Bell I. Wiley has revealed the travails and aspirations of the common soldier of the Confederacy.[1] Our understanding of the Negro in this section has been enhanced by the studies of Vernon L. Wharton and George B. Tindall.[2]

The attention of these students to the "plain people" has rarely been focused on the mountain whites of the antebellum southeast. Professor Owsley did advance a thesis by which he accounted for the isolation of the herdsmen of the mountains and piney woods.[3] But most writers on the subject have drawn upon personal observation rather than the traditional historical sources for their descriptions of moun-

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[1] Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949); Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1943).

[2] Vernon L. Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, The James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science*, Volume XXVIII (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1947); George B. Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes, 1877-1900* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952).

[3] Frank L. Owsley, "The Pattern of Migration and Settlement on the Southern Frontier," *Journal of Southern History*, XI (May, 1945), 150-173.

tain life and institutions. The most thorough account of the North Carolina mountaineer was written by Horace Kephart who lived among or near the residents on Hazel Creek in Swain County for extended periods during the first thirty years of the twentieth century.[4]

Kephart was more concerned however, with his contemporaries than with their origins. To a large measure this preoccupation with the recent is characteristic of most writings which deal with the farmers of the North Carolina mountains in general and the Great Smoky Mountains in particular. Some writers of regional and county history have touched upon the mountain folk as they have traced the progress of settlement in their chosen regions. But a great deal of their information on the more remote parts of these counties has come from traditions handed down from earlier generations, and the authenticity of some of these accounts might be called into question by competent historical investigation.[5]

The dearth of written records appears to be the principal factor which explains the relatively small quantity of material on the history of the first settlers of the Great Smokies. Indeed two categories of source material which are indispensable to the historical investigation of any subject cannot be included among sources available to the student of Smoky Mountain history. There are no files of newspapers extant in this region during most of the nineteenth century except in the cities of Asheville and Knoxville; these centers received little news from the isolated coves.[6] Furthermore, the great depositories of personal papers at Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill contain few collections which bear on the Smokies. Of course, the same might be said of sources pertaining to most yeomen of the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain because of the low incidence of literacy in the period

[4] Horace Kephart, *Our Southern Highlanders* (New York: The MacMillan Company, second edition, 1922).

[5] John Preston Arthur, *Western North Carolina, A History, 1730-1913* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Printing Company, 1914), 208-209, hereinafter cited as Arthur, *Western North Carolina;* W. C. Allen, *Annals of Haywood County* (Waynesville, 1935).

[6] Winifred Gregory (ed.), *American Newspapers, 1820-1936: A Union List of Files Available in the United States and Canada* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1937).

and the simplicity of the few business transactions in which they participated. The scarcity of such sources can be explained, but the task of the historian is much more difficult because of the near absence of such contemporary accounts.

Because circumstances have deprived him of newspapers and personal papers, the historian must fall back to a second class of sources, public records. Here he must place reliance for statistical information on the Population Schedules, 1830-1880,[7] and the Agriculture Schedules, particularly for 1850 and 1860,[8] as made available by the United States Bureau of the Census. Only those population figures for 1850 and after are detailed enough to do more than trace lineage of heads of families. Of course, all such figures are to some degree subject to the whims of the enumerator and his informants.

County records provide the researcher with information on the acquisition and transfer of property due to purchase, sale, or decease. The researcher is handicapped here, however, by the fact that wills and deeds were legal instruments used by men of sufficient property and business acumen to wish to control the disposition of that property. This applies particularly in the case of wills. Should the investigator rely wholly on such county records he will only skim the surface; he will be dealing with the exceptional settler who was literate and relatively affluent. On the other hand, the records of the county courts provide some information on such public concerns as roads, elections, and jury duty.[9]

Several other categories of sources provide additional, but limited, data. Travel accounts are of but little value in

[7] Microfilm copies (originals in the National Archives) of Manuscript Population Schedules, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Census, 1810-1830, State Department of Archives and History, Raleigh; and Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Census, 1840-1870, Library, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Gatlinburg, Tennessee, hereinafter cited as National Park.

[8] Microfilm copies of the Seventh Census, 1850, Schedule IV: Agriculture, for Haywood County; and Eighth Census, 1860, Schedule IV: Agriculture, for Jackson County, State Department of Archives and History. The Oconaluftee Valley lay in Haywood County until the formation of Jackson County in 1851 and became a part of Swain County in 1871.

