Place-Names in Ashe County, North Carolina

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MAN HAS ALWAYS FELT it necessary to give names not only to himself and his animals but to the geographical places of significance in his sojourn on the earth. Such naming suggests both his knowledge of his surroundings and, stemming from this knowledge, a degree of control. From earliest recorded history man's questioning mind asks,

> What place is this?
> Where are we now?
>
> —"Grass" by Carl Sandburg

The etymology of place-names is endlessly diversified, yielding a wealth of fascinating material, and one fertile region is the northwesternmost county of North Carolina, a mountain-filled portion of the state bordering both Tennessee and Virginia—Ashe, named for Samuel Ashe, who was three times elected governor of the state in the 1790's.[1]

The mountains encircling the area effectively isolated the early settlers and continue to isolate to varying degrees those who have chosen to remain in the place where their ancestors migrated years ago in search of independence and freedom from control. In addition to keeping men in, the mountains also keep others out. Today Ashe County, with an area of 427 square miles, has a population of only 19,571. The largest towns in the area, the county seat Jefferson and its neighbor West Jefferson, in the last census reported only 943 and 889 souls, respectively. The remainder of the 17,739 occupy the other places in the county, some of whose names do not even appear on the large county map. Although the population may be small, to one who is a part of this mountainous county, each road, each ridge, and each bald has its name; and these designations, some of which today seem strange

1 Arthur L. Fletcher, *Ashe County, A History* (Jefferson, North Carolina: Ashe County Research Association, Inc., 1963), p. 34.

misnomers, reveal something of the history, the culture, and the interests of these people of the mountains.

No matter what the spot, be it a village, a road, a creek, a ford, a spring, or a gap, the name most frequently chosen is a family surname, and a listing of such spots is a listing of names long familiar in the annals of his forebears from across the sea—Yates, Ashland, Toliver, Baldwin, Clifton, Sturgills, Sutherlands, and Woodford. These names identify the earliest settlers of the area and sometimes, as in the case of Crumpler, honor one who served: Major Crumpler, an officer in the Confederate army. French surnames such as Transou and Ballou stand in striking contrast but are no less significant in the history of the county. Meredith Ballou, the first of the name to settle in Ashe, in 1800, was born in Amherst County, Virginia, and has been called a "pioneer iron man."[2] Indeed, he came to the county with the intention of mining the iron and acquired hundreds of acres of land for that purpose. He stayed and raised a family of 13 children, and the name Ballou remains as testimony to the impact he and they made.

Throughout the county, proper names are used with definite geographical locations, as in the following: Daniel's Gap, Phillip's Gap, Miller's Creek, Weaver's Ford, Henderson Hill, and Stanley Road, as well as Stanley Hollow. Often as not, the land so designated is part of an original land grant and at least one person of the name still lives on at least part of the land. The names of the roads most often reveal the name of the one who settled the land in the beginning and very likely started the road as he cleared the land for his home and then packed the soil with the repeated passing of his animals, an ox perhaps and a few cattle and a wooden sled bringing wood out of the mountain. A local resident revealed an interesting etymology for Jerd Branch Road: "It's named for Jordan Sullivan. You know there's a branch on up in the holler."

The earlier occupation of the land by Indians is acknowledged and is even today revealed in the discovery of arrowheads and other artifacts, and yet the names by which they knew the fields and streams have all but disappeared, and a newer and younger culture has given to the area its own designations derived from its own experiences. It may be that those early settlers, determined to conquer the land and be independent, wanted to use only their own designations. As they rejected names they had known in another land, so they rejected those of the native Indians. Also settlers with strong religious backgrounds hesitated

2 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

retaining any semblance of what they considered a pagan culture, and this attitude may well account in part for the absence of mellifluous Indian names.

But if the Indians did not leave their names on the land, their activities, especially their hunting, are revealed in the place-names that echo the past. A spot now called Todd was formerly known by two names, Elkland and Buffalo. Although the traditional image of the buffaloes includes the broad plains of the West, at one time they lived in this section and were hunted by Indians and later by whites. Now when one goes "up Buffalo" it is very likely he is pursuing a milder creature, mountain trout, or hog-fish, or sucker, or red eye (the common name for rock bass).

