

# *Bottom Creek — From Community to Conservancy*

Jim Crawford

In the far eastern corner of Montgomery County, cloistered atop Poor Mountain, rests The Nature Conservancy's Bottom Creek Gorge Preserve. Now the emblem of humankind's efforts to preserve diversity of nature, the preserve also harbors the fading remains of an isolated mountain community. The story of the old Bottom Creek community is the story of this region's cultural past and reminds us of our interconnectedness with the environment.

The popular preserve is a place of edges, boundaries, isolation, and awesome elevation changes. The cultural history of the preserve was molded by its unique geography, not only its physical geography but its political and cultural geography as well.

Physically, the 1,657-acre preserve lies atop Poor Mountain along the southern rim of the Roanoke Valley, where the Blue Ridge Mountains fan out into a rugged plateau. Its foundation of Precambrian granite and gneiss are some of Virginia's oldest geologic formations. From its perch at the edge of this highland plateau of uplands and ravines, Bottom Creek drops a thousand feet in less than a mile to join Goose Creek. Together they form the south fork of the Roanoke River on its course to North Carolina's Albemarle Sound. Along the creek's precipitous descent through Bottom Creek Gorge, Camp Creek cascades into the gorge, forming Bent Mountain Falls, the second highest waterfall in Virginia.

Politically, the preserve is tucked into the easternmost corner of Montgomery County, bordering the intersection of Montgomery, Roanoke, and Floyd counties. Towering Poor Mountain and the precipitous Bottom Creek Gorge served to isolate the former community of Bottom Creek from the rest of Montgomery County to the west.

Culturally, this land has been host to several distinct patterns. The beliefs of the first people to live on this land were animistic; their social and economic systems were tribal and subsistence level.<sup>1</sup> These Native Americans left very little in the way of a physical imprint. They were supplanted by an onslaught of European culture whose God reigned over all human-

kind and nature. The colonialists soon initiated the institution of slavery, which lasted nearly 250 years, deeply marking the land and its inhabitants. The first white settlers to work the land of the Bottom Creek Gorge Preserve owned slaves.<sup>2</sup> From our position 135 years after the emancipation of slaves, it is difficult to understand and interpret what we see now through the sordid lens of slavery.

The cultural landscape of this region can be traced back to sporadic contact many thousands of years before the Bottom Creek community was established. Tom Klatka, archaeologist with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, has excavated evidence of a campsite dating to the Middle Archaic Period (6000–2500 B.C.) in the Bottom Creek community. The specimens found include quartzite, quartz, and chert flakes; one quartz Guilford projectile point; and one sherd with cordmarked exterior surface and quartz temper. In relating how he found these 5,000-year-old artifacts, Klatka described the geography of the Bottom Creek Gorge Preserve. “If I wanted to find an archaic site, one thing that I know: if I go into a mountainous area and I go to a saddle or a ridge top or a ridge bench, something like that – especially an area where you’ve got some level land and you’re in very close proximity to water, small spring heads, and southern exposure, there’s very high probability of finding a site,” Klatka said.<sup>3</sup>

In the period from 500 A.D. to 1600 A.D. ancestors to the Toter Indians, (also called Toter, or Tutelo), lived extensively in this region.<sup>4</sup> Today, residents of the Bottom Creek area have found many stone points and tools of these pre-colonial peoples.<sup>5</sup>

Toter Indians of the Siouan linguistic group lived in small clans of up to 100 people per village. Their palisaded villages were located near rivers and streams. Their well-built houses were poles set in the ground in a circle and joined at the top, the sides covered with strips of bark or mats. Their gardens had many of the same crops as our gardens today: corn, tobacco, gourds, sunflowers, and beans. They also harvested wild plants and herbs and relied on hunting and fishing to provide sufficient meat. Bear, deer, elk, mountain lion, turkey, box turtle, and passenger pigeon were mainstays of their diet.

Village life consisted of activities such as pottery making, processing animal hides, tool making, cooking in a central communal area, tending garden plots, hunting, and foraging. In all likelihood, these peoples practiced animism. Each clan had a benevolent spirit, represented by a familiar animal, which provided for their needs.<sup>6</sup>

It is estimated that at least 50,000 Indians inhabited the entire state of Virginia when the English established Jamestown in 1607.<sup>7</sup> The colonial

presence in Jamestown got off to a rocky start. In the first 15 years, 14,000 Europeans came to the malaria-infested settlement. Of these souls, 13,000 perished of disease or famine or in the Great Massacre of 1622.

