Vernacular Architecture and the Park Removals: Traditionalization as Justification and Resistance

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The creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, authorized in 1926, entailed the largest removal of a local population for a park in United States history. After an early policy change that halted the wholesale elimination of the cultural landscape, the National Park Service used the preservation of traditional culture as an implicit justification for the park’s creation. In contrast, the families of those removed sought new meanings in the remnants of the cultural landscape within the park and established new rituals that celebrated an alternate interpretation of the selectively edited landscape.

To speak of tradition is invariably to speak of the end of tradition. Tradition, so labeled, is almost always perceived to be endangered, if not dying. The ascription of tradition is always motivated, and the perception of loss is part of the rhetoric of traditionalization. Tradition as a call to arms is most successful when it plays upon anxieties about the loss of tradition, even when that tradition was not valued as such until the death knell was sounded. As much recent scholarship has pointed out, the uses of tradition can be “oppressive and hegemonic” in nature. Care should be taken, however, not to create false dichotomies between “invented” and “authentic” traditions. All tradition is inherently constructed, and all can be used for nefarious purposes. Still, the symbolic power of constructed tradition is available for use by individuals and groups with diverse agendas. Tradition as a call to arms can be used for resistance, as well as oppression.

Increasingly, folklorists and other students of culture have defined tradition not by specific objective criteria, but instead have seen it as the product of a specific process of ascribing meaning. In the past 25 years, concern for the invention of tradition has dominated much of the literature in Appalachian Studies. Henry Shapiro, David Whisnant, Allen Batteau, and Jane Becker, among others, have all examined how powers external to
the region (especially governmental and philanthropic agencies) defined tradition within southern Appalachia in order to facilitate their own agendas. A limitation of this scholarship is that it generally has not examined how people within the region also utilized the concept of tradition to resist the efforts of these agencies of change. As has recently been argued in the edited volume Usable Pasts, “the politically powerless may also have the power to invent, to apply the creative impulse to their own private heritages, and in doing so to keep their own walls vibrantly renewed.”

An examination of the uses of tradition in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park removals provides a provocative case study through which to understand more recent examples of the politics of tradition. A perceived loss of tradition was used by park officials to help justify the creation of the park, and hence the removal of the local population by the power of eminent domain. On the other hand, traditionalization became a means by which the displaced could lay claim — emotionally, if not physically — to the buildings that marked the remnants of former homes and communities. The conflict was not between “invented” and “authentic” tradition, but rather between opposing uses of tradition as a “call to arms.”

THE CREATION OF THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

In 1926 the creation of three national parks was authorized in the southeastern section of the United States. Unlike earlier parks that had little native population, or were depopulated prior to authorization, the creation of these three parks entailed the removal of local populations by the power of eminent domain. Although there were plenty of similarities, the histories of these three park removals were also distinct. The creation of the Shenandoah National Park involved experimentation with planned resettlement, and it spawned the most radical contemporary group of park descendants, the Children of Shenandoah. Mammoth Cave was the smallest, but most densely populated, of the proposed parks. Its creation was marked by the only act of violence of the park removals. Although there still exists some tension between the local community and park officials, it generally has had the most quiescent group of park descendants. The creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, quite simply, involved the largest park removal in the history of the United States. And, unlike the Mammoth Cave and Shenandoah National Parks, it involved a substantial effort to preserve part of the vernacular landscape within the park.

Official histories of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park tend to emphasize the fact that a few timber companies owned a large portion of the land within the proposed park. While the creation of the park might be seen as an act of environmental conservation, it should be noted that by the time of the park’s authorization, the timber boom was declining and the timber companies were often being relieved of cutover land. It might also be argued, correctly, that the creation of the park prevented commercial development within its boundaries. However, much of the development of the region was in fact spawned by the park’s creation, and subsequently there was a massive touristic development at the park’s gates, with all its attendant environmental problems. Today tourism within the park itself poses a substantial environmental threat.

