

## **HEAD OF THE SOUTH FORK OF THE POWELL RIVER**

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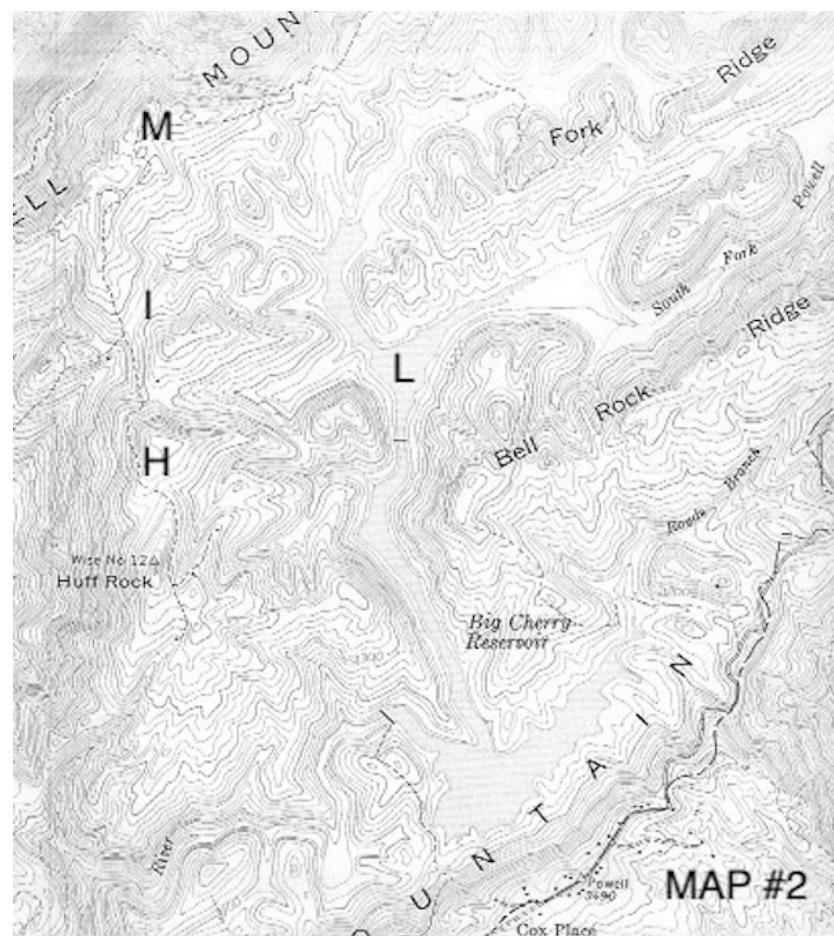
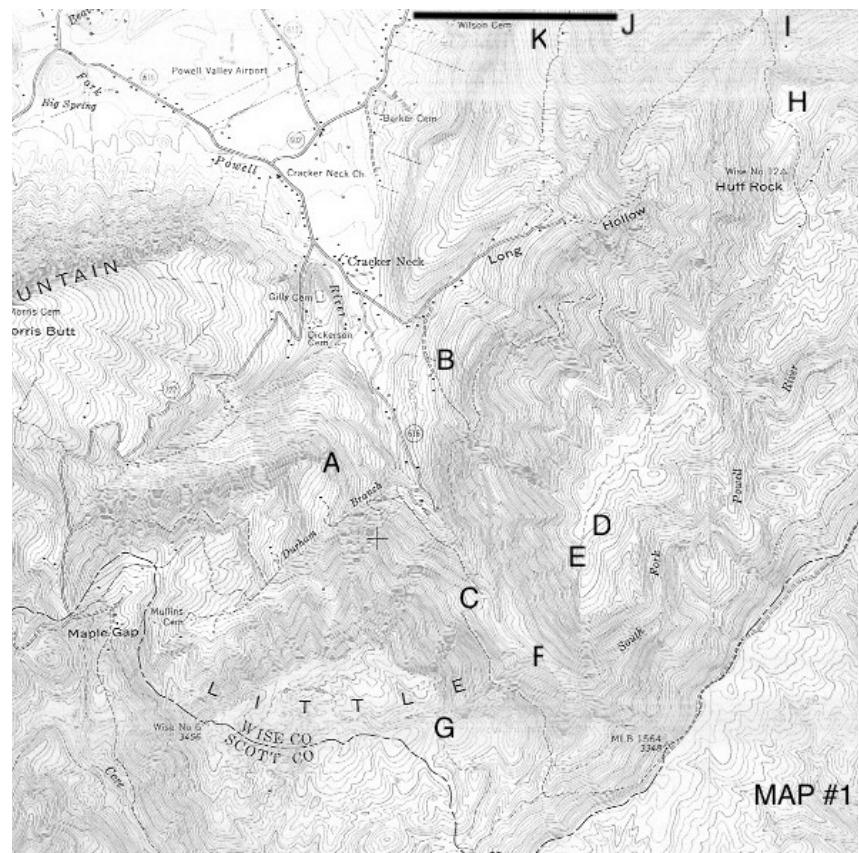
The South Fork of the Powell River begins in an eroded break in Powell Mountain. In its formation the mountain cracked from top to bottom, and the waters that fell from the sky upon it discovered that crack and eroded it to form a narrow gorge that drops the river 1800 feet to the valley floor. In this process some of the most spectacular scenery in the world was created, much of it inaccessible to any but the avid ridge runner. Hidden within this scenery is much of our history, all but lost to any but to the descendants of the original settlers. The flora is just as rank as the fauna. What follows is mostly a life time collection of photographs that show views not often seen by those bound by the limits of asphalt highways. Accompanying folk traditions and descriptions of the views of the area are presented so as to enhance the appreciation of the photographs.