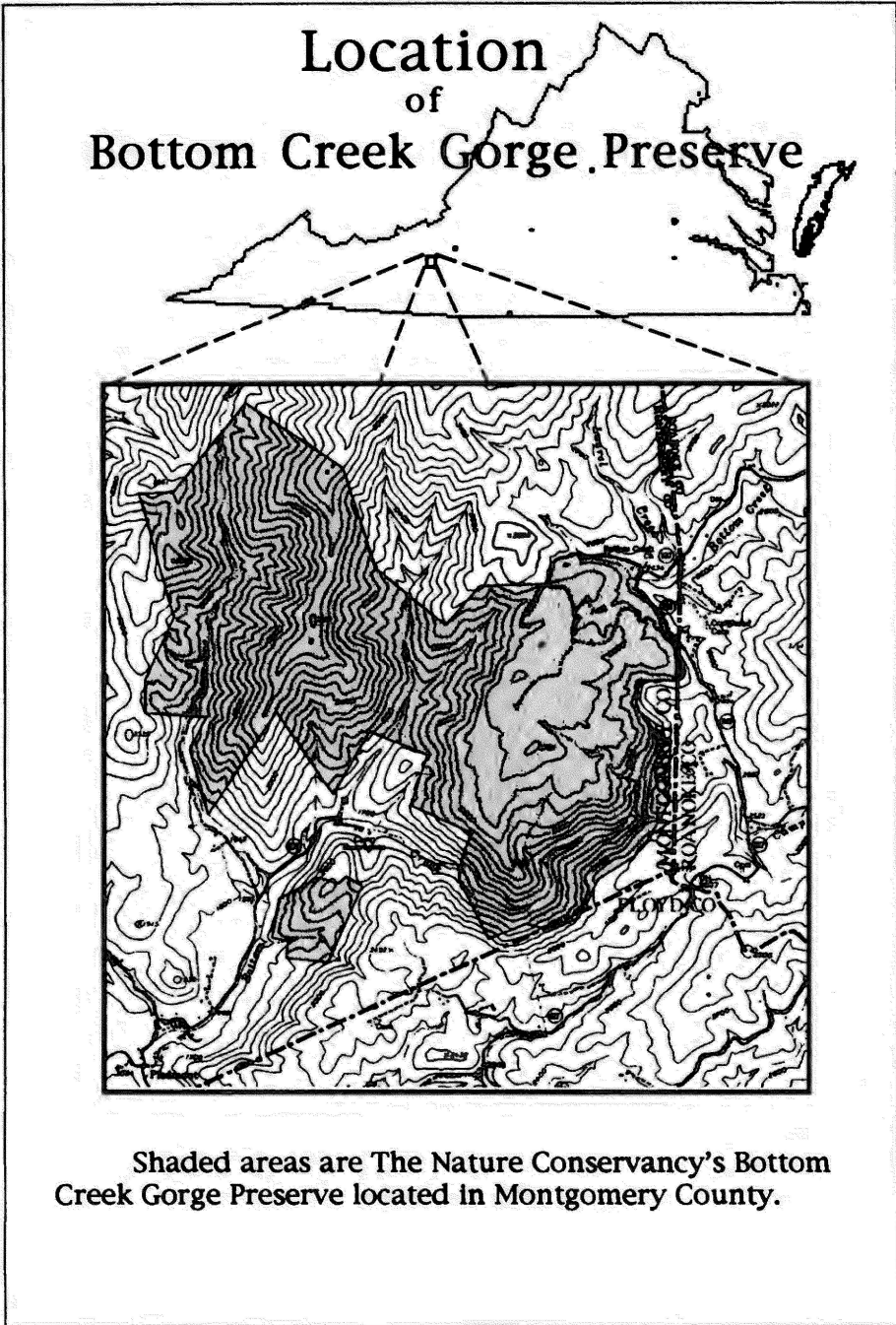
After 1622 the fortunes of the colonial settlers changed mainly due to the growing importance of one export crop: tobacco. With the aid of legislation that forbade the growing of tobacco in England or Ireland in 1619, the English Parliament predetermined Virginia's economic and political heartbeat.<sup>8</sup> Tobacco became Virginia's medium of exchange and left its cultural geographic mark on her land in the prominence of the plantation and its voracious appetite for land and labor. In 1619, the first year African slaves were brought to Virginia, the colony shipped out only 20,000 pounds of tobacco. By 1627, 500,000 pounds were exported. In 1619 the population of the colony was around 2,500. By 1662 the burgeoning population was 40,000.<sup>9</sup>

