

TRAVELOGUE THROUGH HISTORY THE MENDOTA TRAIL

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The City of Bristol, Virginia is planning to develop a "rails-to-trails" hiking and horse back riding path on the right-of-way of the old rail road track that ran from the depot in Bristol to the Scott / Washington County line west of Mendota. It is hoped that the trail will eventually be completed all the way to Maces Springs in Scott County.

The purpose of this article is to provide a humanizing background to the corridor followed by the trail, with the hope that its traveller will take the opportunity to reflect upon the people who lived and died there in the days of its glory, as he leisurely retraces their foot steps. It is, after all" the human experience that defines a place.

Bristol is a creation of the States Rights view of government, and of the State line between Virginia and Tennessee. In the decades before the Civil War the Sovereign States granted charters to corporations, which could operate within their borders. Rarely did a corporation's operations cross a state line. So, when technology progressed to the point that a railroad was needed down the Great Valley of Virginia, which really runs between the Appalachian Mountains and the Alleghenies all the way from New England to Alabama, the State of Virginia chartered the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad that would run down the Valley only to the state line with Tennessee. The State of Tennessee chartered a different corporation, the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad that met the Virginia railroad at the state line in the year 1856. This necessitated a depot and a railroad yard where the trains of one railroad could be switched to the engines and crew of the other. The railroad and its crews needed the services of a town, and Bristol came into existence.

After the Civil War Confederate General John Daniel Imboden and "General" Rufus Ayers sought to make their fortunes by developing the coal and iron deposits in Wise County. The first step in the process was to build a railroad from the Bristol depot to what is now Appalachia, Virginia. Under the name Bristol Coal and Iron Company Narrow Gauge Railroad right-of-way only was prepared from the Bristol Depot to the Holston River south of Mendota. Lacking the capital to either lay track or to build a bridge across the North Fork of the Holston River, Ayers and Imboden recruited northern capitalists who formed the South Atlantic and Ohio Railroad Company and bought out the Narrow Gauge Railroad Company. By 1891 they had completed the standard gauge S. A. & O to Appalachia. In 1910 the S. A. & O. changed its name to the Virginia and Southwestern Railroad, and it was later bought out by the Southern Railroad.

Three types of trains operated on this line, local freights that stopped at every depot on the line, through coal trains, and the passenger train -the Lonesome Pine Special. There were actually two Lonesome Pine Specials, with one running west and one returning east to Bristol on the same day. The Lonesome Pine Special departed the Bristol Depot early in the morning, and stopped at all the stations between there and Appalachia, where it exchanged passengers with the Louisville and Nashville Railroad at their depot. It then made a run to St. Charles. The next day it ran the reverse route. The L&N provided connections with the Midwest via Corbin, Kentucky.

In 1972 regular service was discontinued on the section of the line between Moccasin Gap and Bristol. That segment was sold to the Southwest Virginia Scenic Railroad, which briefly ran excursions between Hiltons and Maces Springs. This venture failed, and the tracks were pulled up.

The History and The People

The hiking trail will begin near where the railroad right-of-way crosses 1-81 north of the Bristol Depot. The route of 1-81 at this point is that of the first formal road constructed into the region, the Island Road. Built in November 1761 by militiamen under the command of Major Andrew Lewis, it carried the Virginia Militia commanded by Col. William Byrd III from Fort Chiswell to the Long Island on the Holston at present Kingsport. The circumstances were that the Cherokee had laid siege to the South Carolina Militia in Fort Loudon at the Junction of the Little Tennessee with the Tennessee River just to the southeast of present Knoxville, Tennessee. The Virginia Militia built Fort Robinson at Long Island, and wintered there, leaving the South Carolina Militia to be massacred by the Cherokee. With nothing left to accomplish, Byrd returned in the Spring to Williamsburg via the road he had built.

The trail begins its leisurely ascent up the southern face of Walker's Mountain. It takes only a climb of 300 feet to gain the top. It seems contrary to common expectations, but Bristol is at the same elevation as the destination of the railroad in Appalachia. The railroaders put a depot here at the top of their conquered mountain, and in pride named it "Mountain". At some later date the name was changed to Haskell Station. It is the highest point on the line. A mile to the north the trail crosses the Reedy Creek Road. This ancient trail follows the crest of Walker's Mountain along its length from Abingdon to Three Springs, at the Tennessee line, where it drops off into the head of Reedy Creek, which it follows as the old Indian "Great Warrior's Path" to Kingsport. It was of equal significance to the Island Road as an avenue of immigration used by the pioneers.