The Powell River has four forks. There are two North Forks due to confusion among the early surveyors. The westernmost North Fork traverses Pennington Gap, the eastern North Fork comes through the Big Stone Gap in Stone Mountain from Appalachia, the Middle Fork is today better known as Butcher's Fork, and comes in from the head of Powell Valley from its origins within the bowels of Stone Mountain from which it emerges as a creek from a cave at Valley Lake. The South Fork begins near High Knob and flows along the top of Powell Mountain, which has been eroded by the river into two ridges, Grind Stone Ridge, and Little Mountain. The Town of Big Stone Gap has its reservoir, Big Cherry, in the hollow between these two ridges. The section of Powell Valley known as Cracker's Neck follows the South Fork up stream into the gorge within Powell Mountain.

Three annotated topographic maps will be presented to assist the explorer. In keeping with most of the photographs, they are from 1957, photo revised in 1969. The two maps overlap each other in a north / south axis. Below is the key to the annotations on the maps.

### **KEY TO MAPS #1 & 2**

A - Durham's Rock	G - Double Chestnut
B - Chandler Cabin	H - Huff Rock Field
C - Stagger Weed	I - Jones' Fields
D - The Ball Ground	J - cable car steam engine
E - Snake Den	K - cable tram car track
F - Washboard Falls	



Near the topographic transition between the tip end of Cracker's Neck and the lower end of the gorge lies the 'intake' of the Big Stone Gap water system. In the wet seasons the roar of the river as it passes over and between the boulders left by the erosion of the crack in the mountain all but drowns out conversation. Vertical cliffs reach skyward on both sides. The thick laurel hells that follow the river all the way to its springs of origin near High Knob surround the intake. The first awesome natural spectacle of this journey of exploration may best be seen just downstream and to the right of the intake. Note the massive slide off of the mountain which occurred in 2019. Consider the massive jumble of trees at its base. The cracking and breaking of this timber was heard a mile away. Now look at the tip end of this slide near the top of the mountain. You will see Durham's Rock protruding from the top edge of the mountain. Directly under it you can see a massive crack in the earth made by the earth as it separated from the mountain in preparation for its 400 foot slide to the river.





