

Cascades Lodge Recalled as Idyllic Summer Retreat

By Carroll McMahan



In the 1920s, the push to establish a national park in the Smoky Mountains gained momentum thanks to the work of several prominent Knoxvillians such as Willis P. Davis, his wife Anne, and Col. David C. Chapman. These supporters loved the idea of a park where anyone could enjoy the mountains. Other equally prominent Knoxville citizens were less enthused. Attorney James B. Wright was one of the Appalachian Club members and cabin owners who preferred a national forest designation to keep the masses out in favor of strict conservation, which would also keep his property safe from condemnation and eminent domain.

Wright represented some of the Appalachian Club members, like himself, who opposed the park idea. He pushed relentlessly in Nashville and Washington for the Smokies land to be included in a national forest so that the lumber companies could continue taking out timber.

Anne Davis pushed back, urging her husband to lobby for preservation. She and Knoxville Mayor Morton encouraged Col. W.B. Townsend, owner of Little River Company, which held the deeds to 76,500 acres of land in what is now the park, to sell the entire holdings as a kind of seed stock of Smokies acreage.

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In 1924, Anne Davis was elected to serve as representative in the Tennessee General Assembly; one of the first women elected to the legislature. Once elected, her main goal was to pass a bill that would provide state money to buy Little River Company's holdings. But, with the help of Wright and a contingent of timber lobbyists, the measure failed in 1925.

Anne Davis did not give up. She huddled with Mayor Morton and Col. Chapman on a new strategy which involved using Knoxville taxpayer's money. The only way a Tennessee bill could pass was for Morton to convince Knoxville's City Council to pay one- third of the cost of Little River property. Together, Davis, Morton, and Chapman made Governor Austin Peay an offer: Knoxville would pay one-third of the cost for Col. Townsend's holdings if the state would pay the remainder. The governor went for it, and Townsend sold his land for \$273,557, or \$3.57 per acre.

Once the park was established, Wright promptly sold his cabin at Elkmont to another family. However, his love for the mountains was such that he soon found a beautiful tract of land in which to build an even finer summer retreat.

Born November 13, 1875, James B. Wright married Dora "Doddy" Whittaker and they had three children: James, Jr., Elizabeth, and Lois (Roddy). He was a distinguished attorney and civic leader in Knoxville; known for being a strong mentor for young lawyers. Wright invested heavily in real estate, particularly in downtown Knoxville.

In 1936, Wright purchased eighty-two acres on Cove Creek, along the narrow dirt road to Wear's Valley near Walden's Creek. Centered around a spectacular cascades, this remote tract consisted of a series of small but steep waterfalls on Cove Creek located at the base of Tilda Ridge.

This scenic property was used by the Cherokee Indians as hunting grounds. No doubt, Aaron Crowson, Ruben Hatcher, and a young man by the last name of Percifield spotted the beautiful cascades in 1892 when they traversed through the rugged mountains to discover what is now Wear's Valley. In 1795, the Indians attacked these men and killed Percifield. Crowson and Hatcher once again passed the spot on their way back to Walden's Creek to bring back additional men.

Since the time of the Civil War, stories have been told about Confederate gold stashed near the falls. However, the legend has never been substantiated. In the 1920's, James Brownlow Lawson, a legendary figure known as One Armed Jimmy, persuaded his friend Governor Austin Peay to build a road from Pigeon Forge to Wear's Valley. Despite his handicap, One Armed Jimmy Lawson helped dig out the mountain side at the bend where the cascades were located. The new road placed the property in a desirable location.

Wright developed the land into a summer resort called the Cascades Lodge which consisted of a seventeen-room lodge, a swimming pool, a tennis court, a store, a mill, and eventually five cabins. The two-story rustic lodge, called Cascades Lodge, was, along with all the buildings located on the banks of Cove Creek. The rustic Revival-style cabins were privately owned but all shared common architectural characteristics, such as round log construction, multi-level porches, cobblestone foundations and chimneys, and log porch detailing.

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Sandy Brown, an African-American gentleman, came from Knoxville to work for James Wright as a maintenance man. He lived in a cabin and lived there year-round. Brown remained there until the family sold the property. He moved to Sevierville and worked for James and Ruth McDermott at Mac's Sweet Shop- the only eating establishment in Sevierville operated by African-Americans. James McDermott met Brown when he worked at the lodge as a cook.

On December 4, 1954, James B. Wright died at age 79. His children inherited the property and his son James, Jr. came up with the idea to rename the place Cornpone to underscore its "Tennessee countryness." He promoted the village with the slogan: "Breathe in the fresh air of Cornpone and live longer."

Wright's granddaughter Edith Harvey of Naples, Florida remembers wonderful times in the summer driving from Knoxville and spending idyllic days at the lodge. The Wright family sold the property when Wear's Valley Road was widened in the 1970s.

Today, four of the original cabins are still standing; three are rentals and one has full-time occupants. The old lodge is no longer standing. Remnants of old chimneys and rock walls are scattered about the property. The mountainside on the south side of the creek is brimming with modern rental cabins.

About three years ago Clyde Rennie, Jr. and Tina Plunk bought the five acres along the north and south banks of the creek. Capitalizing on the beautiful cascades, they operate a business called Friendly Falls which includes a restaurant, a store, a gem mine, and a campground as well as a venue for weddings, retreats, receptions, and reunions.

"For almost a century this has been a place for families to gather to relax and have fun," says owner Clyde Rennie, Jr. "It is our goal to carry on the tradition."