

Visiting Our Past: Logging dangers filled our hills

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Peter Gibson Thomson came down from Hamilton, Ohio, in 1905 to check out the fields of timber in Haywood County. He was on his way toward establishing the Champion Fibre Co. in Canton.

For a while now, lumbermen had been calling the Great Smoky Mountains a huge prize, "the largest continuous forest cover in the eastern United States," and it was

primeval. Steam-powered skidders and the steep-climbing Shay locomotive turned formerly inaccessible tracts from money pits into treasure troves.

The big money men from the North came in all at once, "staking off watersheds like so many claims," as Wilma Dykeman said in her text for the National Park Service book "The Great Smoky Mountains."

W.M. Ritter set up along Hazel Creek, with headquarters at Proctor. R.E. Woods took Eagle Creek and built Fontana. Twentymile and Forney Creeks were taken by Kitchin and Norwood Lumber Cos.

Thomson got his share: Deep Creek, Greenbrier Cove and the headwaters of the Oconaluftee.

Imagining the industrialist

Ron Rash's novel "Serena" has captured worldwide attention for its narrative of the fictional Boston Logging Co.; Pemberton, the bigger-than-life lumber tycoon; his Lady Macbeth-like wife and partner, Serena; and its Western North Carolina setting.

People have called the novel a "Lady Macbeth in a logging camp," but that is not right. "Serena" is more like "Moby Dick." A diverse work crew witnesses the destructive path of a monomaniac in an exploitive industry. The fact that Rash's Ahab is a woman should not alter our appreciation.

When Pemberton meets his first challenge — a knife-wielding, drunken mountain man incensed by Pemberton's impregnation of his teenage daughter, Rachel — Serena instructs her husband, "Get your knife and settle it now."

Before gutting his antagonist, Pemberton reflects on his knife, "precisely calibrated as the épées he'd fenced with at Harvard." He was an all-around champion.

In the reality of history, Thomson was not a knife-wielder, as far as we know. But he was a trained boxer and weightlifter. His father had enrolled him in a gymnasium at

age 9. As an adult, Thomson could lift 1,265 pounds without a harness, as Corydon Bell documented in his 1963 book, "A History of Champion Papers."

By the time Thomson came to the Pigeon River, he was 51 years old and had built three businesses. He'd been a bookseller and real estate developer, then a manufacturer of coated paper.

This last he took up for two reasons: One, he wanted to create jobs and thus customers for his subdivisions, and two, there was an industrial opportunity created by the boom in books and by a new coating process.

Champion Coated Paper Co. depended on wood pulp. The supply was restricted. The best move was to get one's own pulp.

Pulp nonfiction

The world that Thomson saw in turn-of-the-century Haywood County was filtered by his focus on trees and affected by 20 years of cutting.

To the east, the wooded mountains had been pretty much logged out.

In Haywood and Swain counties, things were in a different state. Much was gone, but much remained.

The large poplar and ash trees had been cut along big creeks because the logs of those trees could be floated. With no railroad or highway access, loggers used the river for transport, building splash dams, waiting for the right flow, and herding logs to the Little Tennessee. (A splash dam was a temporary wooden dam used to raise the water level in streams to float logs downstream to sawmills.)

"Splash dams were probably the most destructive logging technique ever devised, and Hazel Creek still bears the scars on its banks," says Sam Gray in his environmental report "Hazel Creek: Patterns of Life on an Appalachian Watershed."

Skidding the logs down mountains to get to the dams pounded and dug up everything in their path, occasionally running over oxen.

Floating logs down streams — with their unpredictable flows and their snags — proved to be a doomed enterprise.

Alexander Alan Arthur's attempt on the Pigeon River in Newport, Tenn., had resulted in disaster in the spring of 1886, as a historic flood swept away booms that had held "a dammed-up fortune in logs," Dykeman related in her chronicle "The French Broad."

Logs scattered from Arthur's Scottish Lumber Co. operation "clean to the Gulf of Mexico," folks reported.

In 1890, Blue Ridge Lumber Co. of Maine built a splash dam across the Tuckaseegee River at Dillsboro. Each spring brought its own floodwater calamity. In 1894, the foreman, Joe Johnston, went out on a logjam at the confluence of Trout Creek and the Tuckaseegee.

"He fell into the water in front of the moving mass of logs," Robert Andrew McCall noted in his Western Carolina University master's degree thesis, "The Timber Industry in Jackson County." "The logs prevented (Johnston) from surfacing in time."

Accidents and environmental destruction took place in a horrifying variety of ways, up through the 1920s, as represented with biblical vividness in "Serena." The fatality rate in the logging industry was six times that of other industries in 1913, Margaret Lynn Brown reports in "The Wild East: A Biography of the Great Smoky Mountains."

Biblical was also how famed author and national park advocate Horace Kephart saw the progress of logging.

In his book "Our Southern Highlanders," Kephart tells about his experiences in the Great Smokies shortly before Thomson entered the picture, and shortly after Ritter, a noted clear-cutter, arrived.

The splash dam era had yielded to the era of railroads, as the Southern Railway extended to Murphy and logging companies built spur lines up mountainsides.

Once, on a bear hunt, Kephart related, he "heard the snort of a locomotive."

"All this," he related, taking in his surroundings, "shall be swept away. ... Soot will arise, and foul gases; the streams will run murky death."

The real-life Kephart is also a character in the fictional "Serena," hiking and plotting with Horace Albright, national parks director, and with Charles Webb, pro-park editor of The Asheville Citizen.

Rob Neufeld wrote the weekly "Visiting Our Past" column for the Citizen Times. This column first appeared May 15, 2011.