**DURHAM'S ROCK**



**CRACKER'S NECK FROM DURHAM'S ROCK IN ABOUT 1980**

The land around the intake had belonged to Hop Dickenson and Jessee Gilly. The water company for the Town of Big Stone Gap bought the area from them in 1887. The land at Durham's Rock was not included, and Hop's brother, Will, sold it to Frank Durham, who had come in from Scott County on horseback. The Durham family lived near there until the mid Twentieth Century. The branch just to the south of the rock, and the route of the access road, is named Durham's Branch.

#### THE CHANDLER CABIN

The eastern flank of the gorge of the South Fork of the Powell River is defined by Chandler Mountain. 'Uncle' John Chandler came to the Powell River from North Carolina before the 1850 census. The most common route of immigration into Powell Valley was to come down the Clinch Valley to Big Stoney Creek at Fort Blackmore, and to go up that creek and just past High Knob, and at Chestnut Flats to turn west down the 'Old Baptist Trail' that followed the northern edge of Grindstone Ridge to Huff Rock Field and then followed the crest of that ridge to the south for about a mile, and then turned down the spur that runs to the northwest. That spur is now known as Chandler Mountain. One can exit this trail at tip of the spur either into Long Hollow or into the Valley of the South Fork of Powell River near the entrance into the gorge. Just uphill from this fork in the road sat an ancient log cabin down under the road to the north (left) near a reliable spring. Now dilapidated, it was once known as "The Chandler Cabin". The style of notches used in its corners is the 'V' notch, which strongly suggests that the cabin was built before about 1820, and therefore by a predecessor to the Chandlers. No one today seems to know where Uncle John settled, but this cabin would be a major contender for that honor.



THE CHANDLER CABIN, SHOT 5 FROM THE ROAD AT ABOUT 1980



**NOTE THE 'V' NOTCHES - THE SPRING HOUSE IS LOCATED ON THE ROAD  
ABOVE THE CABIN**

#### STAGGER WEED

Unexpected though it may be, there is no place on earth as rewarding to the wildflower photographer as the flattened pile of boulders on the west (right hand) side of the Big Cherry Road located about a half mile up from the access road to Durham's Rock. The pile of boulders is a natural phenomenon caused by the fracturing that broke open Powell Mountain long ago. There is no real layer of soil on top of the boulders, but the spaces in-between them are filled with rich loam. According to oral tradition, a man once supported his family by planting corn with a mattock in these collections of top soil. Another tradition says that there lived a family here that a neighbor once found near starvation in the late winter. The family had been living only on cabbages. In those days cabbages were preserved by pulling the entire plant out of the ground and then burying the head, leaving the roots sticking out. Later in the season one had only to pull the cabbage out of the ground by its root, and cook it. The cabbages seldom lasted out the full winter. Whether or not these two oral traditions reference the same family is unknown.

This pile of boulders lies on the north (shaded) side of Little Mountain. Such places along the Virginia - Tennessee border are frequently natural wild flower gardens. White Top Mountain is often cited by text books as a prime example. The wild hyacinth especially likes to grow on this approximate acre of 'ground'. It is odd, if one thinks about it, because this beautiful

flower that blooms in April and May, is not found much other than on this rock pile. It just seems to like there.

This wild hyacinth is one of several wild flowers that is commonly called 'stagger weed'. These lovely flowers make various types of poisons called alkaloids. When cattle or horses eat these succulent flowers the alkaloid rapidly paralyzes them. They begin to stagger, usually down hill, because their legs cannot support them. The animals will crash into barns, fences, and trees on their stumbling way down the mountain. They then collapse and die from respiratory paralysis.



THE WILD HYACINTH

GOOGLE IMAGES

## THE BALL FIELD

Life was not so hard that the old timers didn't find time for pleasure. They seemed to mind the heat more than climbing straight up Chandler's Mountain with packed picnic baskets and baseball gear. Forsaking the flat land of the valley floor, they chose to go to the top of the mountain to enjoy a ball game and picnic with their neighbors. At the southern tip of Huff Rock Ridge lies about an acre or so of flat land. This site is known to this day as 'the ball field'. One wonders how often they had to chase a ball down the side of the mountain.