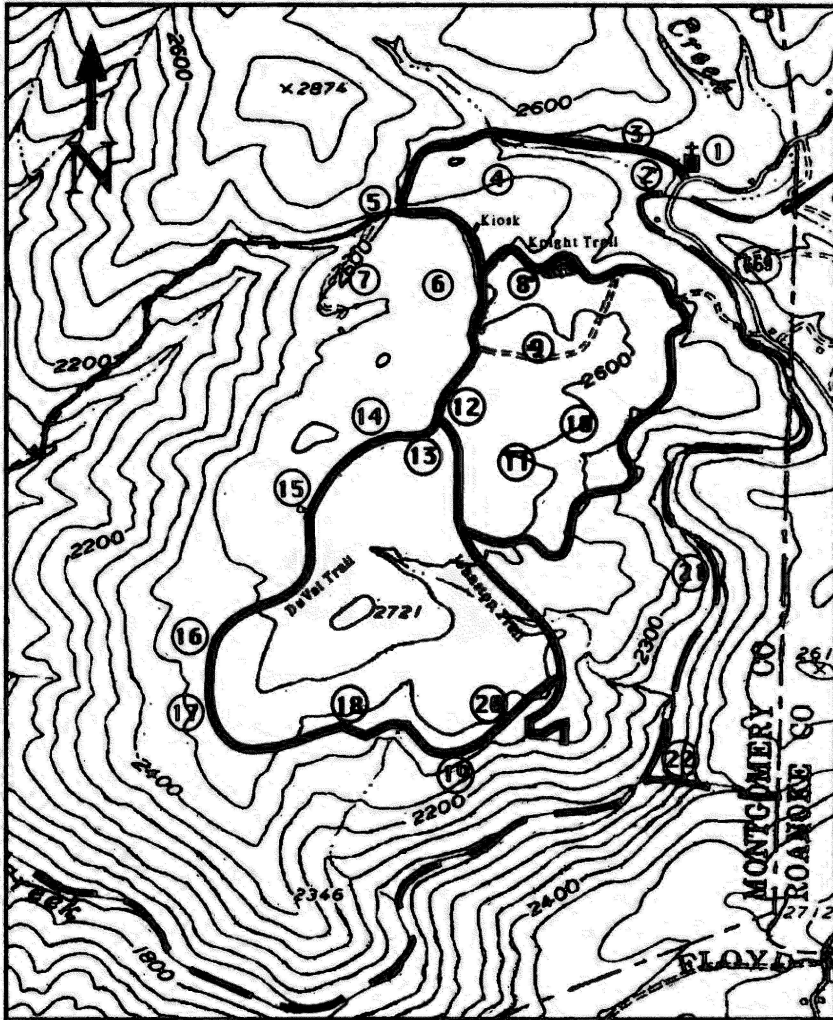
Archeological evidence suggests that shortly after the Indians' first contact with colonialists, 80–90 percent of them died of smallpox or influenza. The survivors were either taken into bondage or moved into other territories to the west.

This was true in the Roanoke region. In 1671 explorers Thomas Batts and Robert Fallam ventured through the gap in the mountains just to the north of Bottom Creek in the Roanoke Valley. These explorers provided the first written documentation of Indians living in this region, a Totera Indian village in the valley. By the 1720s traders and trappers in the Roanoke Valley found few, if any, Indians. The Totera Indians had vanished from the area.<sup>10</sup>

As more settlers, mainly of Scotch-Irish and German ancestry, moved south into the valley from Pennsylvania and Maryland or westward up the James and Roanoke rivers from the Virginia Piedmont, the frontier spilled over the divide into the New River Valley and Greenbrier river system. These waters flow into the Ohio River system and on to the Mississippi River on its way to the Gulf of Mexico. The French controlled the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, and this expansion by the colonialists into these river systems set the stage for the French and Indian War.<sup>11</sup>

In 1753 skirmishes began in these outer settlements, and this frontier region was abandoned. The Roanoke and James river valleys became the frontier for the next decade until hostilities diminished. In 1756, just below Poor Mountain, along the south fork of the Roanoke River in the present day Shawsville area, a contingent of Indians under French command entered the area and attacked a stockade fort built by Ephraim Vause, capturing most of the occupants and burning Vause's Fort.