Although a few environmentalists did advocate the creation of the park, most notably writer Horace Kephart (who did fear its impact on the local population), local sentiment for the creation of the park came mainly from business interests who saw their salvation in tourism and good roads. The proposed parks created a perceived “wilderness” within a day’s drive of major metropolitan areas. In providing outdoor recreation within easy access to many Americans, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was wildly successful. Today it is the most visited park in the United States.

The people who paid the price for the park’s creation were not the timber owners but the more than one thousand families who lost farms, many of which had been in their families for generations. It is striking that even today the National Park Service is reluctant to deal honestly with this part of the park’s history. Although quietly it has sponsored oral history collection and worked cooperatively with the former residents and park descendants on homecomings, publicly its representation of the removal has tended to be appalling, when it is not ignoring the issue altogether. In a summer program a few years ago, a young interpreter dramatically representing former park residents, portrayed John Oliver, who fought the loss of his land through the legal system for years, as an ignorant gun-toting hillbilly who couldn’t accept change. Oliver was, in fact, an educated and well-to-do man; if he had not been, he, like his poorer neighbors, would not have had the means to challenge the government. Governmental officials at the time expected the progressive businessman to support their actions, and felt betrayed when he did not. The current Website for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park barely mentions local opposition in its history of the park’s creation, except to cast aspersions on those who resisted. The brief mention reads, “Land was difficult to buy despite the park movement. Greed, private property rights, and personal glory often clashed with government condemnation and the park movement.”

The reaction of the local population to its removal was as varied as the individual circumstances. Some sold out and felt that they were better off. Such a person was the late Celia Baxter who told her grandson in 1994, “We was glad to get out. Didn’t get much for it. We didn’t have many acres.” At the time financial imperatives were more important. “[My husband] just wanted to get out somewhere where he could make a living. Because we just had a little rocky farm. Rocks
— a few smooth places where you could raise a little garden — but the rest of it was just rocks.” Others opposed the park but felt it was useless to fight. Many spent the rest of their lives heartbroken or bitter over the loss. Those, like Oliver, who fought through legal means, eventually lost. Finally, some took the government up on an offer of tenancy, accepting half the settlement in order to continue to live in their former homes. However, most eventually found this choice untenable, when stores, schools, neighbors, and all the other social supports that sustained life in the mountains disappeared, and as rules which governed a farmer’s relationship with the environment were changed. Tenants soon found that they could no longer, legally, shoot the bear raiding the hen house.

The park removals dragged on through the 1930s. Ironically, although the park’s creation was intended as economic development, during the years of the Depression, it also served as a source for work relief. The Civilian Conservation Corps built much of the park’s infrastructure. In 1940 the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was finally dedicated in a ceremony presided over by President Franklin Roosevelt.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CULTURAL PRESERVATION PLAN

The primary intent of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was, and still is, preservation of the natural environment. Originally, in all three of the parks authorized in 1926, only those artifacts on the cultural landscape that were deemed particularly “sensitive,” mostly churches and graveyards, were slated for preservation. Former owners were sometimes given salvage rights, or the park service, in order to discourage squatters, simply burned former homes. The latter action, the park superintendent wrote unironically, aroused “considerable ire among residents.”

Park records do not present a clear picture of why there was a distinct change of policy toward the preservation of cultural resources in the Smokies. Much of the impetus seems to have come from below and subsequently received the blessing of park management. Two individuals on the payroll of the Civilian Conservation Corps, H.C. Wilburn and Charles Grossman, along with park naturalist Arthur Stupka, spearheaded a “mountain culture program.” By the mid-1930s, the official policy of the park was that preservation of mountain culture should come second only to the preservation of the natural environment of the park. Such a program did not develop for the culturally similar Shenandoahs, and justification for the cultural efforts was predicated on the supposed uniqueness of the Smokies. A 1936 park memo noted that the significance of Smoky Mountains culture lay in the fact that

... there has survived a manner of living, an entire cultural complex, which almost everywhere else within the boundaries of the United States has disappeared entirely. The Smokies might be conceived of a cultural [sic] island, to a great extent, isolated from the outside world, where we are able to see the survival in our contemporaries of language, social customs, unique processes, that go back to the 19th century and beyond.