## SNAKE DEN

Just to the south of the ball field the ridge comes to a sudden end at a near vertical buff. It lies above where the South Fork of the Powell River makes a ninety degree turn from the southeast to the northeast. In that bluff lies the most famous snake den for miles around. Snakes are cold blooded, and require external heat to get warmed up enough to move. They hibernate in the winter, seeking out the warmth provided by earth's interior lying beneath the frost line. They like a southern exposure on a rocky surface, which will capture and hold the sun's heat on cool days when the sun lies low on the southern horizon. They also need to have cracks in the rock that are wide enough to allow them to crawl in, but narrow enough to keep predators, such as eagles, hawks, and turkeys out. The cracks must penetrate the rock deeply enough to provide entry to spaces below the frost line, and away from the chilling breezes that howl up the gorge. All these physical requirements mean that such places are few and far between.

All kinds of species of snakes will crawl into these dens, and curl up in balls all together. In the spring and summer when the nights remain cold, but some of the days are warm the snakes will crawl out onto the ledges to sun themselves. When the nights warm, the snakes will disperse, crawling miles from the den. In the fall the process reverses itself, and they will congregate closer and closer to the den.

Snake hunting is an old Ridge Runner's sport. They climb all over the ledges of Snake Den, sometimes coming eyeball to eye ball with the sunning snakes. They usually do not kill the snakes, but capture them with a snake stick, and take them home in a gunny sack and keep them for months at a time, sometimes even feeding them. This process usually ends with the release of the snake. Sometimes, however, the snakes find their way into the snake handling religions of the Deep South. The author once knew the major supplier of snakes for this trade, but his hunting grounds were Black Mountain, and not Powell.



**VIEW FROM SNAKE DEN**

In the center of this photograph one can see the fields south of Durham's Rock, which lies to the right of the field, and on the edge of the mountain. In the center background one can see the fields of Morris's Butt at the north side of Maple Gap. One readily gets a sense of the altitude of Snake Den when one looks down on these features that in themselves seemed to be so high. In the right background one sees the dim ridge line of Stone Mountain.

**WASHBOARD FALLS**

Continuing the tour, let us return to Stagger Weed. The main road up the river makes a ninety degree turn to the right in order to get around the upper end of Stagger Weed. From the outside of this bend a logging road takes off to the left, and toward the river. Walk down it a hundred or so yards to the river, and wade across it. The river has native trout in it. Walk up the far bank. It will be a difficult task in several places. In other segments you will note the remains of an old tram railroad bed that once was used to carry logs down to the valley floor. In places it

has been scoured away by the flooding torrents that from time to time come roaring down the gorge. This site raises the issue of the early logging that occurred in the river's watershed.

The Big Cherry tract was judged to have been the best timber tract in the whole area. In 1892 Elihu Debusk built the first saw mill on the South Fork. It must have been a sizable operation, as he built a commissary (the first store in Cracker's Neck) that same year. J. B. Adams started his own mill in 1904, and in 1906 DeBusk sold his mill to Adams and his store to Minton Wampler. Though collapsing, this building still stands at the intersection of Egan Road with Cracker's Neck Road. Adams soon built another store on the Mountain at Big Cherry, and used paper script at both places. He moved the actual 'set' of the mill several times, with the Big Blue Spring being one of them. His key men at the sets were 'colored' men. A local gang of white men ran these folks off, who returned to West Virginia. Adams could not find any white men who knew how to set the mill up, so he brought the 'colored' men back, and who soon had the mill up and running. It was Adams who built the tram railroad up the gorge. It hauled logs out of the mountain, which were sawed at the mill sets in the Valley floor. The grade was steep, and mules were used to pull the empty cars back up the mountain. The loaded cars were run down grade by gravity. Worley Tate held this job for a long time. The job was called 'the Mule Epy'. There was a switch-back near the intake. Wiley Holloman was killed near it when his loaded car hit some track that had been previously damaged when George Shoop had wrecked there. Adams later extended the tram road all the way to the main railroad at the River View Cemetery in East Stone Gap. Tug River Lumber Company bought Adams out, and moved the entire operation to the top of the mountain at Big Cherry. We will return to that phase of the logging history of the South Fork later.

