

Hazel Creek Memories

Written by Paula J Parton In honor of Etta Welch, my grandmother

Hazel Creek, located on the North Shore of Fontana Lake, was the location of many thriving communities until the Tennessee Valley Authority forced the residents to leave their homes to make way for the Fontana reservoir in 1943. Although the TVA never used these 44,000 acres of Swain County as part of the Fontana project, they did not offer to return it to the original owners. Instead they gave it to the National Park Service, and it became the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Scattered throughout these mountains, there are twenty-eight cemeteries containing nearly 1,000 graves. My ancestors are buried in many of them.

Going to Hazel Creek to visit these cemeteries is an adventure for my family. We get up early on the first Sunday in July, drive to the Almond Boat Dock, and load the pontoon with everything we might need for our yearly trip to the burial place of my ancestors. Then we head down the lake to the Cable Cove Boat Ramp, where we pick up my grandmother who is the main link to my Hazel Creek heritage. When we arrive at the boat ramp, we transport my family across Fontana Lake to the mouth of Hazel Creek. There we embark on a wonderful journey to the land where my grandmother was raised.

Mamaw, who spent most of her life from early childhood to age seventeen in the Hazel Creek-Proctor area, looks out across the lake to the distant mountains, and memories from the days of her youth come into focus again. As she boards the boat, we ask my grandmother what her first memory of Hazel Creek is. She thinks for a minute, then replies, "My first memory is when we moved to the Nute Wilson place on Sugar Fork. The W. M. Ritter Lumber Company was cutting virgin timber, and my dad, Bill Woodard, worked as the signal man with the skidder crew. I still recall the big work horses they used to tighten the cables and snake the logs out of the woods right beside our house." Although the house is no longer standing, Mamaw is sure she could still find where it once stood if she were able to walk the ten or fifteen miles to get there.

As we are pushing off from the shore, Mamaw begins to tell us about her maternal grandparents, Richard and Jane Martin. "I loved to visit my grandparents. They didn't live in a traditional log house but in one of the little red railroad cars that sat below the Hickory Nut Trestle. Sometimes, I would help them sweep the yard or work in the garden, and Grandma would pay me with the 'sack candy' she always kept hidden away. Occasionally, grandma would tell stories of things that had happened before I was born.

"One was how she broke her oldest son from using curse words. Grandma had tried everything to no avail. One day she caught him cursing, took him barefooted out in the woods, and tied him to a big chestnut tree. It took him a long time to get loose, and when he did, he came to her and said, 'Maw, will you give me a pin?' She asked what he needed it for and he said, 'To pick the chestnut burrs out of my feet.' When he finished with the pin he brought it back and said, 'Maw, here's your pin.' She responded, 'No, son, you better keep it cause you'll be a need'n it again and again.' Needless to say, Grandma never heard him curse again."

Halfway across the lake, I ask her if she has always gone to church. "My first memory of going to church is when we moved to the Jess Cook place. We started going to the Bone Valley Church about three miles from our house. There was preaching only once a month but Sunday School every Sunday. Each year in the fall there would be a 'protractive meetin' that usually lasted two or three weeks. We would go to church in the morning and again at night. Sometimes the preacher would go home with us to eat 'dinner' after the morning service and stay to eat 'supper' before

returning to the church for the night service. I remember how we would run ahead and stop by Grandma's to borrow extra dishes, so we would have enough for the preacher."

As we near the mouth of Hazel Creek, we slow the pontoon down to a crawl because of the shallow water. Dwayne, my oldest son, asks Mamaw if she waded across the creeks to get to the other side. Mamaw smiles and explains, "No, honey, I crossed the foot logs or 'walk logs' as we used to call them." Dwayne says he bet that was fun. "Most of the time it was, but when it had rained a lot it could be very dangerous. One time my sister, Jane, and her friend, Ruth Bateman, slipped and fell into the raging waters of Sugar Fork, a 'prong' off Hazel Creek. Luckily, Cowen Bateman, Ruth's brother, was standing on the porch and saw them. He jumped off the porch, rescued Jane, and saved Ruth just before she was swept into Hazel Creek."

As we approach the shore, we can see the trail that leads up the steep embankment to the cemetery where my grandmother's mother and father are buried. We ease the boat against the bank and help Mamaw onto the shore. We slowly pick our way up the trail, across the old road bed, and climb another steep embankment to the base of the small graveyard. Some graves have only rocks for markers while others, like my great grandparents, have a small headstone. Their graves are at the top of the hillside cemetery. "Mettie Martin Woodard," Mamaw reads aloud as she places a bouquet of silk flowers on the grave. "This is where Mama is buried." Mamaw looks at the tombstone and lets the years roll away, "Mama was the closest and dearest friend I ever had. She was a lot like grandma; both were quiet-natured and serious-minded. Mama was always doing something for those in need. Sometimes, us girls would pick out a dress we liked in the Roebuck catalogue and Mama would make us one that looked just like it. She also knitted all our winter stockings, sweaters, gloves, and caps. She made all our 'wearing clothes.' I can remember how Mama knitted herself a pair of gloves once, one of them to fit her crippled hand. You see she only had her thumb and little finger on her right hand. She got the others crushed in a cane mill when she was twelve years old, and they had to be amputated, but she could still do just about anything." Anyone hearing my grandmother talk would come to the conclusion that her mother truly was a remarkable woman. Tears fill the eyes of everyone listening as Mamaw tells us how she watched her mother die of cancer at the age of fifty. We can not imagine the pain or feeling of desolation that a twelve-year-old girl must have felt after watching her mother die. Growing up in a time when people worked all the daylight hours just to feed their family, had many hardships, and few doctors made my grandmother realize just how precious life is. It also made her into the wonderful person she is today. Mettie Woodard may not be alive today, but her qualities and characteristics live on in her youngest daughter, my grandmother.

"Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies."

Proverbs 31:10

I have many ancestors buried in the numerous cemeteries around Hazel Creek, and the access is not good. It's really sad that we are unable to take Mamaw to visit the gravesides of her mother and father more often, but the only way to reach the cemetery is by boat, horseback, or a difficult hike that would take several days. Even by boat, the climb up the steep embankment is very dangerous for her because she is eighty-eight years old now and not as agile as she once was. However, the difficulty of taking her is nothing compared to the wonderful feeling of having fulfilled Mamaw's great desire to visit the burial place of her parents once more. As we make the tedious climb back down, we turn to take one last look at the cemetery. I can't help wondering if this might be the last time my grandmother is able to make this journey.

I will never forget the ancestors I have buried on this distant shore or their history, and I plan to return here each year with my children so they will always remember too.