

THE EARLY TIMBER INDUSTRY WITHIN THE GAP IN STONE MOUNTAIN ALONG THE POWELL RIVER HIKING TRAIL

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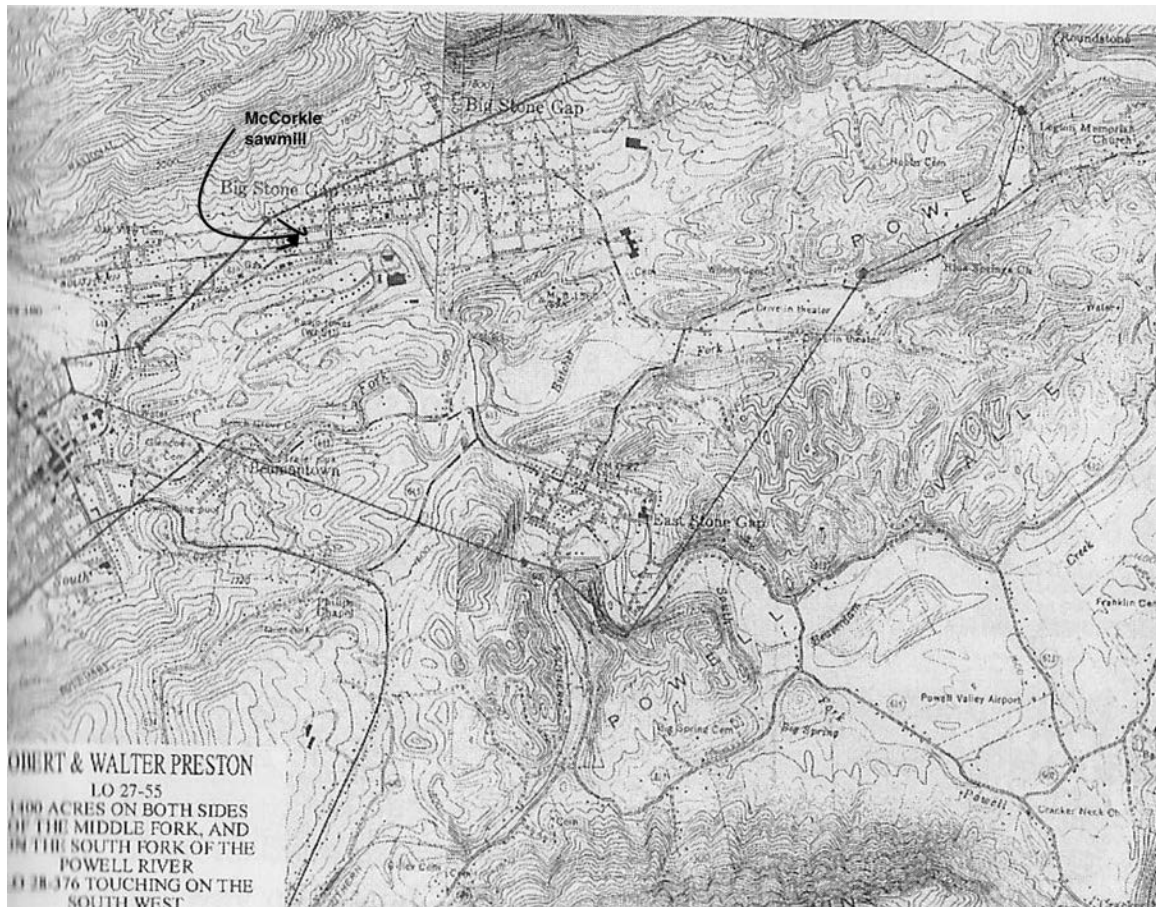
Near the longitudinal center of Little Stone Mountain lies Dark Hollow, which is formed between two verticalized rock formations. The hollow represents the softer material that was caught between these harder rock formations, and was thus eroded in the approximate 3 ½ million years since they were pushed up by the collision of the African continental plate with the North American one. Roaring Branch Hollow was formed by the same events. The northern section of the Town of Big Stone Gap, called Little Italy, or Italy Bottom, was turned into a wedge by this force, and was thrust against Stone / Little Stone Mountain with such strength that the mountain cracked and the two fragments were pushed to a slight angle to each other. The crack subsided in the process, and water from the Appalachia side began to run through, and to erode it into the present gap in the mountain.

