

Tales of Lost Cove

By Mary Patten Priestley

Do you remember the musical *Brigadoon* about the enchanted Scottish village? In the story, when intrusions from the “real world” threaten to destroy the village, one of the characters laments, “Why do people have to lose things to find out what they really mean?”

That could easily have happened to Lost Cove, a very real hollow that is tucked into the Cumberland Plateau in Franklin County. It has been subjected to pressures brought on by development and population sprawl that have negatively impacted the entire plateau. But like *Brigadoon*, Lost Cove has been saved. To paraphrase another line from the musical, “I told ye when ye love something deeply, anythin’ is possible.”

An Ancient Cove Preserved

A site of Native American cultures dating back thousands of years, Lost Cove saw its first white settlers in the early 19th century. A farming community, numbering around 100 at one point, developed in the secluded cove. By the 1950s the people had left. Bobcats, Coyotes, and Mountain Lions ruled, and legitimate human activity was limited to hunting, herb digging, and timber harvesting.



Fast forward to the 21st century, when development pressures began to encroach severely on natural ecosystems and Tennesseans woke up to the need to preserve what was left of our wild lands. A partnership to protect Lost Cove developed, spearheaded by Sewanee: the University of the South, The Land Trust for Tennessee, and the state’s Heritage Conservation Trust Fund. Several philanthropic foundations joined in and hundreds of people got involved.

Chris Roberts, The Land Trust for Tennessee’s project manager for the South Cumberland Plateau, was surprised at the depth and breadth of interest in the project. “It’s the people who have connected around that property that have intrigued me. I didn’t realize the sense of place that [Lost Cove] had for a lot of people – I was just blown away by it.”

In early 2008, Sewanee purchased the 3,000-acre Lost Cove, with a conservation easement held by The Land Trust for Tennessee. The undertaking received a 2009 Governor’s Environmental Stewardship Award because it “incorporates innovative conservation practices to protect Tennessee’s rich wildlife diversity, abundant soil, forest resources and exceptional recreational opportunities.”

Altogether, there are now 21,000 contiguous acres of protected land that includes the Franklin-Marion State Forest and the Carter State Natural Area, as well as Lost Cove and Sewanee’s other land holdings.

Quite a success story! But what is it about Lost Cove that captivated so many people and brought them together to preserve this unique place? In addition to the ecological importance of the cove, the answer might be found in the fascinating tales that rise out of this misty hollow.

The Garners

Mucidore Garner was 84. For the first time in her life she felt too tired to do the spring plowing, so her brothers arranged for some men to carry her on a litter up the steep mountain road to the hospital in Sewanee. Born and raised in Lost Cove, she had never laid eyes on the little college town, only five miles from her home.

She had been out of the cove two or three times in her life, and once she had even ridden the train 10 miles to Decherd, only to return home on the next train. Her brothers, Sol and Mose, hiked or rode horseback out infrequently to visit relatives or to purchase goods for the farm. The three of them were the only remaining inhabitants of the cove.

The year was 1946. Mucidore Garner recovered and went back to the cove to farm with her brothers for a few more years. Lost Cove has had no human residents, except for the occasional smattering of squatters and hippies, since the Garners left.

How, in the mid-20th century, could the three siblings live such insulated lives, tucked away in a Tennessee cove?

Well, Lost Cove is not just any mountain cove. A “cove” is a recess in the mountain, carved out by streams, many of them seasonal, that course down the mountainside and ordinarily run out into the valley below.

But Lost Cove is encompassed on all sides by the Cumberland Plateau. Every drop of rain that runs down the sides of the cove and enters Lost Cove Creek tunnels underground at or around the Big Sink. Lost Cove is like a big bathtub, for which the Big Sink is the drain. For a farmer living in the cove, it took quite an effort to scramble up the 600 feet or so in elevation to get out – a lot of trouble when there was plenty to be done at home, tending to fields and animals.

“Covites?” Savvy Mountaineers!