Let us get to know some of the old inhabitants of the region we are passing through. After all, it is their country, and not ours. Their Spirits still lurk here. A description of a few will give flavor and understanding to the larger community. To the west down the Reedy Creek road during the era of the American Revolution, at Three Springs, lived a land speculator named Cornelius Carmack. The name had first come from McCormack, and then to McCarmack, before settling in as Carmack. He owned most of the land extending from the top of the plateau at

Three Springs down Steele Creek at Bristol, Reedy Creek into Tennessee, Cove Creek and Abram's Creek to the north. He had a daughter named Susanah, who was nicknamed Sukie. We will meet her again.

Passing on down Haskell Branch a mile and a half further, high on the side of the hill to the northeast in an unmarked grave in the cemetery there, lies James A. Cross. He lived his life no more than a mile from here. He got his leg cut off in a saw mill accident just before the Civil War. Unable to hike, he joined the local McCausland's Cavalry. This unit was with the Confederate forces under General "Grumble" Jones, also of Washington County, at the Battle of Piedmont, when Virginia lost the Shenandoah Valley to the Yankee hoards for the last time. The unit fought on through the siege of Petersburg and on to Appomattox. While Cross was away honorably fighting in the army, local unionist "night riders" came and burned his barn, condemning his family to poverty, if not near starvation.

Round the bend to the right, and you are in Rich Valley. Because its waters drain to the North Fork of the Holston to its north, it is technically part of that valley, but folks consider it a separate one, and call it Rich Valley, as opposed to the main North Fork Valley, which is called Poor Valley. The creek here is Abram's Creek, which has two branches. The two branches come together just to the south east, and go over Abram's Falls, as lovely a spot as there is anywhere hereabouts. The head spring of the southwest branch of Abram's Creek was once called Abram's Spring, named after Abraham Fulkerson. His brother, James, lived at the head of the northeast branch. They were Dutch Huguenots, and James especially was a well to do land speculator and an officer in the Holston Militia during the Revolutionary War period. He functioned as a go-between between the ruling local Scots-Irish community of the Valley of the South Fork of the Holston, and the sizable community of Germans who occupied most of Rich and Poor Valleys.

In the early days of the railroad, there was a spur that ran from the main line to Rock Station at Lime Hill to the southwest. Several sand and limestone quarries were worked here, and there was a small company town complete with a commissary and a company doctor. The doctor had married James A. Cross's daughter. The southwest branch of Abram's Creek is now called Rock Station Creek. The limestone quarried here was hauled by the Virginia and Southwestern to the main line at Bristol, where the Norfolk and Western Railroad took it a mile or so to the Barytes Plant which was located in the northeastern section of town. The community of Benhams was a creation of the intersection of the railroad with the Rich Valley Road. The railroad depot was named after John Benham, who built the first fort in the North Fork of the Holston sometime before 1769, between Pine Grove and Mendota. Like most of the other settlers on the North Fork, Benham was a German immigrant. He was a long hunter, and the developer of the Benham Apple. His wife was Mary Hobbs, the sister of Vincent Hobbs, Jr., the slayer of Chief Bob Benge, of the Chickamauga Cherokee.

The community of Benhams grew with the coming of the railroad, and had a school, several churches, and a Masonic Lodge. It was to have become the southern terminus of the Southwest Virginia Scenic Railroad.

Pressing on from Benhams, the traveler heads into hard scrabble country. It was the last part of this region to have been settled, and the first to have been abandoned. Its peak population occurred between the Civil War and the Great Depression. Making a living was so hard here that most of the local families had relatives that sought escape from the drudgery and poverty this land provided, and got jobs on the railroad when it came through. When the center of operations of the railroad shifted from Bristol to Appalachia, these people moved with their jobs. For this reason there is a familial connection between the country you are passing through and the Appalachia -Big Stone Gap area. It may be hard to envision it, but the land you now see as being wooded was cultivated when the railroad was built. The hillsides were pastures, and the bottoms were all plowed. The population density was much more than you see today. Each hollow or hill top was identified with a specific surname of the people that lived there. For instance, State Route 799 passes under the trestle just north of Benhams, and goes to Gum Hill. Gum Hill is synonymous with the Leonard family. They were also of German origins.