Other animals no longer in abundance have also left their prints on the land. Stag's Creek winds its way down a narrow hollow now domesticated with white frame homes, barns for the summer hay, and smaller buildings for grinding corn and curing tobacco or protecting the hogs, and even a few beehives for some sweetnin'. But the tall and weathered 96-year-old inhabitant of one house remembers the Indians and tells his tale of the beautiful 7'2" Indian woman buried on top of the ridge in an Indian cemetery, and of his dream that $60,000 is buried with her, and of his wife's horrified refusal that he dig into the grave to find the money. But he is still haunted by the dream, and his face has a different look as he contemplates that distant ridge called Johnasy Rock and that long forgotten moment from the past.

There are other animals than the stag, however; but strangely enough, they too are names of water sources in the area, mostly creeks. A creek in the mountain reaches is a flowing body of water three feet or more in width, approximately, until the water becomes a river; anything less than three feet is a branch. Travel brochures advertising the lures of the state frequently refer to these mountain attractions as *glistening mountain streams*, but *streams* do not flow in these hills; *creek* is the term used by the natives and put on the neat white signposts to tell the unknowing traveler that if he turns left over the bridge he will be "going up" Little Horse Creek, but if he continues straight ahead he will be on Big Horse Creek. The exact history of these two terms is lost, according to natives of the area; but when questioned about their genesis, they were quick to respond with several possibilities. Their logic is perhaps preferable to that of any outsider. The *Little* and *Big* simply serve to distinguish two of a kind, with the latter somewhat larger. Farther down the mountain the creeks come together to form the New River, an anomaly in itself for it is said to be one of

the oldest rivers in the world. The term serves to show man's proclivity for seeing his small piece of the universe from the vantage point of his own limited experience and perspective. The *Horse* perhaps suggests the wild horses that used to roam the area, or, as one man suggested, the power of the waters, especially when heavy rains raise them far above flood stage and they sweep down the mountains and rush heedlessly through the countrysides carrying with them debris and filth along with the evidences of the struggles of a lifetime. They do indeed seem to be living creatures running wild and destructive. Along with another Horse Creek, there are also Bridle Creek and Saddle Gap, the latter indicating appearance as well as association with the most common form of transportation in an age not far removed from the 1970's. Some folks say the three spots commemorate a traveler's fall from his stolen horse into this creek. Fearing he might be caught, he hurled the bridle in one direction and the saddle in another.

Other animals familiar in the area are also immortalized in the names for water. Beaver Creek, Bear Creek, and Fox Creek share honors with Dog Creek and Doe Branch. However, the land reveals somewhat greater variety in its terms that reflect more decisively activities and appearance. Big Buck Mountain and Little Buck Mountain are evidence again of two of a kind, whereas Rattlesnake Hollow, Rattlesnake Den, Possum Hollow and Raccoon Hollow all bear witness to the fauna of the region. The latter two also testify to the mountain man's devotion to hunting those two small animals which have provided many a family with its main source of sustenance and the smoking of which has produced a multiplicity of recipes for succulent meats. The hunt may yield no animal, but the designation of a spot high on a ridge as Lis'nin' Rock attests to the mountain man's delight in sitting and listening to the dogs bark, with an ear so finely attuned that he can distinguish each of his animals from all the others. It is not uncommon for this ritual to continue until sunup.

The hunt also clarifies the names of two other spots in the area—Skin Camp Creek and Meat Camp. Stories tell that in days past, when people were fewer and bears more plentiful, men killed bears in the area and "skinned 'em out" in the camp near this creek, after first trapping them in large pits. This activity is recalled today in the term Bear Pen. In like manner, Turkey Pen suggests the ingenious traps made for that wily bird still with us today but rapidly disappearing from the mountains.

