Research
Those venturing to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in search of old-growth trees will not find many. The Little River Railroad and Lumber Company Museum in Townsend, Tennessee (four miles from the park entrance) tells the reason. The museum exhibits artifacts from the Little River Railroad and Lumber Company, which removed the last of the virgin timber within the Tennessee section of the park in a time when engineering advances made logging easier, and when the dawn of government oversight and protection measures instigated a mad rush to harvest the last of the giant trees.

The U.S. Congress, alarmed at the rate of destruction from harvesting practices throughout the country, passed the 1911 Weeks Act authorizing the federal government to buy land for stream protection and establish national forests. Within weeks, the U.S. Forest Service put out a report, “Purchase of Land in the Southern Appalachian and the White Mountains,” stating that because of their altitude and steep terrain, these regions were in dire need of protection. Preservationists in the region pressured the state and federal government to establish the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Amid this political climate, the Little River Company was gobbling up or leasing whatever land it could.

Set up by entrepreneur W. B. Townsend in 1901, the Little River Railroad and Lumber Company acquired title to 80,000 acres of land in the Little River watershed on the Tennessee side of what is now the national park. Originally from Pennsylvania, Townsend may have been influenced by a USFS report from 1897 that lauded the abundance of valuable timber in this part of the country. USFS dendrologist George Sudworth wrote the area consisted of “primeval forests” that “guard cold crystal streams that run throughout the year.” He went on, “Huge tulip poplars with ages numbered in centuries crowd the deep coves and mountainsides with their gigantic forms.”

Within 40 years of Sudworth’s assessment, the virgin forests were obliterated by two forces: chestnut blight and the industriousness of the Little River Lumber and Railroad Company. The advent of new technology allowed the company to reach areas deemed uneconomical and too dangerous to log in the past.
The Shay engine on display at the museum was the ultimate “little engine that could.” Invented in the late 1800s, the Shay used a series of gears to turn the wheels, allowing it to carry heavy loads up steep hills and around razor-sharp bends. With the Shay, the company moved operations into the upper reaches of the Little River watershed. There the company could access the virgin stands of tulip poplar, chestnut, and hemlock described by Sudworth in 1897.

However, the company couldn’t access all of the lands in the Little River watershed. One holdout, William Walker, owned some of the most valuable timber in a tributary of the Little River. For years Walker refused to sell or lease his land, which Townsend wanted to build a railroad. Folklore has it that in 1919, Townsend went to Walker on his deathbed and persuaded him to sign over his land, assuring him that his majestic trees wouldn’t be cut.

One can imagine why Walker, a mountain man independent from cultural norms (it was said he had three wives and as many as twenty children), was reluctant to sell. As railroads inveigled their way into the forest depths, so did the lumbermen and their families. They lived in shacks called setoffs, examples of which are on display at the museum. These 12-by-12-foot mobile homes were placed on flatbed railroad cars and trudged up the mountains on
rail cars. Two or three might be set next to each other along the railroad bed to house lumber workers and their families. Communities called *stringtowns* sprouted up along with them. It was common to find general stores, blacksmiths, and makeshift schools. Once an area was harvested and operations moved on, the community moved as well.

It took a small army to cut and load the trees on the rail cars. Men used steam-powered “skidders,” wheels of long cable let out and dragged up the sides of slopes to access cut logs. The men wrapped the cable around the trunks and dragged them down the slopes to a waiting crane that lifted them onto a flatbed railcar. Once the workers stacked twelve or more logs, a train carried the timber down the steep slopes to town.

There was little government oversight or regulations on forestry practices, and forest fires were common. Indeed, the unheralded pace of timber cutting alarmed preservationists determined to turn the area into a tourist mecca. But the government didn’t own the mountains. And since much of the mountain land was either leased or owned by companies such as Little River, government officials had to negotiate with the lumber companies.

The Little River Company took advantage of its position. It negotiated the sale of 75,000 acres to the state of Tennessee in 1926, with the caveat the company could still harvest for another decade. And then Little River Company went after the virgin timber ambitiously.

By 1934, the area around the Little River watershed region was a wasteland of slash and dead chestnut trees. Men recruited into the federal Civilian Conservation Corps to develop the national park discovered sites filled with cast-off limbs and debris. One of the first things CCC had to do was clear these abandoned lumber towns to prevent forest fires. And when Townsend died in 1936, the company disregarded its agreement with Walker and cut the last of the virgin timber in the watershed.

After decades of harvesting, the Little River Lumber Company closed in 1939. Families who lived and worked in the park confines were forced to move out through the government’s use of eminent domain. Those who stayed (the elderly and a few who refused to leave) were not allowed to cut timber for

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firewood or building. In addition, the government forbade them to hunt, raise cattle, or let any livestock graze in the mountain pastures.

Although there are still a few places where one can see old-growth trees, most of the Smoky Mountains today is second- or third-generation forest.

Four miles from the Townsend entrance to the park is the Tremont Institute, an educational and research facility located near one of the last areas harvested by the Little River Company. While hiking the trail that leads up to Spruce Flats Falls, I came upon a towering tulip poplar, one of the few remaining that escaped the axe. I wondered if William Walker had once sat under the shade of this magnificent tree. Viewing it reminded me of this statement by Sudworth in an address in 1897: “Big black cherries stare at you from their lofty heights and seem to suppress a sigh of relief when you are gone.”

—Sheila Myers

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