

MOUNTAINS

Discovering intersection of history, nature



Sue Wasserman
Word from the Smokies

This spring, I finally began my stint as the 2022 Steve Kemp Writer-In-Residence. Coordinated and funded by Great Smoky Mountains Association, the residency allows writers to live near, work in, and draw inspiration from the Great Smoky Mountains for a period of six weeks.

Beginning this residency, at least for me, is like being a kid in the proverbial candy store. My eyes pop, thinking of all the delicious possibilities. The only challenge, given the brief time frame, is choosing what to focus on.

That thought was behind my request to use the Spring Wildflower Pilgrimage, a park event held every year at the end of April, as a jumping off point. Given the diverse offerings, I'd be able to dabble not only in nature, but in the park's history as well. I thought if I could get a quick taste, I could hone in on places and topics that resonated most.

Thanks to Ranger Brad Free, Elkmont has become one of those places. Prior to the pilgrimage, I knew absolutely nothing about what existed beyond the "turn here" sign.

But the avid history buff, who loves wearing his "cool" ranger hat, immediately piqued my curiosity when he told our group, "Elkmont is not lost, nor is it the ghost town you might have read about on the internet." As we walked, he proceeded to tell the story of William Bailey Townsend, who amassed close to 80,000 acres for his Little River Lumber Company and the town that sprung up around it.

Elkmont came to life through Free's stories — of the loggers who worked six days a week for meager pay, of railroad engineer Rooster Williams who bought one of the earliest airplanes and crashed it while showing off for the community, of the professional ringers brought in to win company baseball games, of the exclusive Daisy Town community, which emerged as a getaway for Knoxville's elite and whose structures the park is currently bringing back to life.

It was with a more powerful sense of place that I arrived back a few mornings later for a wildflower walk along the Cucumber Gap Trail. As much as I thought



Building remnants from several eras of history dot the Elkmont area of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Some structures are more than a hundred years old. PROVIDED BY SUE WASSERMAN

I wanted to learn more about each plant, I realized we would never see much of the trail at the rate our group leaders were botanizing. A new pilgrimage friend named Lisa and I sensed it was time to set out on our own.

Since neither of us had intended to wander off, we hadn't looked at a trail map. When we came to a fork in the trail, we invoked eeny-meeny-miny-mo, and turned left up the hill.

It worked. Thanks to two gents who passed us, we discovered Cucumber Gap was a loop. And, oh, what a loop it was.

Clearly, the trail earned its name for the abundance of Indian cucumber root blossoming everywhere we looked. Having sampled the root over the years in other locations, I knew it was not only edible, but delicious. I wondered if the loggers had stumbled on them and added them to their diets. Given their meager pay and excessive cost of living, I imagined foraging and hunting must have played a role in their lives.

Did they, I wondered, have the opportunity Lisa and I had to ooh and ahh over patches of umbrella leaf or large flowered trillium? Were they blown away by the excess of showy orchis that blossomed in clusters, the likes of which I've

never seen along the Little River? Or was the ooh-ing and ahh-ing, if it indeed even happened, left to the wealthier Daisy Town residents who had nothing but free time when they arrived at their vacation homes?

When we reached the Little River turnoff, I was curious about how flat the trail now seemed. It dawned on me that the train tracks were probably housed here along the river. This was just an educated guess, however, until a passerby ranger confirmed it.

Despite being whipped as we closed in on our fifth mile, my step felt lighter for having made that connection. Having a little sense of history helped me to better appreciate the bits and pieces of old structures we encountered on this last section of trail. Lisa and I wondered who had lived here. Were these vacation properties or lumber company structures? Were the wildflowers scattered across the grounds now, scattered across the grounds then?

The only thing of which I'm certain is there's so much more to learn, both about the flowers currently thriving on the trail and the people who once thrived in the community. I have a strong hunch I will be richer for understanding both.

Sue Wasserman is the 2022 Steve Kemp Writer-in-Residence in Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the author of "A Moment's Notice" and "Walk with Me: Exploring Nature's Wisdom." She has also written for the New York Times and Southern Living. She currently lives in Bakersville.



The native wildflower known as Indian cucumber root was a common food source in many Native American cultures across what is now the eastern United States. The root smells and tastes like cucumber. PROVIDED BY SUE WASSERMAN

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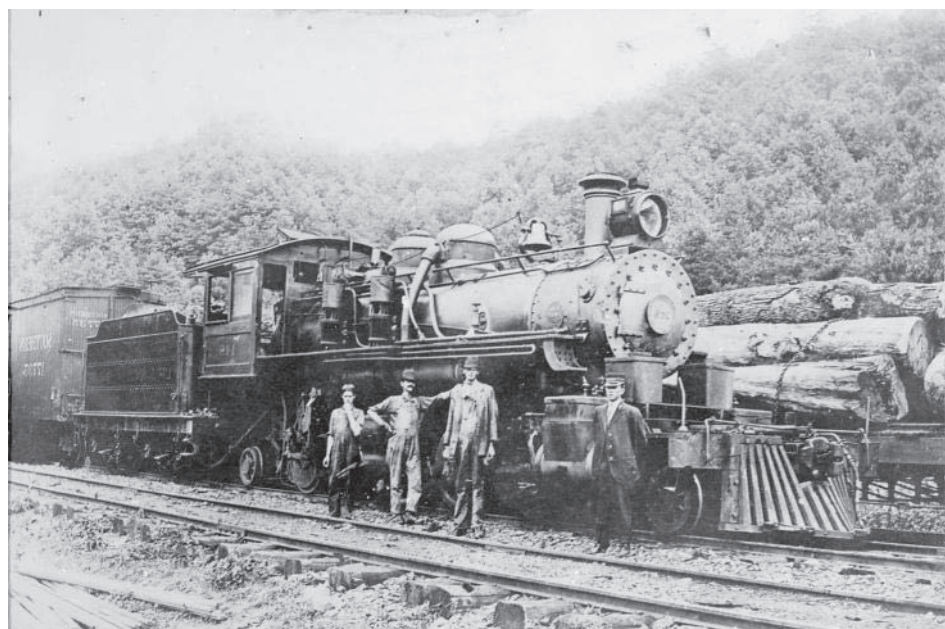
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The Little River Railroad Company Locomotive No. 148 stands ready in Elkmont, Tennessee, sometime prior to 1918. Remnants of train tracks are still visible in the area today. PROVIDED BY GSMNP ARCHIVES

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