The walk up the river towards Washboard Falls passes through groves of trees that were left standing during the logging days because the terrain was too rough to get them out. Closer to the river rhododendron grows in one continuous thicket all the way to the beginnings of the river. Mountaineers call rhododendron 'mountain laurel', and those thickets 'laurel hells'. The beautiful flowering shrub that outsiders call 'laurel' is called 'ivy' by mountaineers.

The walk up the river to Washboard Falls is a little over a quarter of a mile. It is best made in the spring when the river is full but not flooding, and the laurel and ivy are in bloom. This would be late May or early June. People like to trout fish this stretch of the river because the water is well oxygenated by passing over the falls, and the trout thrive here. Deer come down out of the mountain to drink here, and the cliffs provide excellent dens for the bear.



**SOUTH FORK OF THE POWELL RIVER WITHIN THE GORGE**



**WASHBOARD FALLS**



**WASHBOARD FALLS**

**DOUBLE CHESTNUT**

In the days before the chestnut blight of the 1930's one in every four trees up and down the Appalachians was an American Chestnut. These trees produced a munificent harvest of nuts that was the base of a massive food pyramid that fed squirrels, deer, elk, bear, and humans. The wood was rot resistant, and easy to split. For these reasons it made excellent fence rails, and log cabins. After death, they stood on their stumps for decades, and people passing them would memorialize the sites of the most noteworthy. High up the gorge and across the river to the southwest of Snake Den and on the Wise-Scott Co. line lies a pass in the mountain top, and which is a hundred feet lower than Maple Gap, and which provides passage from the Valley of the Powell River to that of the Clinch River via Cove Creek. Stanleytown lies in Hunter's Valley at the bottom here, and many families have married across this divide. The site also is an excellent place to deer hunt, because the animals also use it as a passage way. Therefore, this isolated gap was of significance to people. Living there on the north side was a double chestnut, two trunks coming from one stump. It was one of the last to rot and to fall. The

pass became known as 'Double Chestnut'. It, even today, is an iconic point of reference for the



**THE LARGER OF THE DOUBLE CHESTNUT TRUNKS LIES ROTTING  
ON THE GROUND - IN ABOUT 1986**

Ridge Runner.

### **HUFF ROCK FIELDS**

High on top of the southern end of Grindstone Ridge lies a collection of massive boulders collectively known as Huff Rock. Composed of a layer of stone known as Lee Conglomerate, this beautiful layer of rock once covered the entire region. It has all eroded away except for places like the White Rocks of Ewing in Lee County, boulders on top of Little Stone Mountain, Guest River Gorge, and Birch Knob near Clintwood. Eroded passageways within Huff Rock provide shelter for people from the elements.

There are two oral traditions of such people having stayed there. According to one "Huff scouted out (was a draft dodger) during the Civil War and lived under the rock. A long haired red headed woman lived with him. They came and got him and shot him." In another, "Bill Huff lived at he Old Blanton Place (the Lige Neely place above Sugar Camp). He was awfully bad to pout at his wife, so one day he got mad and left and was gone for three months. He made his hiding place under the rocks at Huff Rock. He lived on roasting ears and meat, which he killed. He was given up for dead until one day he came walking out with his old trusty rifle."



**HUFF ROCK FIELD LOOKING TO THE NORTH - THE ROCK IS TO THE REAR OF THE CAMERA**  
**1965**



**VIEW FROM HUFF ROCK FIELD 1965**

Taken from the left to the right one sees Morris's Butt; Wild Cat Valley; the origin of Wallen's Ridge with no shopping center, no prison, and no college; Powell Valley; and Stone Mountain.