The Secretary of Interior’s annual report in 1939 stated, “attention has been given to the unique opportunity presented in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to preserve frontier conditions of a century ago, which have vanished elsewhere.”

The casting of Appalachians as dwellers of America’s mythic path has a long history. Much of the literature about Appalachia that developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century emphasized not just that mountain people were backward, but that their lives were somehow representative of the past of all Americans. In the 1890s William Goodell Frost, the president of Berea College in Kentucky, labeled Appalachians “our contemporaneous ancestors.” In their now classic article, “Appalachian Fables and Facts,” Charles Perdue and Nancy Martin-Perdue argued that stereotypes about mountain people were used to justify the park removals in the Shenandoahs by suggesting that the lives of these supposedly isolated and ignorant folks would be improved by relocation from their homes.” In the Smokies, the official stereotypes were generally more positive, but in glorifying a mythical mountain culture, they obscured the reality of the former residents’ lives. To recognize this is not to besmirch the good intentions of those who actually did the cultural work in the Smokies. Grossman, especially, seemed to have an understanding and sympathy for local people and left a lasting contribution to the documentation of the architecture of the region.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the mountain culture program that developed in the Smokies in the 1930s was Charles Grossman’s “cabin survey.” Grossman’s work was one of the first systematic surveys of vernacular architecture ever conducted in the United States. During the 1930s and early 1940s, Grossman systematically documented more than 1,700 structures within the park area. Far from being only cabins, the structures surveyed included “dwellings, barns, corn cribs, apple houses, pig pens, bridges, six types of grist mills, smokehouses, and blacksmith shops.” Unfortunately, the use made of his work left a public impression that was quite opposite of what the results of his survey revealed.

Although most of Grossman’s notes, maps and negatives have been unfortunately scrambled over the years, the photographic evidence still in the park’s archives clearly demonstrates the diversity of the architecture in the Smokies at the time of the park’s creation. True, Grossman’s work does show the survival of a large number of log structures, but it also demonstrates the popularity of single-walled “boxed” construction, the building method of choice for many rural people of modest means during the timber era (fig.1). Also documented were prosperous frame houses and a variety of industrial, commercial, religious and civic
structures. Grossman dreamed of a “comprehensive program to preserve the architecture of the region in natural settings and to permit tracing the development of structures from the most primitive to pretentious frame house,” and he advocated that representatives of each building type, including the boxed house, be preserved. In 1943, however, he wrote that “up to the present time personnel and funds have been lacking to carry on the program in a logical manner.”

While Grossman was avidly documenting vernacular architecture within the park, the park service had begun its process of selectively editing the landscape. Many buildings disappeared because the park service was unable to maintain them. However, the results of the building preservation plan show a more deliberate effort. By the time an interpretative program actually began in the 1950s, most of the “pretentious frame” houses, all the boxed houses, most of the industrial and commercial structures, and virtually all remnants of the twentieth century had disappeared. Most of the buildings left on the landscape were log structures and a handful of frame churches. While it is easy to see why park personnel may have made the choices based on perceived significance, the surviving cultural landscape neatly confirms the stereotype of the former residents as living in frontier conditions even at the time of the removal.

The cultural landscape that most tourists now encounter in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is in Cades Cove. The cove today bears little resemblance to the Cades Cove of living memory. Bonnie Meyers grew up in a two-story frame house, as did many of her neighbors. Most of them frame houses that I knew. . . . We never noticed these cabins, growing up, paid them no mind. . . . All those [frame] houses were torn down. They left the cabins, you know. more pioneerish. . . . [Visitors] can’t believe that people used to be here and you had schools and stores and churches and stuff like that.

The large school buildings, the boardinghouses and tourist cabins, the cannery, and other twentieth-century structures were all gone. As Meyers mused, “lot of people think that we never did go out to town, you known, and people here just lived and died and never went to the city. But, cars were in here in 1915, the first car came in. My mother was fourteen years old.”