Two unusually descriptive terms for spots on Big Horse Creek and Little Horse Creek, respectively, are Bear Wallow and Hog Wallow. Although they are now used to designate an extended area bordering

these creeks, they refer specifically to areas where bears and hogs came to wallow in the muddy shallows, returning again and again until they left their indelible mark on the land and in the speech of its people.

The hog is an important animal in the mountains, with hog-killing time a family event carefully determined by the old timers so that the weather will be cold enough to cure out the hams properly. Hog Rock up on Three Top recalls the time when men allowed their hogs to run loose on the mountains to eat the mast crop—acorns, nuts, wild grapes, and fox grapes—until they were rounded up in the fall. The animals bedded under the rock, and so the name.

Animals are by no means the only source of names reflecting appearance and activity. The Bluff and Big Peak and Little Peak, as well as Green Valley, Roaring Fork Creek, Big Ridge Church, Rocky Creek, Big Springs Mountain, and North Fork, Middle Fork, and South Fork of the New River all reveal with clarity their meanings. Cabin Creek derives its name from a lone log cabin up above Helton. Mouth of Piney and Mouth of Wilson suggest again the many water sources. One need not seek far for the etymology of Three Top with its three peaks clearly visible for miles. In similar manner The Fodder Stack, a peak on Three Top, resembles its namesake as does The Cow Face, another formation; and the notch-like rock cliffs on the Phoenix appropriately bear the name The Notches. One might assume Bald Mountain to have no vegetation, but the term *bald* refers only to the absence of timber. Balds on top of mountains are natural clearings, sometimes rocky but most often grassy. Evident in all these terms is the mountain man's literalness and his efforts to identify his surroundings in a straightforward simple fashion, selecting the most obvious and distinguishing characteristic of a spot.

Areas often retain designations that suggest another time and other occupations. On the big curve in the road between Bina and Warrensville, there where the New River bends too and provides water for "the Plant," is a small sign post pointing up the hollow—Pounding Mill Road. Pounding Mill Branch joins Healing Springs Branch about two miles back up in the hollow and both of them flow into the New River just below the little sign. The power generated by the flow of water once operated a pounding mill beside the branch. Now that same water supply helps provide the Sprague Electric Company with the clean water required for the production of dry electronic capacitors used in manufacturing television sets and other electrical equipment.[3] The

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 239.

name on the small sign bears witness to that other time and that other important function of water power once so essential to those who lived within its influence.

Two other names that echo another time are Keiger Switch /ˈke gər/ and Canthook, both close to the railroad bed. During the summer of 1977 the rails and ties were removed. No longer will the small train make its weekly Tuesday run or bring visitors from Abingdon, Virginia, in the fall to see the blaze of color in the mountains. Once it was advantageous for men to beat down the wilderness and lay the rails to get to the timber covering the ridges, and villages grew up with the lumber business the primary emphasis; but no more. Keiger was the name of one of the foremen on that railroad; and Canthook is the name of the hooked instrument used to roll logs. The latter spot is near a former logging place between Green Cove and Creek Junction.

Place-names in other instances relate more specifically to the farmer and his animals. Buckeye Community derives its name from the timber of the same name, and one native suggests the area may have been so designated in order that farmers would keep their cattle away, because the nut of the buckeye kills cattle. A similar situation is evident in Poison Branch, so named because of the wild parsnip—also poisonous to cattle—that grew along its banks. Once again the mountain man's economy of speech impresses the outsider.

There are some terms the very lack of whose sources intrigues and sometimes eludes the one who would identify and define them and place them into a neat category with others of their kind. The many names for Mount Jefferson illustrate this type. This name, by which it now stands defined on the signs that point their white arrows toward the park and the mountain and by which children in geography classes in other states learn to label it, is of recent vintage—the 1950's. Formerly it was known as Mulatto Mountain, Nigger Mountain, and Negro Mountain; and some even suggest it is one with Paddy Mountain. Any effort to learn the ultimate source of the names leads invariably to disagreement if more than one native is present. Some contend the name refers to the dusky color of the mountain, suggested, too, by its place as part of the Blue Ridge Mountains and indeed its proximity to that particular part designated the Smokies. Others say the name derives from the large black rock—gneissoid granite—on its top.[4] Others tell of the days when Negro slaves fled into the mountain reaches and no one ever found them. There has never been a large black population in Ashe County, but the mountains may well have served as a