Water found its way through the northern rock formation, and the hollow where the Appalachia Reservoir and Ben's Branch eroded out, creating a divide between the waters of Ben's Branch and Dark Hollow Branch.



The 'Olinger Survey' of 62,000 acres (LO 35-291)⁽¹⁾, which included Little Stone Mountain as well as the Gap itself, was bought by the corporate ancestor of Penn Virginia Corporation in 1880⁽²⁾. In 1900 the company contracted with the M. C. McCorkle & Sons Co. (predecessor of the McCorkle Lumber Co.) to harvest all the timber on Stone Mountain (Little Stone Mt. is a portion of that mountain).⁽³⁾

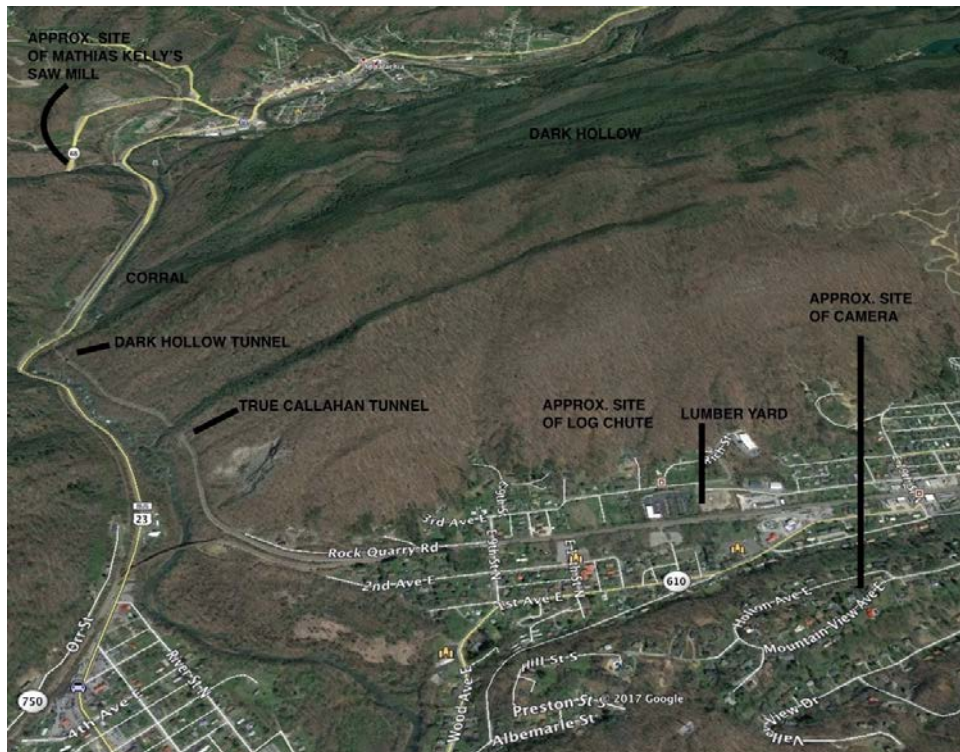
Earlier, in 1897, McCorkle had moved his operations from the Tug River in West Virginia to Wise County⁽³⁾. He bought 2,000 acres from the South Appalachian Land Company, which was the slightly enlarged Preston Grant (LO 27-55) of 1,400 acres⁽⁵⁾. He placed his sawmill and lumberyard in the northwest corner of this tract. In today's terms it ran from Mountain Empire Older Citizens east to E. 23rd St.



McCorkle logged the southern face of Little Black Mountain just to the north of his mill by running the logs down an earthen chute on the face of the mountain. The logs moved so fast that the friction heated them up to the point that the sap turned to steam, and the logs would explode making a sound like a pistol shot. This chute was in the general area of the current PACE building on Rich Street.