The sequestered Lost Cove community developed its own mores, including distrust of incomprehensible Sewanee people whose whole object in life seemed to be “book-larin’”. Of course, misunderstandings ran both ways, as Sewanee folks often referred to cove inhabitants as backwards “covites,” a derogatory term that some people still remember.

There is a story – at least partly factual – of speculators who in the 1930s tried to buy Lost Cove from the Garners for \$1 an acre, stop up the Big Sink, flood the cove, and sell it to TVA for big money. When the “ignorant” covites held out for more than \$4 dollars per acre, the investors still thought it was a pretty sweet deal, until they found that no amount of dynamiting at the sink would block it. The water never got to be more than a couple of feet deep in the fields before the sink would swallow it all up. The hapless shysters were forced to sell the land back to its original owners, who wouldn’t give more than \$1 per acre for it!

The Garners probably weren’t familiar with the geological term “karst,” which refers to bedrock that is riddled with cavities. But given that they never left their land, even during the dynamiting, they almost certainly could have told those city slickers that the water always eventually finds its way out of Lost Cove.

Water that enters the Big Sink emerges through the Buggytop Cave entrance to Lost Cove Cave, now the centerpiece of the Carter State Natural Area, just south of Lost Cove. The creek roaring out of Buggytop after a heavy rain is a spectacular sight.

The Sacred Beech Grove

We know that Archaic Indians dwelled in and around Lost Cove at least 9,000 years ago. Modern Native Americans, probably Cherokee or Choctaw, also found a home here. With all that history, this mountain hollow provides fertile ground for myths and legends. One story – that of the sacred beech grove – has the ring of truth.

Sometime in the 1950s, a group of Native Americans from Oklahoma knocked on the door of a house that overlooks Lost Cove. The group asked for permission to hike down into the cove in search of a sacred beech grove that they had heard about all their lives.

According to biologist Dr. Harry Yeatman, scientific evidence points to the existence of such a grove. Beeches are virtually impervious to lightning strikes – a positive characteristic for a sacred site! Either they do not attract lightning or they conduct electricity so well that they remain unharmed, making them the perfect lightning rod.

Whether the Oklahomans found what they were looking for no one remembers, but Harry’s wife, Jean, who has combed Lost Cove on horseback for decades, thinks she happened upon it. “The beeches, the rocks, the water were just as the Indians had described them,” she says. Given the opportunity, this spunky lady thinks she can find it again.

Mountain Lions!

Jean Yeatman has good evidence that Mountain Lions still prowl the 21,000 acres of protected land that includes Lost Cove. She has a plaster cast of a Mountain Lion paw print that she took in the cove, and there have been sightings. But no one has been able to get a photo of this elusive predator that many are convinced still haunts this untamed forest.

Besides the tantalizing possibility of Mountain Lions in the cove are the regular sightings of a diversity of other wildlife there. Lost Cove is part of a flyway for Golden Eagles headed to their nesting sites. Ruffed Grouse, Wild Turkey, and the rare Cerulean Warbler inhabit the forest; hawks and vultures are a common sight soaring above. Additionally, all kinds of mammals – predators and their prey – scurry or prowl through the woods.

New Beginnings

The acquisition of Lost Cove opens up a raft of educational possibilities for Sewanee, under the auspices of the newly created Environmental Institute, which offers both college and pre-college research-based opportunities. Dr. Jon Evans, the institute's director, remarks, "With 3,000 acres come 3,000 new student opportunities" for research and field work. For starters, the cove's forests, streams, and caves offer great possibilities for study in biology, geology, forestry, anthropology and archaeology.

But it's not just for book-larnin'. Once the university gets a good inventory of its resources, new hiking trails in Lost Cove will be open for public access. If you go, you probably won't see the wary Mountain Lions. You can, however, enjoy the other wildlife, search for the sacred beech grove, and otherwise explore this rugged cove that time forgot.

(Mary Patten Priestley is curator of the Sewanee Herbarium and president of the Tennessee Native Plant Society.)