On the topographic map one sees the Jones Fields. No one knows who 'Jones' was, but Ed Dickenson grew up there. He once gave me a tour of the collapsing house. From there it is just down "Stump Hollow" to the left hand branch of the Old Lake at Big Cherry. Coming up from Long Hollow the mountain road branched here, with the right hand branch going to Huff Rock and the road down Chandler Mountain. The left hand fork was the main trail coming into Powell Valley from Clinch Valley via High Knob. It ran along the northern edge of Grindstone Ridge, and was called 'The Old Baptist Trail' because many of the people coming in were part of the Big Stoney Creek Baptist Association at Fort Blackmore. They were to form the first church in Wise County, the Blue Spring Baptist Church, which was located at Fraley Park in Big Stone Gap. This intersection is also the start of the trail that went to the steam donkey engine that powered the cable that pulled the 'incline' tram car up the hill from the John Tate's Place on Egan Road. When the Tug River Corporation bought out Adams, they abandoned the tram road down the river, and the saw mill set in the Valley, and put a band mill up at Big Cherry. This site was later occupied by the old lake, backed up by the oldest of the three dams that are now part

of the water works lake. Their attempts to transport their sawed lumber down the mountain by this process proved unsatisfactory. When it was being built Davy Galloway was walking up the mountain ahead of the car, which was filled with rails. He had a hold on the rope that was pulling the car when the cable suddenly shot thirty feet up in the air, taking him with it. He lost his grip, and broke both legs in the resulting fall. Grover Dickenson, brother to Ed, pulled these rails out of the mountain with a horse as part of the scrap iron drive during World War II.

Tug River then put in a narrow gauge steam driven dummy line from the band mill through Beaver Dam Gap, and which ran on the very edge of the cliff line to the 'Sinks' (the present rock quarry), on to Hoot Owl Hollow. One can still see the road bed through the laurel hell to the west of the road in the hollow. It went on down 'Tug Hill' and through Josephine to Dorchester Junction, where it met the standard railroad.

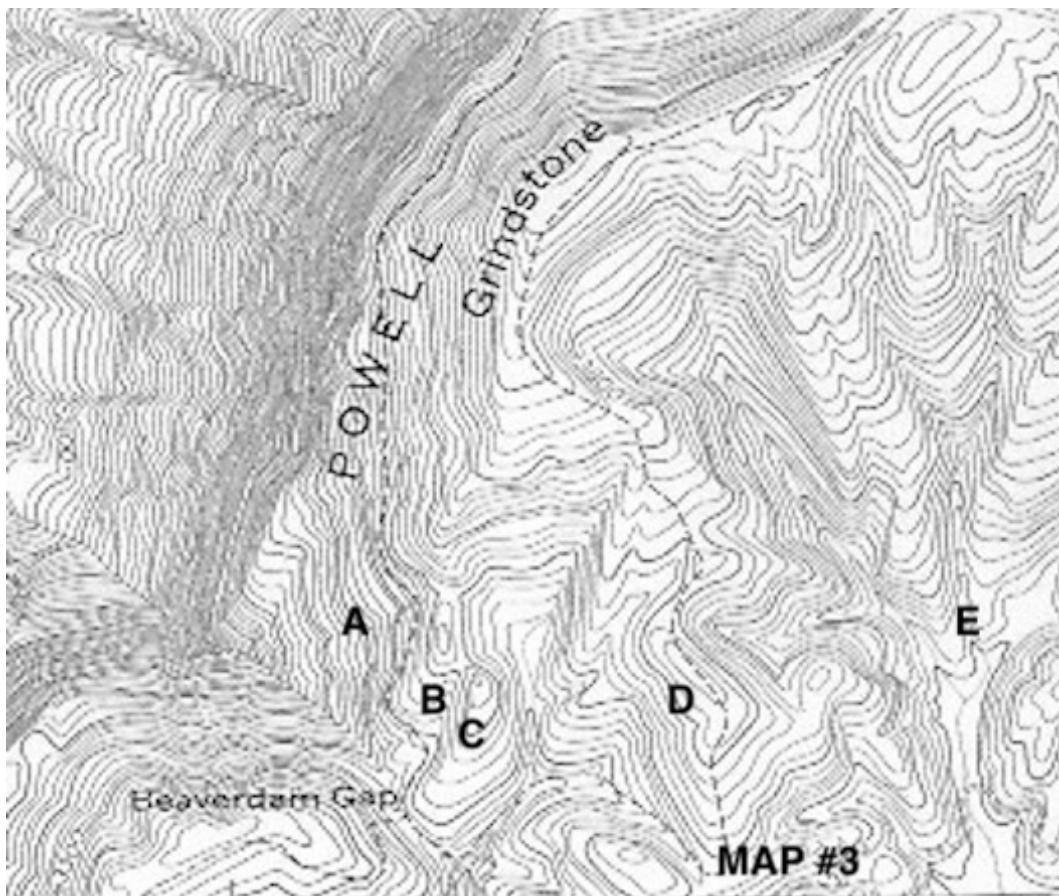
The company camp was at Grassy Spring, located on the ridge line above another feeder to the Old Lake. It consisted of about a hundred 'houses', which were built on posts and had no chimneys. Smoke from their fires exited via a stove pipe stuck through the sidewall. There was a commissary, a church, and a school here. Down under what is now the Old Lake there had been located a large wild cherry tree in the middle of the bottom. This is the origin of the name 'Big Cherry'. There was a blacksmith shop there, whose collapsed chimney can be seen under water during dry spells. The band mill was likely near by.