CONTOUR INTERVAL 100 FEET

### Legend

- |                                   |                               |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| (1) Bottom Creek Church           | (12) Will Funk Home           |
| (2) Leland Craighead Home         | (13) King - Collins Homeplace |
| (3) William "Buck" Craighead Home | (14) Funk's Mt. School        |
| (4) Maxey Place                   | (15) Walter Manning Homeplace |
| (5) Mt. Road to Shawsville        | (16) Hall Cemetery            |
| (6) Funk Cemetery                 | (17) R. Woods Hall Homeplace  |
| (7) Jim Poff Home                 | (18) Jesse Hall Home          |
| (8) Tenant House                  | (19) Zenas Hall Home          |
| (9) Funk Residences               | (20) Lee King Home            |
| (10) Tenant House                 | (21) Bottom Creek             |
| (11) Tenant House                 | (22) Bent Mountain Falls      |

That same year Governor Dinwiddie ordered the militia to construct a more substantial fort near the same site. This fort, Fort Vause, was inspected by George Washington during construction.<sup>12</sup> The Bottom Creek Gorge Preserve lies at the edge of this frontier, within three miles of the divide between waters flowing to the Gulf of Mexico and to the Atlantic coast.

With the cessation of conflict around 1763, the frontier surged westward and new counties were established. In 1770 Botetourt County was formed from Augusta County, its vast boundaries stretching to the banks of the Mississippi. Montgomery County was organized in 1777 from Fincastle and Botetourt counties, and it encompassed an area three times larger than Connecticut. Since its formation, thirty-two counties wholly or in part were formed from it to reach its present boundary lines.<sup>13</sup>

In the early 1800s, the heirs to General Andrew Lewis, who owned several hundred thousand acres of the highland plateau, sold large tracts to families moving to the mountains. This land was choice for growing tobacco. The settlers cleared forests to make way for their tobacco fields which were bounded by log drying-sheds. Other families moved into the area as homesteaders or tenant farmers.<sup>14</sup>

Among these homesteaders, in the 1840s, William Craighead, the son of Timothy Craighead and Mary "Poly" Agee, came to the area from the Hales Ford section of Franklin County. The 1850 census lists William Craighead as being 45 years old.

According to Robert O. Craighead, William's great-great-grandson, William came to Bottom Creek with his oxen, his wagons, his tobacco seed, his family, and an unknown number of slaves. He eventually acquired land totaling around 2,000 acres, including much of the land now owned by The Nature Conservancy. Family oral history depicts William's wife, Susannah Maxey, as part Cherokee Indian.<sup>15</sup>

During this period, altitude was a barometer of impoverishment. The higher you lived above the surrounding valleys, the poorer you were likely to be. To the west of the valley below Bottom Creek, the Scot, John Loudon McAdam, was supervising the construction of the first road built by his McAdam system.<sup>16</sup> The macadam pavement, formed by covering packed crushed rock and clay with a surface of tar, improved the Great Road and offered excellent transport for horsedrawn vehicles, aiding the movement of thousands of families westward. Also, the railroad was completed with connections to the Atlantic coast at Norfolk. Christiansburg, the county seat of Montgomery County, was at the railhead, and this period was one of prosperity for Montgomery County.

As the valley below prospered, William and his family cut and burned clearings for their first crops. He soon learned that not enough tillable land

existed in that area to make a living growing tobacco. The plantation model of Virginia's vast Piedmont territory, where fields produced tobacco for three years before being abandoned and new fields cleared, could not be applied to this section of mountain plateau.

The early community turned to a forest economy. The forest supplied many of life's necessities: shelter, fences, wagons, buckets, eating utensils, food, furniture, herbal remedies, heat, and money, to name a few. The first houses were small log cabins, tucked along the hillsides, some covered with split clapboards. Window openings were small or non-existent. The floors were logs, hewn smooth on one side and often removable in a section above a dirt cellar for the storage of fruits and vegetables.<sup>17</sup>

Other families, many of Scotch-Irish descent, joined the Craighheads. As the community developed, the old log cabins were expanded or replaced with wood frame structures. New homes were built as families grew and new families began. Millard Collins, a third-generation Bottom Creek native who now lives in Portsmouth, is not sure when the Collinses first came to Bottom Creek. "But I do know why they were over here from Ireland," he said. "They transported them over here for horse thieves from Ireland. And they either come over here or get hung, and that's the reason the Collinses are over in here."