The interpretations of the surviving structures in the park tell the visitor little, if anything, of the lives of those displaced by the park’s creation. As with many salvage operations in historic preservation, buildings are preserved on the basis of cultural significance, but the cultural contexts that give them meaning are not. It is evident that those directly involved in the development of the cultural program in the 1930s intended for the interpretive program to have more of an emphasis on context. Presentations of mountain music and culture were planned, and help was elicited from western North Carolina folk entrepreneur Bascom Lamar Lunsford, who felt that mountain people “could easily be persuaded to use the park and to contribute much to its educational program if approached properly.” Wilburn, Grossman and Stupka proposed “field exhibits” of original structures
gathere, hunt and fish, without legal restriction. They suggested that local people might be engaged to produce marketable crafts, and that

... the persons employed in this connection might be permitted to live in the cabins included in the field exhibits, and so carry on their activities under natural and realistic conditions. Thus they would serve as custodians of the buildings so occupied and also continue the cultivation of such fields as are designated to be kept open in these areas.

Later, in a memo to the superintendent, Wilburn called attention to an article on the “living” folk museums of Norway and Sweden, indicating that this was generally what they had in mind.

The irony of repopulating these cabins so soon on the heels of the removal would probably not have been lost on the local population, had they known about it. However, the plan was never implemented, and it is clear that the upper echelons of the park service were much more comfortable with mountain culture in the abstract than they were with real mountain people. For example, early Superintendent Reports reveal an attitude that clearly saw most local people as potential lawbreakers. However, considering the emotions of many of the local population at the time, it is striking that in fact no incidents of violence accompanied the park removals in the Smokies. Most of the records of conflict between the local population and the park service involved a stubborn insistence on the part of some local people to continue to use the park area as a commons, where they could gather, hunt and fish, without legal restriction.

Reflecting the attitude of the upper echelon of the park service, in 1941 Dr. Hans Huth prepared yet another report on the preservation of mountain culture as part of a survey undertaken by the Branch of Historic Sites of the National Park Service. While he generally endorsed the previous plans, Huth felt there was “little hope of still finding much of the past in the present and retaining it.” Still, he took the idea well beyond what was previously proposed. “According to the project, carefully selected settlers, some of them skilled craftsmen as well as farmers, would live and work in the park area wherever it would be deemed necessary and possible to re dedicate a farm, for example, to actual life.” The process of selecting “desirable” people would be difficult, since, as Huth stated, many of the local people had criminal records. Among his suggestions was the possibility that girls from a college in nearby Asheville, North Carolina, might be used for this purpose. Huth also suggested that the crafts production would have to be closely supervised, since craftsmen in the region had “lost the faculty of creating a worthy piece.” Huth’s scheme, however, went far beyond producing marketable items. For example, he wrote that the enterprise should be regarded as an experimental form similar to biological laboratories.

Several months later a meeting of cultural experts was convened to discuss this “Brave New World” approach. In it, the experts transformed the local population into exotics. One expert advocated that a “broader anthropological view of the mountaineers — as if they were the tribesman in the northern Riff of Africa or the Seri Indian of Lower California — should be accepted as a basic concept.” Another emphasized the “many undesirable characteristics of the mountaineer’s culture,” and questioned the value of “establishing mountaineers in typically primitive conditions and then subjecting the group to the scrutiny of visitors.” Yet another questioned whether local people would be cooperative, believing that they could not expect that “individuals will be content to live in crude, rigorous surroundings following the hard way of producing their handicraft solely for the intangible reward of being a scientific guinea pig, particularly when their neighbors can have cars, radios and new dresses.”

The discussion turned out to be moot in any case, for the United States was soon to be embroiled in a world war, and it would be a decade before an interpretive program began. Meanwhile, the tenants helped maintain the historic structures, and in a few cases became museum pieces themselves. The most famous tenants were the Walker sisters, who lived in a massive single-pen log home in the Little Greenbrier section. Their antiquated life-style attracted tourists, and the sisters made a modest income from peddling poems and souvenirs to the visitors. While the five elderly sisters might have seemed a compliant attraction, they were not incapable of protest. One of the poems composed by vernacular poet Louisa Walker addressed the removals:

For us poor mountain people
They don’t have a care
But must a home for
The wolf lion and the bear

The poem expresses the clear violation of the natural order, confirmed by their religious beliefs. Louisa Walker found comfort in the fact that they still had a “title” in heaven.

