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Title of Work: "A Vanishing Culture"

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A VANISHING CULTURE

Hazel Creek was a community near Fontana Lake in Swain County, North Carolina. It hosted many small farms, the Ritter Lumber Company, and copper mines. The town of Proctor developed beside the creek.

Moses Proctor settled this remote region in 1820. He and his wife, Patience, followed a Cherokee trail from Cades Cove in Tennessee to the Smokey Mountains. The journey was dangerous. They encountered rattlesnakes, bears, and other wild animals. They camped beside a creek which was a tributary of the Tennessee River.

Hazelnut shrubs lined the banks of the creek. The leaves varied from orange to brick-red or purplish red. Moses named the stream *Hazel Creek*. A Cherokee woman taught Patience to cook hazelnut soup. The Indian men helped Moses to build a log cabin on Possum Hollow overlooking the mountain stream.

Soon others moved into the high country. Since Moses was the first to enter the area, the settlement was named *Proctor, North Carolina*. A cemetery was located at Possum Hollow near the mouth of Hazel Creek. Many of my ancestors were buried there.

My relatives were forced to move from Hazel Creek in 1943. The Tennessee Valley Authority built Fontana Dam. The government took the rich farmland and paid only \$6.00 per acre for the land. The purpose of the TVA was to control flooding in the Southeast and to bring electricity to the mountains. President Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented the New Deal, as part of the World War II effort. These works programs provided jobs for many people struggling to recover from the Great Depression.

More than 1,000 graves were moved to construct Fontana Lake and the dam. Each year from April until October, thousands of people return to Proctor and decorate the graves of their loved ones. They either take a barge across Fontana Lake, or walk miles over a wilderness trail where the town stood. When folks get off the boat, they climb a hill, and trudge over the land of their ancestors. Each fall the TVA draws down the water. You can see the foundations of houses, barns, cribs, and a school destroyed to build the dam.

A decoration service is held at the cemetery. People sing hymns and a pastor delivers a message. After the ceremony, they hold dinner-on-the-grounds. You savor mountain food like chicken-and-dumplings, black walnut cake, crackling bread, fresh vegetables, gallons of sweet tea, and other mouth-watering desserts. It's a time of fellowship, a spiritual experience, and reminiscing about a vanishing culture.

Many of my ancestors crossed the rugged mountains in the 1800s to settle this wilderness. They carved homesteads and farmed the land. The pilgrims built a church and the community activities revolved around this building. During the week, it served as a one-room school.

The mountaineers were hard-working and self-sufficient. They had many skills including blacksmithing, broom making, hunting, fishing, knitting, weaving, and gardening. My great-great-grandfather killed 103 bears, but never wasted any meat. Granny had a vegetable garden, canned the food, and stored apples in the cellar. An ice-cold spring kept the milk and butter cold.

To purchase staples, my family traveled to Proctor. Ritter Lumber Company ran a sawmill in the 1940s. At one time, Proctor on Hazel Creek, had four country stores. About 1,000 people lived in the community. A Civilian Conservation Corps camp was located nearby. The little town was flooded when the TVA built Fontana Dam in 1943.

I recall a relative telling about the construction of the dam. "It was a sad day when we learned about the dam," said my aunt. "We had no choice but to move." The family relocated to Sylva, North Carolina.

Although Proctor on Hazel Creek is only a memory, I feel it is important to help preserve my heritage. The mountain culture is vanishing like the wind twirling brittle leaves across the parched earth.

Finally, I came across a recipe that my granny wrote on a brown paper sack. It's old-time food that she often made for family reunions.

Country Fried Ham & Red-Eye Gravy

Cut ham so that slices are about ¼ inch-thick and place in cold skillet. Cook over medium heat until ham is brown and fat is crisp. If ham is very salty, first simmer briefly in water, pour off water, and cook as above. Serve with red-eye gravy, drain off excess fat in pan after ham is removed. To the drippings left in the pan, add a little hot water and 1 Tbs. strong coffee. Bring to a boil and serve with grits.

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