[9] Manuscript Minutes, Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, Haywood County, Clerk's Office, Waynesville, and Jackson County, Clerk's Office, Sylva, hereinafter cited as County Court Minutes; wills in the same offices and locations; deeds in the Register of Deeds' offices for Jackson and Haywood counties.

a day when most travellers preferred to go around the Smokies rather than to cross them.[10] Some church records have survived and are among the most valuable sources for such local history. Finally, the efforts of a few unheralded researchers have brought to light information which, when combined with other evidence, gives some insight into life in some of the early mountain settlements.[11]

The following account of the settlement of a single community in the Great Smokies is provided to demonstrate what documentary information is available to scholars. Implicit in the selection of this community is the fact that the primary sources are more numerous than for the other valleys in this region; the life in the Oconaluftee Valley cannot be considered as typical of much of the mountain region because of the relatively wealthy and literate people who inhabited it. However, it should also be noted that many of the mountain people about whom Kephart wrote were descended from families who first inhabited valleys like this one.

The Oconaluftee River rises just below Newfound Gap in the Great Smoky Mountains and flows into the Tuckaseigee River at the town of Cherokee in Swain County. Known by the first settlers as the West Fork, it was joined from the east by the Bradley Fork and the Raven Fork. Near its source it is a typical mountain stream narrow and winding, but below the Bradley Fork its "beautiful and fertile though narrow flat bottoms," made a vivid impression on the Swiss physical geographer, Arnold Guyot.[12] Indeed, by the standards of the mountain areas of North Carolina the Oconaluftee would be considered a broad valley. Most of it now lies within the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, while the balance is a part of the Qualla Tract of the Cherokee Indian Reservation. Here the relatively rich agricultural lands provided

[10] Charles Lanham, *Letters from the Alleghany Mountains* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1849), 84-92.

[11] The writer is indebted to H. C. Wilburn of Waynesville for personal suggestions as to sources. The frequent citations herein of his manuscript writings are further testimony of Mr. Wilburn's contributions to knowledge of Great Smoky Mountains' history.

[12] Myron H. Avery and Kenneth S. Boardman (eds.), "Arnold Guyot's Notes on the Geography of the Mountain District of Western North Carolina," *The North Carolina Historical Review*, XV (July, 1938), 284, hereinafter cited as Avery and Boardman, "Arnold Guyot's Notes."

the basis for a civilization which was distinctive in comparison with the usual picture of mountain life.

The Charleston traders did business with the Cherokees in the Tuckaseigee Valley as early as the second decade of the eighteenth century.[13] Part of the Indian war trail from modern Sevierville, Tennessee, closely followed the course of the Oconaluftee on the North Carolina side. The beauty of the valley does not seem to have caught the notice of white farmers until the period of the American Revolution. In 1776, a punitive expedition of North Carolina troops under General Griffith Rutherford destroyed a number of Indian villages in the Cherokee country including some settlements on the Oconaluftee.[14]

Shortly after the winning of independence, a number of land speculators began to take interest in the country inhabited by the red men. The Oconaluftee lay within the bounds of a North Carolina grant of 33,280 acres to William Cathcart in 1796, and a Buncombe County grant of 2,550 acres to Felix Walker in 1795, but these men were not actual settlers of the valley. Another early recipient of a sizeable grant resided in the valley only briefly and his holdings had been disposed of by 1812.[15]

The meager records of the early settlements on the Oconaluftee indicate that some whites had settled in this region in the 1790's. The first permanent residents of record were the family of John Jacob Mingus who migrated from Saxony about 1792. Three of his sons settled on the Raven Fork of the river until the mid-nineteenth century, two as prosperous farmers and the third as a preacher. The other son, Dr. John Mingus, a physician, and his wife occupied the home of his birth until very late in the nineteenth

[13] Verner W. Crane, *The Southern Frontier, 1670-1732* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1929), 130-131.

[14] H. C. Wilburn, "The Indian Gap Trail," files, National Park Headquarters, hereinafter cited as Wilburn, "Indian Gap Trail"; William E. Myers, "Indian Trails of the Southeast," in the *Forty-Second Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1924-1925* (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1928), 771-775, hereinafter cited as Myers, "Indian Trails."