When we reach the portles,
Of glory so fair
The Wolf cannot enter
Neither the lion or bear

And no Park Commissioner
Will ever dar
To disturbe or molest
Or take our home from us there?

In the 1950s park personnel were still writing of the survival of a “unique cultural complex,” but mountain culture was something of the past. One report admitted that preservation
Mountains folk culture was a unique remnant of the past. The use of the plural possessive, “our pioneer past,” is significant for the surviving structures no longer represented individual families or communities, but a common past of all Americans. This emphasis in the interpretation of extant structures obscured the realities of the lives of actual people, and the trauma of dislocation was ignored while the park service invested in the myth that Smoky the lives of actual people, and the trauma of dislocation was ignored while the park service invested in the myth that Smoky Mountains National Park, the former residents quietly went through their own process of reinterpretation. The now-vacant structures represented, not a mythic pioneer past supposedly shared by all Americans, but the history of specific families and specific communities. By developing rites of homecoming, the dispossessed and their families asserted their own continued connection to the land they no longer owned. The remnants of the vernacular building system that once sustained the rural communities of the Smokies, while not romanticized as structures of simple pioneer living, were imbued with meanings they formerly did not hold.

Undeniably, the Great Smoky Mountains region had a conservative system of building. Horizontal log construction was used by some well into the twentieth century. But the long survival of log building was not attributable to complete isolation, or even necessarily to the lack of availability of sawn lumber. It was a construction method that simply made sense in terms of the economics and social system of many mountain communities. In particular, a strong ethic of labor exchange sustained log building. A family which was willing to conform to the community’s architectural norms could have a house with relatively little cash outlay. However, other building options were available if the family had the means to take advantage of them.

The switch to boxed (single-wall, vertical-plank) construction was tied to the large number of men who entered “public work,” paid employment away from home, in the early twentieth century. The cooperative building system still held, but neighbors often had less time to spare. The timber industry provided cheaper sawn lumber, many people had more cash to spend, and, most importantly, boxed houses were much faster to build. Most did not mourn the passing of log construction, and many saw boxed houses, flimsy as they may have seemed, as a step up. Economic reasons even drove some to build large frame houses in order to take advantage of the large influx of visitors to the region by turning domestic space into a commodity.

The cooperative building ethic also worked against a positive valuation of old houses. Despite (or, in fact, because of) the conservative building pattern, houses were seen as easily replaceable, and each generation tended to build anew. This attitude helped facilitate the acceptance of the relatively impermanent boxed house. Although attitudes are beginning to change, many older people outside the park have refused to sentimentalize their old houses. Former homes were once commonly burned for firewood. (Having the park service burn one’s former home, however, turned out to be a completely different matter.) This is not to say that there wasn’t a strong attachment to the homeplace, but the attachment was quite literally to a place, not to the structure built upon it.

For many of those removed from the park, the physical remains of former homes and communities did take on a new significance. Of course, the reaction of those who were removed by the park’s creation was varied. Celia Baxter and her husband moved to Kentucky and started a new life. Martha White Bennett of Little Cataloochee settled nearby, but was so heartbroken that she refused to set eyes on the former community again. Bonnie Meyers, who left Cades Cove as a child, returned to work at the visitor’s center — although she understood the sentiments of her mother who blamed the family’s brief struggle with tenancy for her husband’s early death and remained bitter all her life. While there were many like Bennett who could not bear to visit, one of the most common ways to come to terms with what had happened was through the act of homecoming. In 1940 linguist Joseph Hall, who was doing research in the Smokies wrote,

I am told by the local fire-guard that a certain family returned frequently, as often as every two or three weeks in the summertime, and sat on the site of their former mountain-side home drinking water from the nearby spring and eating wild strawberries which run rampant over the place.