Montgomery County deed records provide documentation of grants and sales of land amongst the principal families of the area. The large families in the community became inter-related in complex ways, including the commonplace marriage between first cousins. "They were cousins, yeah, a lot of them were cousins," one former resident said of the early family marriages. "But they didn't have a whole lot of other people in the neighborhood to pick from, did they?"<sup>18</sup>

Records show that in 1845 William Craighhead granted 363 acres of land to his children for the sum of one dollar. William reserved the right to live on the land rent free for the rest of his life. His personal belongings were listed as consisting of five feather beds, household furniture, ten head of cattle, one yellow mare, one dark bay horse, and ten head of sheep. A later account of William's personal belongings included fifty bushels of corn, 1,200 pounds of leaf tobacco, nine feather beds, three head of milking cows, five heifers, five sheep, one side house, and one horse. Bottom Creek's waters provided food, recreation, and power for the community, as well as a place of reflection. In 1850 Montgomery County granted William Craighhead permission to construct a fifteen-foot-high dam to power a gristmill and a sawmill near the present entrance to the preserve.<sup>19</sup>

The Bottom Creek community grew to around 70 people in its heyday from 1900 to 1920. "Of course we all had the same grandparents," Genny



*Virginia (Kreger), Jessie, and Nettie Craighead  
in the Bottom Creek Community, circa 1917.*

Henderson says, referring to William and Susannah Craighead, her great-great-grandparents. At one time there were two small stores, a church, and a school within the community. Besides farming, some in the area found they could make a living growing apples, and the area became known for its orchards. When first entering the preserve, one passes by the remains of “The Little Brown Church on Bottom Creek,” which rests on the knoll to the right of the road in a stand of white pines. It is a fitting symbol of the community and the many people who lived difficult but fulfilled lives in this corner of Montgomery County.

The church was the heart of the community. The simple one-room, wood-frame building, lighted by kerosene lamps and heated with a pot-belly stove, reflected the intense community spirit and common thread that bound these people together for more than one hundred years.

The church was used by various denominations, alternating Sundays, and often the same people attended, regardless of denomination. Ministers would come from Christiansburg and Shawsville and as far away as Salem. The community looked forward to revivals in the summer, and the visiting minister stayed with families in the community.<sup>20</sup>

In her memoirs, Genny Henderson tells of the community’s shared effort to keep the church functioning:

One of the ladies living nearby always assumed the responsibility for cleaning the building, filling the lamps with kerosene, trimming the wick, and washing the soot off the lamps from previous use. A man who lived nearby would see that there was some firewood for the little potbelly stove and would come to the church a little ahead of everyone else and have a fire going to warm up the building in the winter months.

“That’s where I got saved,” Virginia Kreger said, remembering the winter of 1910.

I was about ten years old. I’ll never forget the preaching at that revival. He said, “Two at the mill grinder, one taken, the other left. Two in the field, one taken, the other left.” And that’s it. I wasn’t but about ten years old, and I remember that. He was a Brethren preacher. That was the best old preaching preacher. He’d read a verse and then he’d explain it. Anyway, there was nineteen baptized in December, and it was so cold they had to take an ax and cut the ice on the river. ...

There was nineteen of us, and when we’d come out of the water, they’d take them [us] up to the house real quick. But I just went like a leaf when I came out of there; I didn’t get cold, I don’t remember getting cold at all. Nineteen baptized in December came out of that ice water.



*Five-year-old Genny Craighead in the yard of the "Poff Place" where she was born in 1935. In the background is her father's mill house.*

When no one was available to fill the pulpit in the one-room church, folks attended the Christo church along Bottom Creek or would arrange to attend the Brethren church at nearby Copper Hill.

Another structure still standing in the preserve is the Poff/Craighead homestead. It rests in a swale at the western edge of a field, surrounded by encroaching woods. An old roadbed passes to the south of the house, curving around the hill and into the woods beyond. The ground sloping out of the field, moist from spring seeps, seems to cascade down the grade into the woods. The house itself is gray and silent, its weathered siding and faltering tin roof slowly recycling to the earth. Rusted pieces of metal are scattered among clumps of grass and brush around the house under a canopy of pioneering trees.