A common need in small closed communities where there were frequently several people with the same name was the practice of assigning nicknames to them so that they could be distinguished. The pattern followed with the three Bob Leonards that were contemporaries in this neighborhood about a hundred years ago is illustrative. The eldest was considered to have seniority on that name, so he was simply referred to as "Bob Leonard". The next in line had a marvelous self-taught capacity to read a book down both pages at the same time, but he did have troubles counting. He would count "forty eight, forty nine, forty ten, forty eleven", and could count no further. He was known as 'Forty Eleven Bob Leonard'. The last of this trio was a singing teacher. He would go from community to community and teach the shaped note singing method to all who would pay the tuition.

Nothing defines the Appalachian settlers better than this 'hexachord' system. It is of ancient European origins, and divides the modern eight note scale into just six notes. These notes are identified by specific shapes, such as diamonds, circles, and squares. The student memorizes the pitch assigned to each shape, and when he sees it on a music staff he can reproduce it without having to be able to further read music. There are no sharps or flats in this scale. The sounds produced by this style of singing are distinctive, and the one room churches of the Appalachians resonated with hymns sung in hexachord. The last of the three Bob Leonards was known as "Singing Bob Leonard".

To the east of the railroad tracks in the next hollow on Little Wolf Run were the Dyes and Vanhooks. They were descended from Dutch Huguenots, and the Dyes, at least, were abolitionists. Like a number of families who settled in the hard scrabble country between Rich and Poor Valleys, they had lived in Elk Garden in Russell County before politics forced them to move from that proslavery locale about a decade before the country finally erupted into the Civil War. Fayette Vanhook lived across the road from Creed Fulton Dye. Fayette died during wheat cutting time, and his body split open before they could get him into the ground. His ghost haunted the lane leading from his house to Creed Dyes.

Faced with making a living amongst these steep hill sides and gummy clay bottoms, the settlers made jokes about it. The Dyes named the hollow where they lived "Gimlet Hollow", A gimlet was a hand auger made from a bit and a wooden handle hafted perpendicularly to the bit. The story was that the hollow was so confined that you had to lie on your back at noon and bore a hole in the sky in order to see the sun.

During the Civil War, Creed Fulton Dye was arrested and tried for being in the band of 'night riders' that had burned down the barn of James A. Cross. The Confederate military judge asked Dye if he were named after The Rev. Creed Fulton, the founder of Emory and Henry College. Dye correctly said that he was, whereupon the judge released him, saying that, "Well, young man, he was my friend, and you shall never be harmed as long as you are in my care." The Crosses remained convinced that he was guilty. However, Creed's brother, Raymond Edmond Dye did enlist in the Union army. He stole an officer's pass book, and forged a leave pass for himself, and was home on Little Wolf Run when he heard of Lee's invasion of the North in the summer of 1863. Dye left home to join his unit, and was never heard of again.

Just past the Gum Hill trestle in the bottom to the right was the Lone Star School. Their playground is grown in now, but once it resounded with the laughter of children from the hills around.

Follow the trail into the head of the Gorge down Wolf Run and you drop into the roughest stretch of the trail. The loss in elevation between Lone Star and the bottom of the Gorge at Phillips is 326 feet in only about two miles. Remember that these hillsides were farmed a hundred years ago. The railroad right-of-way was lined with snake fences made of cedar rails - cedar because of its relative rot resistance. People who eked out a living on such hillsides as these would remark about the 'old farmer' who was found dusting himself off at the bottom of one of these hills, and who said, "This is the third time today I have fallen out of my garden. I have had enough, and I am going to the house!"

The Gorge community was served by Leonard's Station. This establishment was a combination railroad depot, post office, and general store. It was run by a Leonard from Gum Hill, and by his wife, Martha, who was a daughter of Creed Fulton Dye. This marriage served to unite the clans on either side of the Gorge.