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

temporary refuge for slaves making their way to safer ground. There is evidence to suggest that they did not choose to stay in the area. The census in 1970 lists only 1.1 percent non-whites in the entire county.[5]

The term Paddy Mountain is even more elusive. An early state grant, dated March 3, 1779, refers to the west line of the designated land running along the base of Paddy's Nobb, now Mountain. The first settlers had arrived in the area only eight years before from Montgomery County, Virginia, but their names offer no clues nor did they leave any evidence that explains the mystery of the name they gave to the big mountain.[6]

If the big mountains—Jefferson-Nigger-Mulatto-Negro and Paddy—dominating the landscape of the county remain enigmas, other place-names readily suggest their sources. Men have often commented on the winds in certain places. Indeed, the county is aptly called the air-conditioned county, for even on the hottest day in August one need only step into the shade and "set a spell" to feel the breeze. There are hollows that seem especially designed as natural draws that pull the air through them. But Zephyrus' gentleness is scarcely recalled in names given to spots in the northern part of the county. The suggestion of violence is rather what one finds—The Hurricane /ˈhær ɪ ken/ lives up to its name, as does the Hurricane Switch, the spot where the railroad crossed the road. There is also The Windfall, Big and Little, where the wind truly falls down through the swag. The mountains and hollows give an unusual quality to these big winds, making them both visible and audible. First the leaves, then the trees, and finally the entire forest reveal their presence. Stranger still is the sound: first, barely a noise in the distance; then, a rumble; and finally, the sound as of a train. Whindlin' Ridge is the name men chose for one such high spot where the winds go whining and whindlin' across its peaks. Wind damage to the forests is often extensive; radical tree surgery results. Such winds frequently precede heavy rains, a situation aptly expressed in a local saying: "When you see the underside of the leaves, you can know it's gonna rain."

Other place-names reveal in a similar fashion the reason for their selection. Far back in the mountains one finds an area with perhaps the longest name in the county—Still House Branch Hollow. The operation of the still is no longer the economic necessity that it once was, when whiskey was easier and more profitable to transport to market than

5 *Ibid.*, p. 55. In 1850, there were 595 slaves and 86 free blacks in a population of 8,777.
6 *Ibid.*, p. 250.

corn. If there is now a still in the hollow, no one tells.

Roundabout Creek and Community might well have been given to many of the hollows where the houses, built with no overall community planning, are all roundabout the base of the mountain where water is available without the necessity for drilling a well. The importance of water can scarcely be overemphasized. Its medicinal qualities are suggested in not one but two Healing Springs. Old timers vouch for the effectiveness of bathing affected parts with the water or drinking it. Even today visitors to the area coming to eat at Shatley Springs Restaurant bring a variety of containers and fill them with water from the Springs.

Other spots reveal this same sense of a unique identity. Ore Knob has been mined recently of its copper ore and, in fact, some gold[7]; but just as in other places in these mountains, the minerals remain, but the cost of extracting them is prohibitive. The Ripshin is one of the wildest spots in the region, with briars and filth that tear a man's shins unless he wears boots or leggings or otherwise protects them. Three Konners, just over the line in Virginia, is not among the place-names of the county and yet it is closely related. One must drive far back in the Pon' (Pond) Mountain on a dirt road, Gate Road, that seemingly ends where a gate crosses it, but if one goes beyond the gate to the top of the ridge, he can see the corners of three states—Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina—and in these states four counties—Grayson, Johnson, Washington, and Ashe.