As mentioned in several places above, the price in injury to the workers in this timbering operation was heavy. 'Uncle' John Chandler had three sons killed while timbering on the South Fork of Powell River. They were John M., Morrell, and Charlie.

#### **BEAVER DAM GAP, DANIEL DAVENPORT'S INN, AND THE STILL**

Beaver Dam Gap is prominently visible from the Valley Road 610 behind the Lonesome Pine Country Club. The cliff line on which the tram line ran is obvious. The key to map #3 is below:

- A - The narrow gauge steam tram line
- B - site of the still
- C - site of Daniel Davenport's Inn
- D - The Old Baptist Trail to High Knob and Fort Blackmore
- E - The head of the South Fork of the Powell River



The narrow gauge steam railroad bed was used by jeeps until about 1960, when rock falls and uprooted trees closed it. It was an exciting ride. One could hang out the jeep and find one's self suspended over the valley below, and enjoy the opportunity to see the backs of hawks that were flying beneath.

The 1850 census shows that Danile Davenport had an inn at point C, in the side of what today are known as the Davenport Fields. Fifty feet to the southeast lies the spring. Also in the community were a store and several houses. This gives some idea of the amount of traffic this road carried.

Unrelated to all the above the author found an old still in the hollow at point B. It had a number of interesting features demonstrated in the following photographs. First and foremost it



**THE COOKER**

was made entirely of galvanized iron - no copper whatsoever. Therefore the cooling worm was a straight galvanized pipe. A wash tub contained the sour mash. Clearly the whisky produced here was for selling, and not for drinking. The cooker was a garbage can whose style dated to

the era between the two World Wars. It had been cut with several pick ax slashes, giving testimony of a visit by the revenuers, likely during prohibition.



**FIREPIT, WORM, AND SOUR MASH TUB**

The head of the South Fork of Powell River is inaccessible, as it lies in a very swampy laurel hell.

## **Bibliography**

The core document used in this article is entitled “Cracker’s Neck Document”, which was written on January 20, 1961 by W. B. Galloway, Joe Dorton, and John W. Dickenson. The author’s Book The Bear Grass, a History was used. The lore is heavily laced with the input of numerous good friends, Ridge Runners all, who have guided me through Powell Mountain most of my adult life. The genealogy information was obtained online. All the pictures except the one of the wild hyacinths are from my collection of some 3000 35 mm color slides beginning in 1963, and which I just recently converted to JPEG format.