Larger gatherings were also common. In 1940, 678 people attended a homecoming at Cataloochee, and 600 attended one at Smokemont. Community gatherings, church homecomings, and family reunions sprang up throughout the park. Attendance dwindled a bit during the war years due to gas rationing, but hundreds still came, even if they had to come on horseback or in the back of a truck. In 1950 Robert Woody, a professor at Duke University who was born in Cataloochee, wrote of the homecoming for the South Atlantic Quarterly. Woody was not pleased with the transformation of his home community.

Homecoming on Cataloochee strikes a contrast between happy memories and the drab present. The Palmers and the Caldwells, the Messers and the Bennetts have departed. . . . Only when those with the happy memories are gone will the present Cataloochee seem better than the old.
In his article, Woody wrote that “time approaches when these reunions must cease,” but he underestimated the meaning that the homecomings still have a half-century later. The Cataloochee homecoming is still the size it was before World War II, and the more remote Little Cataloochee continues to attract a couple of hundred participants. The events are loosely structured, consisting of much visiting and claiming kin, grave decorations, huge potluck suppers, and informal services within the churches (FIG. 2). Each year the church bells at Palmer Chapel in Cataloochee and at the Little Cataloochee Baptist Church toll to mark the passing of former residents, but descendants come even if the family members who were once former residents have passed away. At the informal service, the youngest and the oldest former residents are identified and almost everyone is categorized according to their affiliation with a particular family. This is not the mythic past presented by the park service, but a celebration of individual family and community. The churches and the cemeteries serve as reminders of former communities, and many families make pilgrimages to former homes or homesites, if they can still be identified.

The park sponsors its own “old-timers day” twice a year in Cades Cove. Although earnest young park rangers started it, the event has grown uncontrollably and has little to do with former residents. The event today resembles a bluegrass festival without a central stage. As Bonnie Meyers observed, “it seems like it’s kind of strayed. There’s just so many people, it’s not really old timers anymore. They play music that we’d never even heard of and instruments we’d never heard of here in the Cove. But people like it, so I guess it’ll continue.” In contrast, the Park Service goes out of its way to conceal the dates of the homecomings. However, a stranger would be perfectly welcome there, as long as no one lost sight of the meaning of the event.

Even the family of Celia Baxter, who seemed so unsentimental about leaving the Smokies, now goes to the mountains to find a connection with family history. The family retreat began as a birthday trip for one of Mrs. Baxter’s granddaughters. Now, at the end of October, about sixty family members, some from Kentucky and Tennessee, but others from as far away as Oklahoma and Hawaii, gather in Gatlinburg, immediately outside the park. The homeplace of Mrs. Baxter’s late husband, James Baxter, has become an important symbol for the family. The small single-pen log dwelling is a short hike up Maddron Bald Trail in the park, near Cosby (FIG. 3). Most members of the family make the pilgrimage to the house during the retreat. When they found the structure was named for a later tenant, the family also petitioned the park to have it officially named for Willis Baxter, the builder. Ten years ago the Baxters also collectively made a quilt to celebrate their family. Surrounded by individually made blocks representing hobbies, pets, achievements, or simply aesthetic preferences, is the central square containing a silk-screened image of Papa Baxter’s homeplace.

During the retreat the Baxter family touches base with other physical reminders of family history. The house that James and Celia Baxter lived in when they were first married is gone, but the hedgerow Papa Baxter planted for Granny can still be found. Some years family members make the more arduous hike to the “upper place” where Granny Baxter’s own family lived before she was born. An old chimney, the foundation of an apple cellar, and the family graveyard, where her brother was buried, can still be found. Celia Baxter, when in her mid-eighties, made the hike herself. The family carried a lawn chair, so she could rest along the way.

