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The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

Forests Forever: Rabun's Economic Dependence on Trees

As the forest provided sustenance for the Native Americans who preceded white settlers, so Rabun's history has also been directed by economic decisions based on our surrounding forested mountains and river valleys. From the jobs supplied by logging and sawmills to the spending power of visitors who still come to admire our scenic vistas, the economic value of trees has shaped our past.



The Neville family hauls a huge chestnut log with a team of oxen, circa 1920. Chestnut blight killed the entire species in the Appalachians by the 1950s.

Rabun's virgin timber reserves were first opened to outside economic interests during the completion of the Tallulah Falls Railroad between 1882 and 1907. Two of the first businessmen to take advantage of this new market entered the county just prior to the railroad, purchasing a large number of poplar trees at 25 to 75 cents per tree. Years later the men returned to sell their poplars for as much as ten dollars per tree. Other "timber barons" followed, acquiring thousands of acres of land from local subsistence

farmers who were unaccustomed to dealing in cash and who had little knowledge of the fair value of their timber. As a result, many sold their farm woodlands for as little as one dollar an acre. The new owners quickly moved in to clear-cut large tracts of land before moving on to new locations.

The families who sold their farms also moved on, creating an out-migration that not only decimated small agricultural settlements, but also shifted population centers away from the open

country and into towns. Census reports reveal the devastating statistics behind these demographics: between 1900 and 1910, the county lost 211 farms and approximately forty percent of its farm acreage. And while the county lost eleven percent of its population during the same period, Clayton's population rose approximately sixty-three percent.

Despite the damage done by the logging industry to Rabun's mountains and population, it nevertheless had a stabilizing effect on

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the local economy when, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the county was home to at least ten lumber companies and many more sawmills. A few examples of the employment and economic benefits associated with lumber companies during this time include the following:

- By 1927, local men found employment helping to harvest lumber and make the poles and crossties that filled hundreds of railroad cars;
- In 1934, the Taylor-Colquitt Company paid \$13,000 to the people of Rabun for the manufacture of cross ties;
- In 1941, the Appalachian Forest Products mill employed 250 men and supported a monthly payroll of \$20,000;
- By the mid-1950s, the W.R. Ritter Lumber Company employed about one hundred men in its logging and sawmill business in Mountain City.

The timber harvested in Rabun was used by such diverse clients as the automobile industry, the Singer Sewing Machine Company, and the U.S. Military. Rabun lumber even found its way to Europe where it was used in the manufacture of furniture. In addition, the tannic acid extracted from the bark of chestnut and hemlock trees was used for tanning leather.

The local forests also supported one of Rabun's most enduring industries, tourism, whose foundation can in part be traced to the Weeks Act of 1911. This landmark piece of legislation gave the relatively new U.S. Forest Service authority to purchase large tracts of land east of the Mississippi River, the goal of which was to protect the watersheds of navigable streams from logging entrepreneurs who some in Congress viewed as "crooks and rascals" intent on destroying vast acres of forest.

The actual process of acquiring land under the Weeks Act would take years, as there were many obstacles. In some cases, Forest Service agents had to negotiate with well-connected and educated businessmen like Andrew and Nathan Gennett whose Gennett Lumber Company extended across North Georgia and into the western sections of North and South Carolina. Fortunately for all of North Georgia, the large parcels of land that were eventually purchased from the Gennetts form the nucleus of the Chattahoochee National Forest today. The lumber companies were happy to sell after they had removed all value from the land.

Forest Service agents also had to deal with local landowners, and this too proved difficult. Even with surveys completed and purchase prices generally set at between five dollars and seven dollars an acre (although there were reports of fifty cents per acre),



Note the size of the logs at a sawmill in the Germany Community around 1910. During this period, there were dozens of sawmills in Rabun.

agents were often frustrated by mountaineers who had become more sophisticated and cynical negotiators following their previous dealings with logging companies. In one telling case, an agent lamented the "time and patience" it took for him to deal with the "wavering" of landowners in Hiawassee. Further

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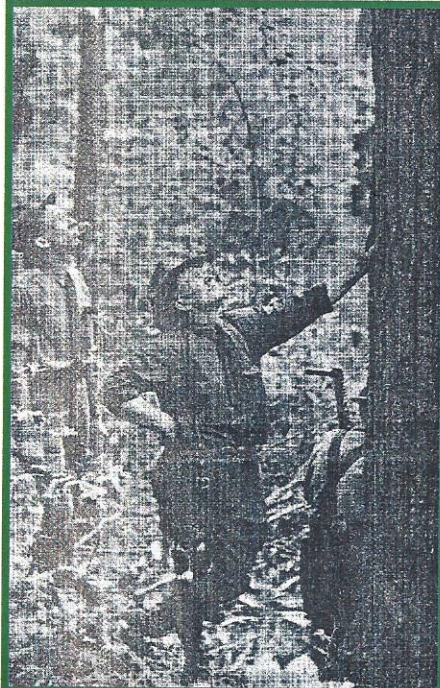
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complications arose when landowners across the region, including Rabun, did not know the exact boundaries of their properties, relying instead upon tree lines and other natural markers that had been altered or that no longer existed. This at times led to multiple parties claiming rights to overlapping tracts of land.