Genny Craighead Henderson was born in this house, and her memories of her childhood reside here even though nature and time have altered their physical backdrop. She can recall the muffled talk of young boys walking along the road in the twilight to visit sweethearts, the sounds of young children playing, the solitude and grace of the picket fence, the dahlias, the chickens and kittens roaming the yard, the slosh of water carried from the springhouse, and the clatter and buzz of a young man's industry in the mill across the way.

To listen to the stories of people who grew up on Bottom Creek is to begin to understand a different time: no televisions, no electricity, no telephones. Work was hard and physical. "Life for us was better than a lot of people that were in here because Daddy always had a job," Genny said, thinking back to the late 1930s.

A lot of people, you know, they were tenant farmers and didn't have income coming in. Life was good for us as long as I can remember. You know we always had a car and most the time had a truck and always had plenty of food; we had everything we needed except we didn't have modern conveniences. But everybody else had the same thing, so you didn't miss them. You didn't miss them at all.

From the beginning of the community in the 1850s into the 1940s, horses and mules helped plow the fields, transport the goods in wagons, and haul timber to the mill and tobacco to the market in Danville. It was common for a man and a woman to work from dawn to dark, especially during planting and harvesting times. Children worked alongside their parents in the fields.

Ninety-eight-year-old Virginia Kreger's best memory of her life on Bottom Creek was fixing cornbread on a sheet-iron wood stove while her husband, Jesse, was milking the cow:

Of a morning he'd go milk while I got breakfast, and then I'd go to the field with him, and one of my sisters came and took care of the little girl. We'd come back, and maybe I had to churn at lunch time. You see, we had a cow. We loved cornbread and milk. I'd bake some cornbread and wrap it up in a clean towel and put it under the pillow to keep it warm. That's what we'd eat when he got home from work. When the chickens went to roost, we went to roost 'cause we had to get up the next morning early, you know. And I was happy. We were happy. I got out there and helped him, and he helped me in the house.

For the residents of Bottom Creek, registering land deeds, marriages, and deaths required a day-long trek down the mountain, past Alleghany Springs and Shawsville and up Christiansburg Mountain to the courthouse in Christiansburg. This old roadbed is still visible as it leaves the community, dropping down the steep mountainside to the valley below. Now, white pine, hemlocks, and other trees and brush have mostly reclaimed the old roadbed.

As time progressed, the community's isolation from the rest of the county gained in significance. Montgomery County graded only a short distance of the road into the community once a year. The dirt wagon road to Shawsville was steep and impassable during rainy periods. The roads in the community were never paved.

Within a few generations after the community began, resources on the mountain were diminished and work became harder to find. With the advent of the automobile, increased mobility lifted the veil of isolation. Families left the community, drawn to jobs and better education opportunities. Many found work in Roanoke with the Norfolk and Western Railroad and at the American Viscose plant, which opened in 1917.

As the community's population declined in the 1930s, the county closed the school. Children had to walk several miles to catch a bus to attend Bent Mountain School in Roanoke County. Losing the school signaled the end of the community. Soon the stores closed. The community's slow demise ultimately led to its death in the 1950s.<sup>21</sup>

Isolation and the lack of county services depressed property values even after the community faded. A Roanoke doctor bought some property and used one of the old homes as a hunting lodge. Some of the fields were fenced and cleared for a cattle operation whose workers were rumored to manufacture a little moonshine now and then.

This isolation, provided by the mountain and the county boundary, allowed nature the time to renew and adapt. The forest returned, covering bare hillsides, aged orchards, home sites, and yards. In 1988 The Nature



*Amos and Edith Craighead in the Bottom Creek Community, circa 1937. The barren hillside in the background, testimony to years of timbering, is now forested.*

Conservancy acquired the land and formed the Bottom Creek Gorge Preserve.

Last spring, the first reunion of the Bottom Creek community was held at the preserve. It had been nearly fifty years since the community faded. Family members numbering in the hundreds gathered in the field near the Funk Cemetery. Awnings covered tables groaning with country cooking. The air seemed charged as the older folks visited, looked at old photographs, and reminisced. Their young grandchildren and great-grandchildren played amongst the chairs and tables and in the beds of pickup trucks, oblivious to the significance of the gathering.

The clear mountain air filled with the hum of conversation and laughter around clusters of lawn chairs. One card table held a box of fresh home-grown cantaloupes complete with a good knife for anyone to indulge himself or herself.