Other families and communities have not had as much opportunity to either seek healing in the homecoming process.
or reconnect with family history. Within all three of the southeastern parks authorized in 1926 conflict still simmers between park families and the park service over maintenance of and access to those remnants of the cultural landscape that survived the efforts to return the land to wilderness. At Mammoth Cave, where only a few churches and well over 70 cemeteries still survive, nearby families feel that the park service lied to them when they promised to keep up the cemeteries. Only those in view of the roads are well kept; most others are increasing inaccessible, and some can no longer be located. In the Smokies, one of the more heated conflicts of recent decades was with the former residents of Hazel Creek, who lost their homes in the 1940s when construction of the Fontana Dam flooded the only access road to their communities. The land was given to the park, but the former residents were promised an access road to their former homes. The infamous “road to nowhere” only made it a few miles into the park before it was halted by environmental concerns and a change of park policy. The perceived betrayal spawned anti-environmentalist sentiment among some in the community, but also encouraged the development of an active historical association, made up largely of former residents and park descendants. The park service now helps provide limited boat and vehicular access to Hazel Creek for the annual decoration of the cemeteries.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The justification usually offered for the creation of the three southeastern parks was the need to preserve wilderness. For the former residents, the land was not wilderness, however; it was home. Even the park service understood that in the park wilderness needed to be reinvented, not preserved, and they systematically began to remove the cultural traces. In the Smokies there was a strange change of heart. The culture there was so unique, they argued, that it should be preserved; but it was so endangered that it could only be preserved in a museum-like context. In an act of cultural taxidermy, they killed the culture in order to preserve it. In essence, the cultural landscape of the Smokies was not preserved, it was radically edited. Anything that did not tell the story of a quaint and isolated people, still living in frontier conditions, was ripe for removal — just as the individuals themselves, who could have told a quite different story, were banished.

If the call for the preservation of tradition was used to help justify the park removal, traditionalization also was at the core of a quiet rebellion. For those removed, sense of place was not enough, as the landscape was dramatically transformed. Park families clung tightly to the surviving fragments of the cultural landscape, and they created new traditions to celebrate their connectedness to the Smokies centered on these remnants. For many, these rituals were part of a healing process that helped them come to terms with the removal. But they also continue to constitute a form of “back talk” to the official park interpretation. These buildings, cemeteries, and landscape features are not about America’s mythic past. They represent real individuals, real families, and real communities.

Celia Baxter’s youngest son, John, believes that the family retreat will continue. The retreat, which is simply about “just being a Baxter,” could probably take place somewhere else, but there is something special about going to the Smokies.
We still probably would all go [somewhere else]. And yet, when we get that close, in terms of miles, to the log cabin and to the apple cellar . . . the hedgerow, the graveyard, we want to just go back up there and stand there and look and think, you know, “My Daddy, he lived right here. And he walked and played right here. And people that have been kin to people that I know — this has been part of their home.” . . . It just gives you an eerie feeling to be up on the side of a mountain that’s now grown up and you can’t hardly find your way in and find your way out. And you think, “This is the home of people that also were kin to me, but so long ago.”

REFERENCE NOTES

1. For a fuller examination of the folklife of the region and the impact of the creation of the national park, see M.A. Williams, Great Smoky Mountains Folklife (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995). I am grateful for the assistance of my husband, David Carpenter, a park descendant (of the Bennetts of Little Cataloochee), and the help of my former graduate assistant David Baxter, who made it possible for me to tell the story of his family’s retreat.

2. Over 25 years ago, Dell Hymes reinvented the notion of tradition in his presidential speech to the American Folklore Society. Hymes wrote, “Let us root the notion not in time, but in social life. Let us postulate that the traditional is a functional prerequisite of social life. Let us consider the notion, not simply as naming objects, traditions, but also, and more fundamentally, as naming a process. It seems in fact the case that every person, and group, makes some effort to ‘traditionalize’ aspects of its experience. To ‘traditionalize’ would seem to be a universal need.” D. Hymes, “Folklore’s Nature and ‘traditionalize’ would seem to be a universal need.”


7. www.nps.gov/grsm/gmsmite/welcome.html


10. Relevant reports can be found in the Wilburn and Grossman papers, as well as other materials in the Wilburn and Grossman papers, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Archives, Sugarlands Visitors Center.


12. Charles Grossman’s survey materials and records are found in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park Archives, Sugarlands Visitors Center.


23. Bonnie Meyers interview.