Equally frustrating, many of the properties which Forest Service agents were attempting to purchase had incomplete or missing titles. In Rabun, the situation was so bad that for several years a special federal court was established in Clayton to oversee the condemnation process that was needed before good titles could be approved and sales completed. The reason for this state of affairs was easy to understand but difficult to correct. Throughout the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for family members and neighbors in the county to informally sell or trade land, instead of documenting their transactions at the county courthouse. To correct the problem and obtain clear titles, the Weeks Act required federal authorities to locate all parties who might have an interest in or claim to the properties in question. In total, over six thousand names covering six generations were compiled for consideration.

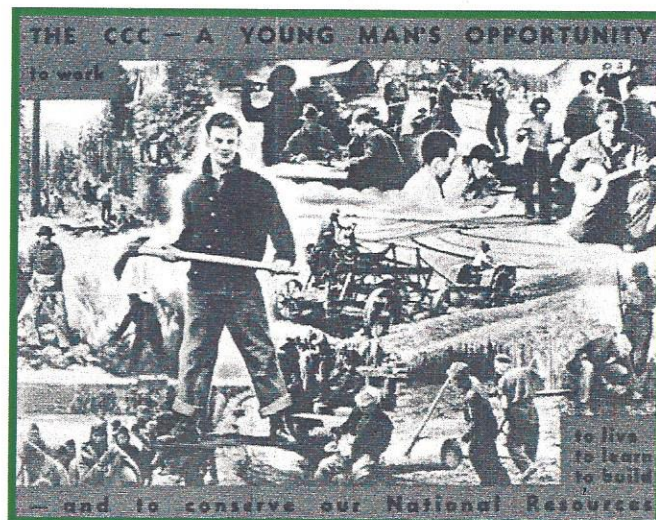
Even with good titles in hand the U.S. Government faced a final problem: the impact that nontaxable Forest Service land would have on the tax base of local governments. To address this problem, the Weeks Act provided paid compensation to counties in lieu of the property taxes that would otherwise have been collected. These payments continue today, with Rabun receiving \$266,565 from the Department of Interior during fiscal year 2015 for the percentage of its nontaxable land (63 percent) owned and managed by the Forest Service.

Roscoe Nicholson (1887-1959)
His career spanned from 1913-1952. Photo circa 1940



Who knew the economics of forestry could be so complicated? Most likely, not Rabun native Roscoe Nicholson, who as Georgia's first forest ranger spent his career maintaining a singular focus on the best interests of the local mountains and streams for which he was responsible. "Ranger Nick," as he was called, initially was hired by the Forest Service to negotiate the purchase of land on what today is the Chattooga River Ranger District. Later, he also proved adept at persuading locals to follow forest management policies aimed at not only ensuring a sustainable supply of timber but also protecting recreational pursuits.

Even later during the Great Depression, Ranger Nick supervised the men at Rabun's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps as they reforested cutover mountain ridges with seedlings and made other improvements to 37,000 acres of timber



land. Also thanks to Ranger Nick and the CCC, by 1955 the Forest Service had spent the equivalent of about one million dollars on building county roads and bridges. Today, much of the work directed by Ranger Nick continues to support the interests of locals and tourists alike. *(continued on page 4)*

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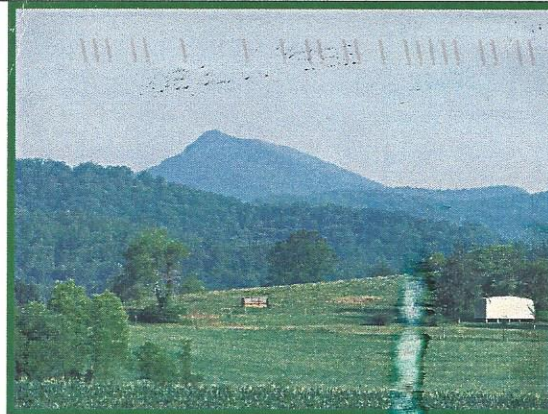


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- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00 and on Wednesdays from 12:30 until 4:30.
- Group tours by appointment



Over a century since the economic value of Rabun's old-growth forests was first realized, the largely new-growth forests which surround us are no less valuable. This is reflected not only in the monetary value of timber but also:

- healthy people (100 trees remove 53 tons of carbon dioxide and 430 pounds of other air pollutants per year);
- a healthy environment (100 mature trees catch about 139,000 gallons of rain-water per year);
- prosperous businesses (consumers shop more frequently and longer in tree-lined commercial areas); and
- higher property values (each large front yard ~~tree~~ adds to a home's sale price).

Given Rabun's wealth of trees, these twenty-first century economics bode well for the county's future.