[15] Wilburn, "Indian Gap Trail"; Deeds, Haywood County, Book A, 185-186; North Carolina Park Commission, Abstracts of Titles to Lands in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, National Park Headquarters, IV, 148 ff.

century. During his lifetime he acquired considerable property to the west of the river along the Mingus Creek.[16]

Abraham Enloe, originally a South Carolinian, acquired lands from Walker near the site of the present Lufty Ranger Station. Most of his nine sons married and settled on nearby lands. The name Enloe remained prominent until a grandson of the original settler sold out to the Floyd family after 1900.[17]

Gradually in the period of the War of 1812, other families moved into the area. One of the first settlers was Samuel Sherill; another, Robert Collins, was born in the valley and was a prominent community leader until his death in the 1860's. These pioneers were followed by Isaac Bradley, Samuel Conner, and John Beck.[18]

Most of the early settlers had left homes in the older parts of North Carolina. It was not unusual however, for South Carolinians and Virginians to take up land in the valley. From time to time some residents departed for new adventures elsewhere, one group migrating as far as Missouri. For the most part, however, these first inhabitants seem to have been content to remain in an area which afforded them such a good living.[19]

As in so many frontier communities, the basic economic unit was the family farm. The majority of North Carolina farms of the ante-bellum period contained 100 acres or less.[20] By these standards several of the farms in the Ocona-

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[16] H. C. Wilburn, Memorandum for the Superintendent, National Park, March 22, 1939, on the Mingus Creek Mill, Wilburn Papers, accession number 13-27, National Park Library, hereinafter cited as Wilburn, Mingus Creek Mill; Deeds, Haywood County, Book A, 202; Population Schedules, Third and Fourth Census, 1810-1820, Fifth Census, 1830, 379, Seventh Census, 1850, 165, all for Haywood County, and Eighth Census, 1860, Jackson County, 58.

[17] J. A. Sharp, Memorandum on the Enloe Family, files, National Park Headquarters; Population Schedules, Fourth Census, 1820, Fifth Census, 1830, 379, Seventh Census, 1850, 167, all for Haywood County; and Eighth Census, 1860, Jackson County, 58.

[18] Arthur, *Western North Carolina*, 208-209; Population Schedules, Third and Fourth Census, 1810-1820, Haywood County.

[19] Population Schedules, Seventh Census, 1850, Haywood County, 165, 167; Eighth Census, Jackson County, 56, 58. This was the first census to show the birthplaces of all members of families and if accurate, is particularly valuable for the origins of early settlers in a remote region.

[20] C. O. Cathey, *Agricultural Developments in North Carolina, 1783-1860*, *The James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science*, Volume XXXVIII (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 48.

luftee Valley could be considered fairly large, such as Robert Collins' 335 acres.[21] Much of the land held probably was not under cultivation. Woodlands and pastures seem to have made up over eighty per cent of the average farm. The size of the family unit and the proportion which was cultivated varied with the number of mouths to be fed and the number of hands and backs which could contribute to the planting and harvesting of the crop.

Most farm labor came from members of the family. Some younger men hired out as laborers on other farms from time to time, but work for others seems to have been a temporary expedient designed to contribute toward saving enough for future farm ownership. Several farmers in the valley were prosperous enough to own a few slaves; Samuel Sherill and Abraham Enloe each owned five in 1829. The few slaves which the valley farmers owned seem to have been used for domestic service rather than as fieldhands.[22]

Although many land titles were obscure, where there was clear title to acreage it was in fee simple. Farm tenancy in the modern sense was virtually unknown. At least until after the Civil War the supply of fresh lands up the tributaries of the Oconaluftee seems to have been sufficient to allow the sons of the original families to settle on small farms of their own.[23]

The inhabitants of the valley engaged in grain and livestock farming. The principal crop was the staple of the American frontier, Indian corn, food for both man and beast. There was a wide variation in the yield per acre, but several farmers produced harvests of 1,000 bushels in 1849. A few of the larger operators produced significant quantities of wheat such as the 200 bushels which John Mingus' lands yielded in 1859. Small quantities of oats and rye were grown on a few farms. Other contributions to the diet were made

[21] Agriculture Schedules, Seventh Census, 1850, Haywood County, 453.
[22] Agriculture Schedules, Seventh Census, 1850, Haywood County, 453; Population Schedules, Fifth Census, 1830, Haywood County.
[23] North Carolina Park Commission, Land Title Abstracts, IV, contains numerous examples of the land purchases of the sons of the older families; see also Population Schedules, Seventh Census, 1850, Haywood County, 165, 167.

by sweet and Irish potatoes, peas, beans, honey, and sorghum molasses.[24]

The isolation of the Oconaluftee Valley from markets and the necessity to concentrate on the essentials for frontier existence relegated the traditional southern cash crops to a position of relative insignificance. Some tobacco was grown by the larger operators but little or no cotton was produced.[25]

Pork provided the basic ingredient of the settlers' meat diet. Hogs were more numerous than most other species of livestock combined, and the value of swine is clearly indicated in the few recorded wills and estate inventories which have survived. Almost every farmer owned a few head of sheep and the total for the region was exceeded only by the number of swine. The wool yield seems to have been a vital factor for family use. Beef cattle outnumbered milk cows in the valley, and this preponderance was especially marked on the long-established farms. The usual sources of animal power were horses and work oxen, but mules were rarely used.[26]