Roaring Branch was too rugged to be logged, even with mules or oxen, but in the early days of settlement Dark Hollow was logged. It is likely that some of the lumber used to build the earliest frame dwellings in the Town of Big Stone Gap came

(6)



(7)

The L&N tracks had been in place for at least 9 years before the logging in Dark Hollow could have begun. These logs could not have been pulled over the two nearly vertical rock spines (the one Dark Hollow Tunnel and the true Callahan Tunnel are bored through) that lay between that hollow and the McCorkle saw mill. A few yards south of the corral there is an excavated highwall to the east side of the track that could have served as a loading dock. However, this site had heavy equipment run over it as part of the cleaning up operation of a coal train wreck here about 1980, and any remains of this possible log yard and loading ramp were disturbed. There is no evidence of a sidetrack ever having been placed here. An expert who has examined the site thinks that there is enough room there for one to have been present.⁽⁸⁾

It is known that logs were brought in to the mills in the Town of Big Stone Gap on one railroad, and were switched to the cars of another, in order to get them to the mill. The narrow gauge 'dummy line', officially named the Big Stone Gap and Powell Valley Railroad, carried logs from the Preston Tract to the depots of the South Atlantic and Ohio and to the Louisville and Nashville for export to England and to Germany.⁽⁴⁾ Similarly, the Dark Hollow logs could have been loaded onto the L&N at the mouth of Dark Hollow, transported to the L&N depot in Cadet, reloaded onto cars of the Dummy Line, and taken to the McCorkle mill. The Dummy line crossed the McCorkle mill tract just west of E. 19th St.⁽⁸⁾

It is known that floating logs down the Powell River from the gap in Stone Mountain was entertained, and possibly even attempted. This process was found wanting, and the construction of a log flume was entertained, but not implemented.⁽⁴⁾ The fact that George Dutton had a mill located where the South and North Forks ⁽⁴⁾ (the Middle Fork of Powell River is Butcher's Fork – there is another North Fork at Pennington Gap) come together at the west end of the Town of Big Stone Gap would suggest that it received its logs from the river.

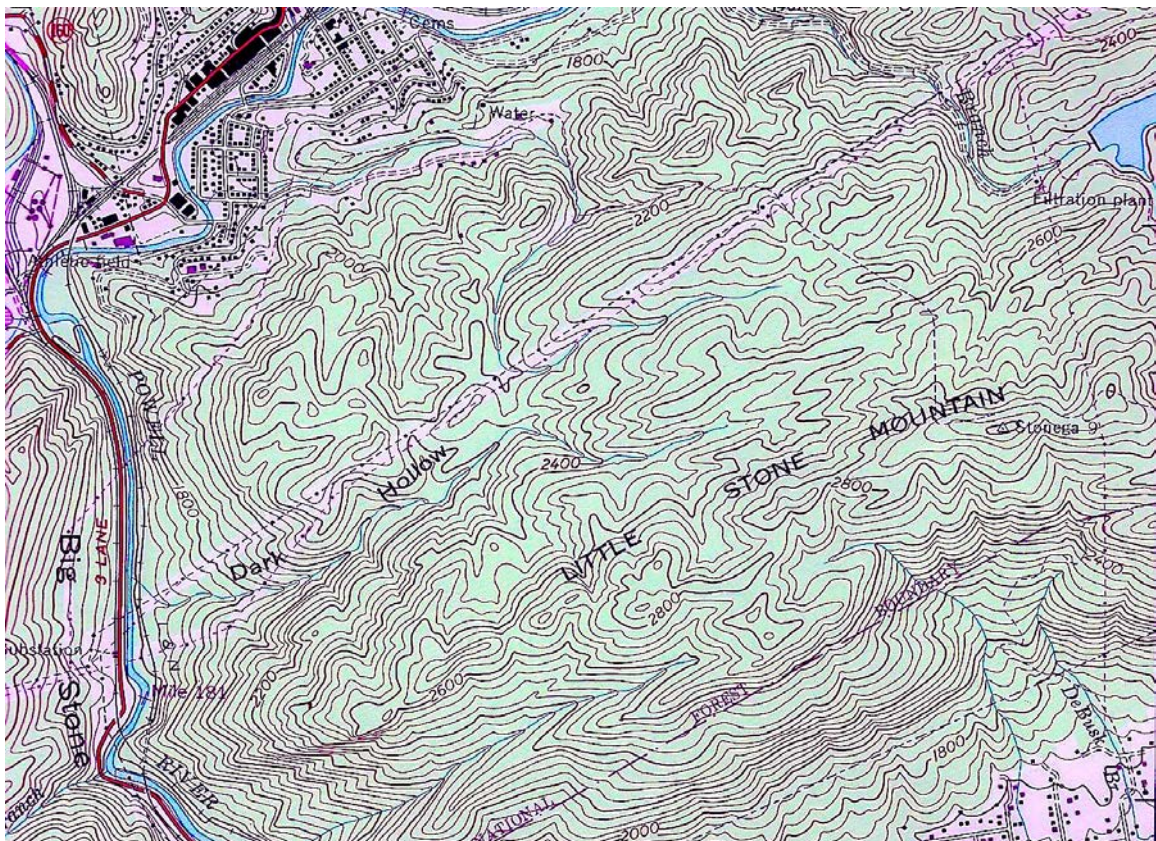
Logs could have been dragged from Dark Hollow to the McCorkle mill by oxen or by mules. Dragging walnut logs to Abingdon had proved to be no impediment. This would have required some sort of bridge to have been constructed over the L&N tracks near the corral at the mouth of Dark Hollow, and the presence of a ford in the river to have provided access to the primitive road that lay on the western side. There is no evidence of either.