For many, the reunion was a cathartic event, a healing of the past. Some had not returned to this land since they had left many years ago, still unable to forget the hard times they had on this mountain. One woman told me that her husband would not come to the reunion. "Why would I want to go see that mountain that kept me from getting an education?" he had asked her.

Another summed up the feelings of many former residents: "This is what heaven's going to be like."

Today, many of those born in the Bottom Creek community and their descendants live nearby on the mountain plateau or in the valley around Salem and Roanoke, close to their roots. Their history and values reflect another time, an agrarian lifestyle that deeply bound these people to the land. "They had hard times; they was the happiest times," Virginia Kreger said. "People was happier then than they are now."

The words of a former resident echoes the sentiments of many Bottom Creek residents, reflecting the dual essence of this preserve as a refuge of nature and a repository of their history. "That was the best thing," he said. "Now I know can't nothing be happening over there."

## Endnotes

1. Keith Egluff and Deborah Woodward, "First People, the Early Indians of Virginia" (Richmond, Virginia: The Virginia Department of Historic Resources, 1992), pp. 27-28; Interview with archeologist Tom Klatka at Roanoke Regional Preservation Office, March 11, 1998.
2. Interviews with former residents of Bottom Creek: Genny Henderson, Millard Collins, and Robert Craighead. Also reference to ownership of Blacks by families

- settling the Bent Mountain area, including the area of Bottom Creek are found in an article "Recollections of Bent Mountain, Virginia" by Mrs. Philip St. Leger Moncure, winter 1992, available at the Roanoke Historical Society. Unpublished memoir of Bottom Creek Community written by Genny Henderson, available at Roanoke County Public Library, Bent Mountain branch. 1860 census records show one in five residents of Montgomery County were slaves.
3. Interview with Tom Klatka at Roanoke Regional Preservation Office, March 11, 1998. Archaeological Site Inventory Form, Site Number 44MY455, filed with the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office, 1/92.
  4. Interview with Tom Klatka at Roanoke Regional Preservation Office, March 11, 1998; Egloff and Woodward, "First People, the Early Indians of Virginia", pp. 49–50.
  5. An extensive collection of arrowheads and other artifacts from the Woodland Period has been collected by Arthur Conner from the area around Bottom Creek and viewed by the author.
  6. Interview with archeologist Tom Klatka at Roanoke Regional Preservation Office, March 11, 1998.
  7. Ibid.
  8. Marshall W. Fishwick, "Virginia: A New Look at the Old Dominion" (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1959), p. 10.
  9. Ibid.
  10. Interview with archeologist Tom Klatka at Roanoke Regional Preservation Office, March 11, 1998.
  11. F. B. Kegley, "Kegley's Virginia Frontier, The Beginning of the Southwest, The Colonial Days, 1740-1783" (Roanoke, Virginia: Southwest Virginia Historical Society, 1938), pp. 131–35.
  12. "The Montgomery County Story 1776–1957", compiled and edited by Charles W. Crush, Chairman of Montgomery County (Jamestown) Festival Committee, 1957, pp. 4–7.
  13. Ibid., p. 15.
  14. Mrs. Philip St. Leger Moncure, "Recollections of Bent Mountain, Virginia" (Winter 1992), available at the Roanoke Historical Society.
  15. Interview with Robert Craighead, March 1998; and unpublished memoir of Bottom Creek written by Genny Henderson, available at Roanoke County Public Library, Bent Mountain branch.
  16. "The Montgomery County Story 1776–1957", p. 62.
  17. Mrs. Philip St. Leger Moncure, "Recollections of Bent Mountain, Virginia".
  18. Genny Henderson, unpublished memoir of Bottom Creek community; interview with Genny Henderson, April 1, 1997.
  19. Lee Mills, "Land Use History, Craighead and Hall, Bottom Creek, Montgomery County, Virginia." unpublished manuscript filed with the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office, April, 1992.
  20. Genny Henderson, unpublished memoir of Bottom Creek community.
  21. Much of the detail of the Bottom Creek Community came from several sources, some of which are previously noted. These include the unpublished memoir of Bottom Creek written by Genny Henderson, and taped interviews conducted during the period from 1997 to the spring of 1998. The interviewees were Genny Henderson, Ocie Cralle, Virginia Kreger, Millard Collins, and Reba Conner.