The total value of animals slaughtered in 1869 was $9,835. Aside from meat, the principal animal product of value was butter of which some 5,000 pounds was produced. Neither milk nor cheese was produced in quantities sufficient for commercial use.[27]

An indication of the economic status of farmers in the Lufty valley is shown by individual statistics. Wesley Enloe was a successful farmer on a relatively large scale. He farmed 200 of his 500 acres which he valued at $3,000. His livestock was valued at $934 and included 8 horses, 12 milk and 24 beef cows, 2 oxen, 15 sheep, and 60 hogs. In 1849, he produced 25 bushels of wheat, 50 of rye, 800 of corn, and 50 of oats. Young Samuel Beck was not so well established; he cultivated 50 of his 90 acres, had 4 horses, 6 cows, 18 sheep,

[24] Agriculture Schedules, Seventh Census, 1850, Haywood County, 453; Eighth Census, 1860, Jackson County, 18-19.
[25] Agriculture Schedules, Seventh Census, 1850, Haywood County, 453; Eighth Census, 1860, Jackson County, 18-19.
[26] Agriculture Schedules, Seventh Census, 1850, Haywood County, 453; Eighth Census, 1860, Jackson County, 18-19.
[27] Agriculture Schedules, Seventh Census, 1850, Haywood County, 453; Eighth Census, 1860, 18-19, and Ninth Census, 1870, Jackson County.

and 12 hogs. His efforts yielded 14 bushels of rye, 6 of wheat, 10 of oats, 300 of corn, and 50 pounds of tobacco. A few inhabitants were more prosperous than Enloe or of smaller means than young Beck, but the economic position of most lay within these indicated bounds.[28]

Virtually all of the adult males were farmers, yet occasionally one found employment as a miller, mechanic, blacksmith, or tanner. The principal industrial installation near the Oconaluftee was the Mingus Creek Mill; it used an overshot water wheel and was employed principally for grinding corn. In 1886, it was replaced by a turbine mill which is still standing.[29]

The valley of the Oconaluftee not only provided unusual opportunities for prosperous agricultural development, but its upper reaches afforded the best route for crossing the Smokies into Tennessee. Long before white settlers had penetrated these lands, the Indians had come to use this Indian Gap Trail as one of their principal trading paths in the whole mountain region. It is interesting to note that when a turnpike road was projected in the 1830's to approximate the route of the early Indian path, one of its prime supporters was Colonel William H. Thomas, the Cherokee agent.[30]

The Oconaluftee Turnpike Company was chartered by the North Carolina legislature in 1832. Among the commissioners for the road were Samuel Sherill, John Beck, and Abraham Enloe.[31] The actual work advanced slowly. Even when it was opened to use one observer referred to it as a "mule path."[32] However, it appears that large numbers of cattle and hogs were driven over it from East Tennessee. In the lower part of the valley these numbers were augmented by local stock and all were driven to market usually in the towns of upper South Carolina.[33] The road also helped

[28] Agriculture Schedules, Seventh Census, 1850, Haywood County, 453; Eighth Census, 1860, 18-19, Ninth Census, 1870, Jackson County. See also the inventory of the estate of John Beck, Wills, Jackson County, I, 74-77.
[29] Population Schedules, Seventh Census, 1850, Haywood County, 165, 167; Wilburn, Mingus Creek Mill.
[30] Wilburn, "Indian Gap Trail"; Myers, "Indian Trails," 771-775.
[31] Wilburn, "Indian Gap Trail."
[32] Avery and Boardman, "Arnold Guyot's Notes," 284.
[33] Wilburn, "Indian Gap Trail"; Minutes of the Macon County Court, Clerk's Office, Franklin, March 28, 1829, 16.

to promote contact with the settlements on the forks of the Little Pigeon River in East Tennessee.[34]

The scarcity of records makes it difficult to determine how much contact the inhabitants of the valley had with the outside world. As a part of Haywood County, "Oconolufty" was named as an election precinct in 1831. From time to time the county court appointed road jurors and impaneled individuals to serve on trial juries from the area.[35] There is meager evidence that the farmers of the valley had business dealings with firms and individuals at the county seat at Waynesville, and periodic meetings were held with associated church groups.[36]

Indeed the religious institutions loomed large in the lives of these early settlers. The principal denomination along the Oconaluftee as in so many other pioneer communities was the Baptist. Records of other faiths have not come to light, but membership in a Baptist congregation was so widely held in the valley that other denominations could have been of but secondary importance in the picture of local religious life.