The Dark Hollow logging operation began at Lost Camp, which lies in a gravel bed formed by the inclusion bodies derived from the Lee Conglomerate formation, at the head spring of Dark Hollow Creek. It is located about a half mile to the southwest of the Appalachia water filtration plant. A corduroy road of about 8 feet width ran along an excavated bench the length of Dark Hollow. There was a connecting corduroy road that ran up the hollow of Cold Spring Drive and across its divide with Dark Hollow. Remains of the bridge trusses across Dark Hollow Creek

can still be found just upstream from this junction. Corduroy logs can be seen just down stream from this junction.

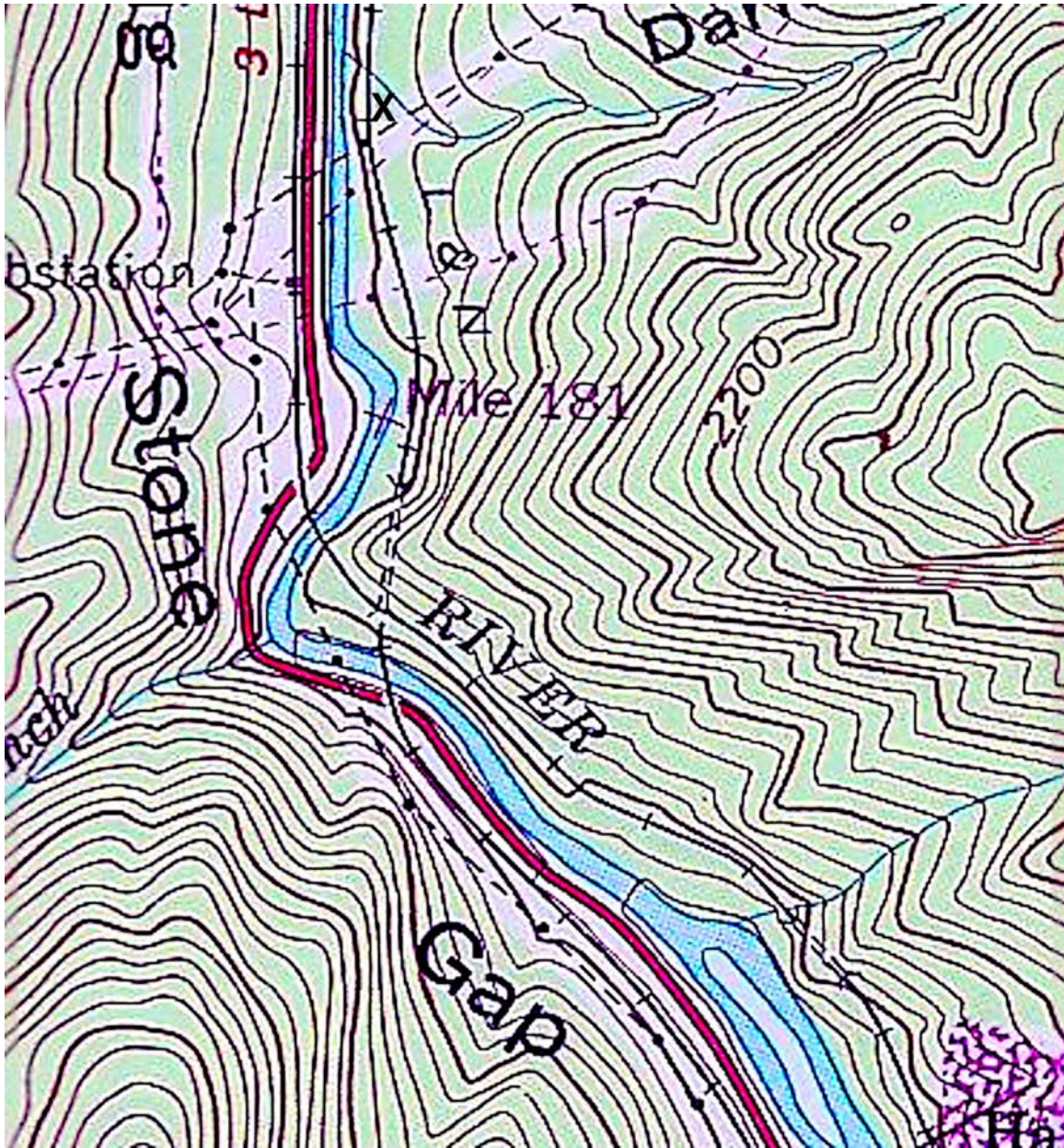
The bottom quarter of a mile of this road was washed away, along with its supporting earth, in the flood of 1977. However, where the creek goes under the present Powell River Trail (the old L&N RR track) before it empties into the river, lay the remains of the draft animal holding pen, or corral. Looking from the trail toward the level in the southeastern corner formed by the junction of the creek and the trail one can see it. Walking over into the woods one can see further remnants of the corral. The accompanying pictures, along with their explanations, will help the hiker enjoy this bit of our history.

Topographic Map of Dark Hollow And the Powell River Trail



The head spring at Lost Camp lies about an inch due north of the "M" in Little Stone Mountain. Half way down the hollow one can see the connecting head of Cold Spring Creek.