Washington is one of the few place-names of national or international fame, suggesting something of the isolation of the section. Other than Jefferson and West Jefferson, there is one other that offers interesting insight. The curve in the road from Warrensville to Lansing as it crosses the railroad tracks just above the river is known now as Bina and has been so called since World War II. Some of the original settlers from Germany had wanted, as do most men, to have a bit of home about them and long before had called the place Berlin, little suspecting the later connotations that would erase it completely from the Ashe County map. Apparently those in another part of the county felt no compunction about retaining the name of another town in Germany, Dresden. It is interesting to speculate whether the name perhaps derived not from the town *per se* but from the designation on the bottom of someone's precious heirloom china. Another place-name suggesting this same national heritage occurs in a 1916 list of post offices—Rhine. It

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7 *Ibid.*, p. 228.

too has passed away. Smethport, a small town between West Jefferson and Warrensville, recalls more of the history of its people. As these settlers came down from Pennsylvania, so too did this name, that of the town from which a tanning extract plant was moved here.[8]

National events touched them scarcely less than did literary terms. Although there are among names for their churches the Biblical Ebenezer, Bethel, and Mt. Zion, only the little dot on the map labeled Othello suggests a founder influenced by books. One might include also the name of the dominating mountain south of Lansing, the Phoenix /finIk/ named for the ship that brought the Ellers and others to this country from Germany.[9] The original suggestion of the legendary bird existing alone and rising full grown from the ashes of its own destruction is unknown by most of the people in its shadow. But watching morning after morning as the mountain rises out of the mist, one wonders if perhaps some settler long ago saw it thus and thought of the legend.

The flora of the region finds full expression in selected names. There is the small shiny dark-green leaf covering the ground, teaberry, chewed for its delightful flavor and also used for making tea, that gives its name to a road and a hollow. There are the trees that used to cover the entire Appalachian range but were wiped out in the blight beginning just after the turn of the century—the chestnuts. The only evidences of their existence are, first, the stories men tell, "When I was a boy. . ."; second, the tall gray tree skeletons that one sees dotted among the myriad greens of the mountains; and third, the place-names such as Chestnut Hill. Greenwood suggests those myriad greens, but other names identify specific trees, as evidenced in the communities of Brownwood, "a scrubby, real hard timber"; Beadwood, a tree that has "nut-like growths that look like beads"; Ironwood, a wood as hard as "arn"; Pine Hill; The Flatwoods; Apple Grove; Hemlock; The Buckeye; Tamarack, the substance that oozes from the lashhorn tree and is chewed like gum; and Haw Orchard, named for the haw, a little black fruit not as big as a cherry but similar to it and, as one native said, "not really useful."

Other trees and crops find expression in Mulberry Creek, Tater Hill, and Cranberry Creek, though the latter probably derives its name from the Cranberry granite in the region. Sugar Tree Branch runs through an area where sugar maples were tapped for their sap, the only source of

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8 William S. Powell, *The North Carolina Gazeteer* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 458.

9 Fletcher, pp. 64-65.

sugar for many families. Big Laurel Creek, Laurel Springs, and Laurel Knob Gap are designations that might be used of any area in Ashe County. An outsider might, however, find himself somewhat bewildered as, gazing at the large-leafed plant known generally as rhododendron, he finds there is no such plant for the mountain man. Rhododendron is mountain laurel, and what some might call laurel is his ivy. And there is for him no changing of terms.

Interestingly enough, the laurel is the only flower that is recorded among all the many place-names in the county. To hear the highlander speak of laurel today convinces one that the hardy tenacious shrub that grows sometimes 35 feet high is looked upon most often by the native as "filth" that must be grubbed out so that the land can be planted with a productive crop. Very likely this name reflects, as do so many others, the harshness of the land. The men who settled here and left their mark were practical men. There are no Eldorados here.

A rose by any other name may, indeed, smell as sweet, but in the county of Ashe, far in the northwest corner of North Carolina, the place-names men chose to identify and define the land that succored them remain today to bear witness to their interests, their concerns, their activities, their loves. They were men often isolated but with every man's urge to know his surroundings by giving them names—the name of a daughter, perhaps, as in Amy Post Office, or a neighbor at the foot of the branch, or a tree or a flower or a fruit or an animal or an event or a memory. His choices indicate he was a man close to nature and close to people, who struggled and who survived in a land sometimes friendly and sometimes hostile, but his own. And he made it his own at least in part by his names on the land.

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