The Lufty Baptist Church was constituted as a separate congregation in 1836. Among its charter members were listed such prominent residents of the valley as John Jacob Mingus and three of his sons, Robert Collins, John and Samuel Beck, and Samuel Conner. Prayer meetings and church business meetings were held alternately at the residences of Samuel Conner on the West Fork, and John Jacob Mingus on the Bradley Fork until a church was erected on land donated by John Beck.[37]

The membership concerned itself with a number of matters of church business and morals. A moderator and deacons were chosen periodically, new members were received and a letter of "dismission" was granted to persons moving to other places. The congregation was called upon to review

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[34] See references to East Tennesseans in Lufty Baptist Church Minutes, manuscript in the possession of Mrs. Ben Fisher, Smokemont, National Park, microfilm copy on file, State Department of Archives and History, and photocopy in the Library, National Park, I, 5, 11, 52; Wills, Jackson County, I, 74-77; Arthur, *Western North Carolina*, 209.

[35] Minutes of Haywood County Court, June 30, 1831, Book J, 12.

[36] Wills, Haywood County, Book ½, 44-47.

[37] Minutes of the Lufty Baptist Church, I, 6 (of the Introduction).

the conduct of certain members and occasionally one was dismissed from the brotherhood. Delegates were chosen to travel to associational meetings in places as distant as Cullowhee and northern Georgia.[38]

Census data on literacy indicates that there was some effort, however sporadic, to provide opportunities for formal education in the valley. Often the heads of the earlier households could read and write, although in many instances their wives were not literate. In some families where the parents were not literate, their children were afforded the chance to attend school from time to time.[39] There are occasional references to individual teachers in the later period, but they provide no answers to the numerous questions which must arise concerning the educational methods in that place and time.

The available documents might provide longer and more detailed studies of certain aspects of life in the "Lufty" Valley, but the foregoing summarizes the information to be gleaned from such sources. The picture is one of a relatively prosperous community made up of devout, hard-working people. One does not get the impression of a society left behind but rather of one whose vitality would compare most favorably with that found on frontiers elsewhere in the mid-nineteenth century.

On the other hand there may be discerned here the seeds of mountaineer isolation and "backwardness." The large families led to ever-increasing demand for farms for the young adult males. This led inexorably to the lands on the more remote tributaries of the Oconaluftee in narrower valleys and on steeper hillsides.[40] The tempo of life here was no match for that in a nation of expanding industries, burgeoning cities, and rapid transportation and communication. It may be that Kephart's people were not so "backward" as the rest of the nation was "forward." Much needs to be done

[38] Minutes of the Lufty Baptist Church, I, 1, 6; typed copy of an autobiographical account by Edward Clarence Conner, a former resident, files, National Park Headquarters.

[39] Population Schedules, Seventh Census, 1850, Haywood County, 165-167.

[40] For pertinent data on this secondary migration, see North Carolina Park Commission, Land Title Abstracts, III, 1-21, 566-598; IV, 148-178, 777-802, 862-880.

in analyzing the documents of the later period to seek an explanation for the increased isolation of the mountain regions from the currents of the twentieth century.

But in a sense, the study of mountain culture is entering a new and highly significant phase. The Western North Carolina Historical Association founded in 1952, has launched an ambitious program to encourage research and publication in the field of mountain history.[41] Mrs. Wilma Dykeman Stokely is following her important study of the French Broad River country with one on the Great Smokies.[42]

The renewed interest in pioneer culture by the Great Smoky Mountains National Park will make a worth-while contribution to the knowledge of the subject as well as to tourist interest. Although the beginnings of a pioneer culture program were undertaken by H. C. Wilburn and others in the 1930's, it was forced by circumstances to take a secondary place because of the emphasis on natural history. Pioneer artifacts gathered in the 1930's by Charles S. Grossman and other National Park Service personnel will soon be displayed in a new pioneer museum to be located in the Oconaluftee Valley. The museum will house the collections which have been accumulated and catalogued, and a continuing program of historical research and interpretation will take shape in the years to come.

These recent developments cannot help but produce new insight into the culture of the mountains of western North Carolina. But every encouragement must be given to this work for time is short. Every year marks the passing of older settlers who may possess or know of the existence of documentary material, and the lapse of time increases the opportunity for the loss or destruction of such papers. They must be preserved, and only through the selfless co-operation of interested individuals and organizations can this worthy work be brought to a successful conclusion.

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[41] Clarence W. Griffin, "History and Progress of the Western North Carolina Historical Association," *The North Carolina Historical Review,* XXXIII (April, 1956), 202-212.

[42] "Historical News," *The North Carolina Historical Review,* XXXIV (July, 1957), 449-450.