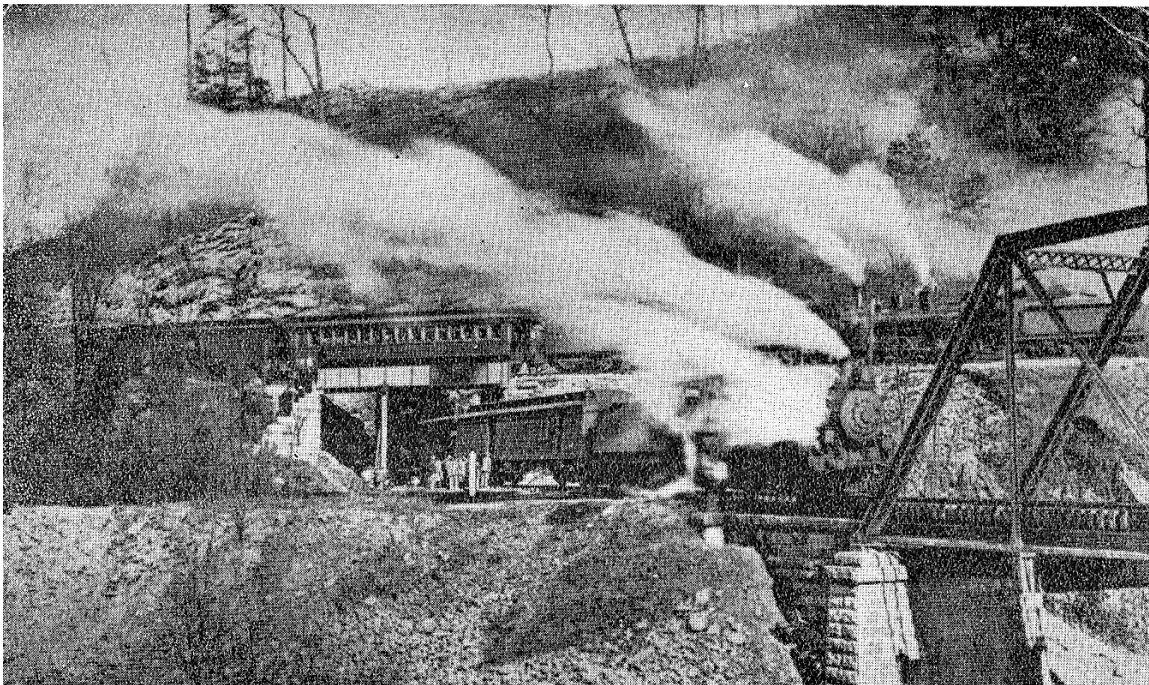
Corral Location of the Topographic Map



The "X" placed in the southeastern corner of the junction of Dark Hollow Creek and the railroad bed is the location of the corral. The corduroy road ended very near to here, but all traces of it have been washed away at this site. The tunnel due south of the corral was known in the author's youth as Dark Hollow Tunnel, and was so marked on an L&N map at the time. Callahan Tunnel was the name of the tunnel located an 1/8th of a mile north of the rock quarry in Big Stone Gap on the

Southern Railroad, and was so designated by a large cast iron sign that stood by the western edge of its northern entrance until about 2000, when it, along with the “zero T” mileage marker at Appalachia, were stolen. In some of his short stories, John Fox, Jr., referred to Washington Rock, located on the western river bank at the southern end of the ‘straights’ on Business 23, as “Callahan’s Nose”. An old SA&O RR brochure has a sketch of the southern entrance to the tunnel labeled as “Dark Tunnel (Callahan’s Nose Tunnel)”⁽⁵⁾. The name “Callahan’s Nose Tunnel”, located close by Washington Rock, was tentatively selected as the name of the tunnel to be used on the hiking trail designations. Somehow the ‘nose’ got dropped. ‘Callahan’ refers to Edward Callahan, a long hunter who lived on the north bank of the North Fork of the Holston River south of Macy’s Spring. His favorite hunting spot was “Caliham’s Spring’, which is the head spring of Preacher’s Creek.⁽⁶⁾ Callahan Creek above Appalachia is also named after him.

Exchange of Passengers Between the
Louisville and Nashville
&
The South Atlantic and Ohio
At the Southern End of
Dark Hollow Tunnel



The photo above is interesting for a number of reasons. It is mislabeled on its bottom as having involved the Virginia and Southwestern RR, which bought the SA&O in 1910. For the purposes of this article this photo can be used to approximate the date of the logging operations in Dark Hollow, which lies on the backside

of the hill in the background. Even though the name on the coal tender of the railroad owning the engine on the upper track (current Norfolk Southern RR) is obscured in the photo, examination of the configuration of the engine and its position at the rear of its train of passenger coaches provide excellent datable evidence. The engine pushing the passenger train toward Appalachia on the current Norfolk Southern track is shown on page 9 of Carl Collins' Train Pictures. It is the same model as the one shown in the photo on page 65 of Ed Wolfe's Southern Railway Appalachia Division. Wolfe states that there were two of these identical engines purchased by the South Atlantic and Ohio RR in 1887, and that they had been sold "prior to 1896". Wolfe on page 80 documents that the SA&O arrived in both Big Stone Gap and Appalachia in 1890. On page 112 Wolfe further states that the L&N arrived in BSG & Appalachia in 1891. On pg. 92 of Wolfe a photo shows one of these two engines in the Appalachia SA&O yards in 1890. Incidentally, Wolfe on page 108 shows a sketch from a SA&O brochure showing the RR crossing in the above photo, and names it as "Dark Tunnel (Callahan's Nose Tunnel)".