At Phillips was a water tank, at the foot of which lived one of several Dan Kaylors. There was a siding here, where in the early days the railroad kept a pusher engine stationed. The run up the Gorge to Lone Star was the steepest grade between Appalachia and Bristol, and the coal trains could not make it up without the aid of a second engine which would attach to their rear and push them up to Benhams. George H. Tittsworth was raised in Phillips and at Lime Hill, and was a brakeman on the pusher. He had married Minnie Belle Dye, another daughter of Creed. Minnie quickly fled the life of hard scrabble farming to be the wife of a cash waged railroader. George later told of the struggles to keep up steam sufficient to push the trains up the Gorge. He would jump off of the struggling engines and snatch up those cedar fence rails

and throw them into the fire box. Soon there were no more snake fences in the Gorge. Later, George was brakeman on the Lonesome Pine Special.

George's stepfather was Joe Leonard. Joe was a Confederate veteran, and after the war he never wore anything but gray suits. He never allowed anything blue to be in his house - not only no blue clothing, but no blue china, no blue carpets, no blue pictures - no blue anything. It was not just that the color blue was forbidden, but as far as he was concerned, it did not exist. He taught George that "BlackRepublican" was one word.

Another man who lived at Phillips was Frank Stratton. One day he saw a steam engine begin to run away down-hill at Phillips, and he quickly placed his two horse hay rake that he was using up under the engine's wheels, and till this day -long after his death, he is known as "Hay Rake Stratton".

At Phillips, Abrams Creek, after its cascade over Abram's Falls, joins Wolf Run, and just below that Little Wolf Run joins in also, just in time for the waters to join the North Fork of the Holston. The Cherokee considered the Holston River to have been the head waters of the Tennessee River, and they called the combined Holston -Tennessee River the Hogehegee or the Kallamako. Early long hunters called it the Indian River. Daniel Boone named it the Cherokee River, and it is labeled as such on some early maps. Sometime before 1748 Steven Holston built his cabin at the head spring of the Middle Fork of the river that was later to bear his name, which is an anglicization of the German Holstein.

The North Fork was especially a favorite of the long hunters. Buffalo particularly liked the combination of river bottoms and easy access to Clinch Mountain. The game was largely gone by the time of the Revolutionary War, and its settlers soon moved on to the deep hollows that penetrated deep into Black Mountain, on the Kentucky border. Across the river from the mouth of Abram's Creek is the Community of Mendota, which served the intersection of the railroad and the Poor Valley Road. Named after the near circular bend in the river just to the west of town, which was named Mendota by the Cherokee, it was known as Kinderhook before the railroad placed the depot there. Mendota was home to the Hamilton Academy, which was a respected private school a century ago. People living as far away as Bristol would place their children on the Lonesome Pine Special to get them to school, and the train running the reverse route would bring them home in the evenings. Up the river from here a couple of miles by Swinging Bridge Road was where John Benham had his fort. He lived among his in-laws, the Hobbs family.

Continuing on down the trail to the west one soon finds oneself deep in the country that was embroiled in the April 1794 raid of Chief Bob Benge of the Chickamauga Cherokee against the Livingstons. Just across the Scott County line, coming in from the south, is the mouth of Livingston's Creek. The Livingston home was located there. On this side of the River was the farm of Edward Callahan, who was a long hunter, and for whom Callahan Creek which enters the Powell River at Appalachia, was named. It is appropriate that this section of Holston Valley that

developed such close ties with Appalachia in the late nineteenth century began its relationship in the mid eighteenth. Bengé carried off some of the Livingston women, including Sukie Carmack Livingston, a bride of only a few weeks, and a slave of Edward Callaham. On his way out of the North Fork of the Holston, Bengé unsuccessfully stalked Abraham Fulkerson at Hiltons, as Abraham was building a new home after his move from Abraham's Creek in Rich Valley. The raid ended between Appalachia and Norton when Vincent Hobbs, Jr. , a brother-in-law of John Benham, killed Bengé.

When the trail ends at Maces Spring, one will be in front of the A. P. Carter store, which is now a museum dedicated to that famous seminal family of country music. Next to the store is "The Carter Fold", where the Carters still perform their traditional music for the public. This closes the circle for the traveller, as the Carters began their famous careers in Bristol, just as the traveller began his journey down the Mendota Trail.

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