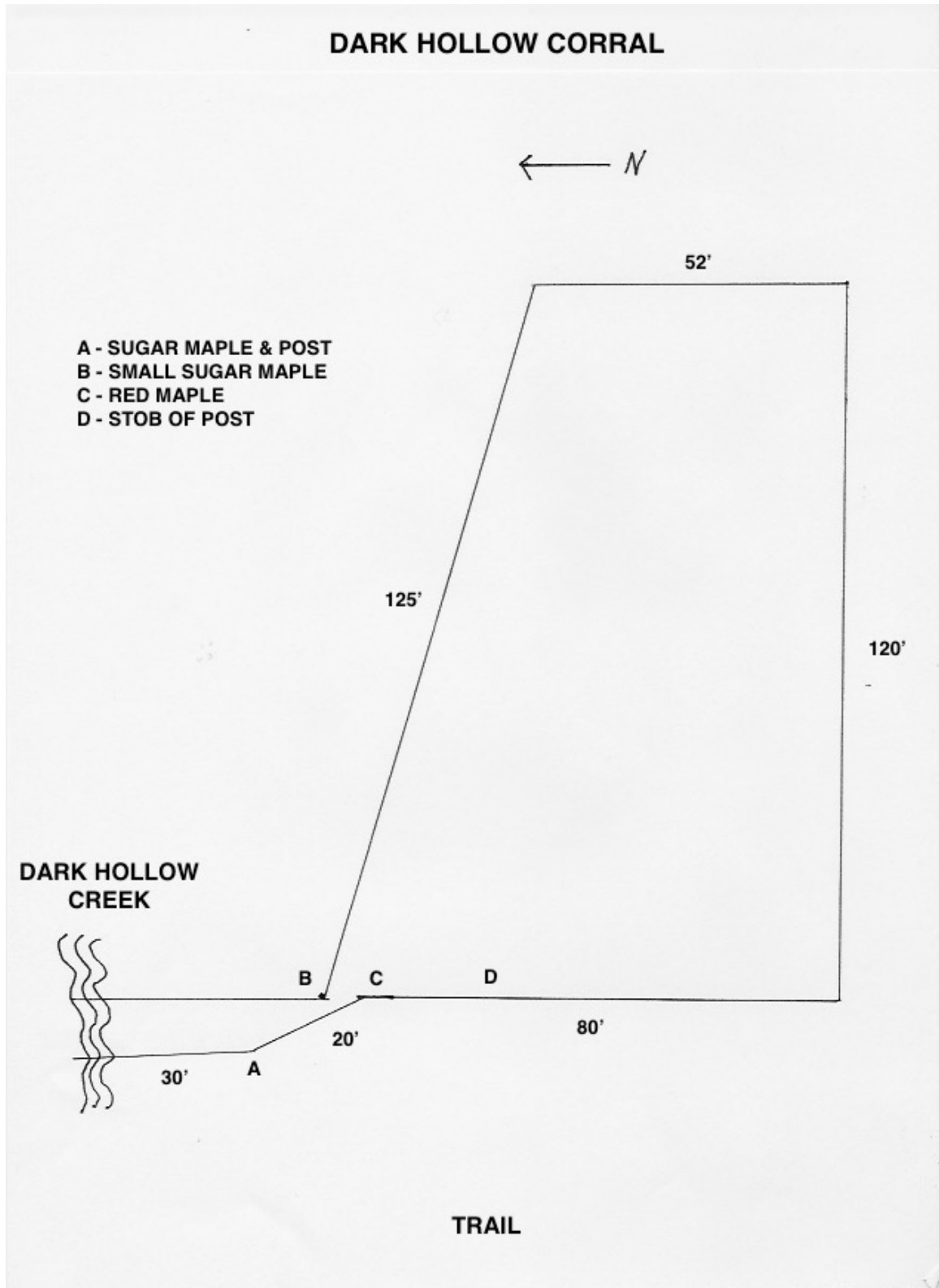
The fact that the SA&O engine is pushing its passenger train suggests that the "Y" used to turn locomotives around had not been built in Appalachia at the point in time when the photo was taken. The "Y" was constructed sometime after 1893, as evidenced by a map drawn that year by the USGS.⁽⁹⁾ Therefore, the window of possibility for this photo having been taken is 1891-1895. This date is five years earlier than the one obtained from the VCI and McCorkle contract records.

This photo shows the hill in its background to have been nearly totally clear-cut. It is not known if this southern exposure of the hill that Dark Hollow Tunnel was cut through was cut at the same time as its northern exposure (Dark Hollow).

The Wise DB 5-300 shows that Mathias Kelly was operating a sawmill near the mouth of Pigeon Creek (SA&O Appalachia Yards) prior to 1890. He did not own the land in Dark Hollow, but it does show that logging in the area was occurring prior to the coming of the railroad. The "BSG Post" documents several logging operations in the region in the 1880's, along with sawmills having been located near the Town of Big Stone Gap. The issue of how the lumber from Kelly's Pigeon Creek sawmill and the logs from Dark Hollow were transported to Big Stone Gap is unknown. However, Kelly's lumber could have been moved only by wagon. A primitive road between Appalachia and Big Stone Gap lay more or less under the present Norfolk Southern track from Pigeon Creek to Washington Rock. The logs from Dark Hollow could have been dragged across the river to this road, and on to the sawmills in Powell Valley. It is documented that walnut logs were dragged from all over Wise County to Abingdon by oxen in the 1880's.⁽¹⁾

George Dutton owned a sawmill at the forks of the Powell River at the western end of the Town of Big Stone Gap in 1891.⁽¹⁾ Such a location would make the most sense if that mill had received logs that had been floated down the two forks of the river.

Diagram of the Dark Hollow Corral



The corral is located on a flat on the lip of the original riverbank, now altered by the L&N RR track bed (the current Powell River Trail). Its northern, eastern, and southern lines are rock walls constructed with uncut stones from the moraine from Little Stone Mountain. Its western line is of Paige Wire (woven wire) topped with a strand of barbed wire. There is a chute extending from its northwestern corner to the creek, allowing the draft animals to water themselves. Photographs of these features are below.

View of the Northwest Corner of the Corral From
The Powell River Trail



The photographer is standing on the Powell River Trail. The riprap bed of Dark Hollow Creek is to the north (left of picture); point 'A', the large sugar maple and fence post, are in the center; points 'B' & 'C' are to the south. The chute to the creek originates from the gap in the fence between points 'B' & 'C' and runs behind point 'A' to the creek. The rocks of the northern side of the corral may be seen behind and between trees 'B' & 'C'. Since the fence post is in such remarkable condition after approximately 135 years, one would suspect that it is chestnut.

Sugar Maple, Post, and Paige Wire



The Paige wire has cut parallel striations into the sugar maple, as it grew around the wire in the approximate 135 years since it was nailed to the then sapling.





The Paige wire on the other (east) side of the tree gave strength to the chute to the creek. The section of the fence north of the maple has been swept downstream to the west by the flood of 1977.



Viewing the sugar maple and post looking west at the trail.



The space between the wire on the west side and the east side gives the diameter of the maple tree when it was appropriated as a fence post. It was about 8 inches.



The stub of a fence post on the western side of the corral



The original culvert under the L&N RR track, made from cut stone



Stonewall forming the north side of the corral, with the sugar maple and post 'A'.
The chute to the creek runs to the right of the tree.



Looking west down the north stone wall of the corral



Paige wire of the western side of the corral, buried in leaves



Eastern stonewall of the corral



Approximate position of the southwestern corner of the corral



The eastern stonewall of the corral, view #1



The eastern stonewall, view #2



Strand of wire at the red maple (point C)



Strand of wire from the western side of the corral



Points A & B, which formed the entrance to the chute to the creek



Looking west down the
southern side of the corral

There are no artifacts of the
wall or fence found here

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Much of the information used in this article comes from the author himself, who played in Dark Hollow when he was growing up in Appalachia. His grandfather had worked on the SA&O, the V&SW, and the Southern RR’s from 1891 to 1955, and was a source of information. The author’s father bought the eastern extent of the McCorkle tract in the Town of Big Stone Gap, and the author labored building houses on it, and collected local recollections concerning the McCorkle operations in the ‘Southern’ section of town, and on Little Stone Mountain.