



W.H. JORDAN

Alleghany County

A hint of that first Eden exists in this Blue Ridge territory,
where the human and the natural seem blended
in just the right proportions.

BY R. KELLY COFFEY

A leisurely drive through Alleghany County reveals its abundant treasures: The two-lane road is part of the scenery, not just a passage through it. Aging barns seem to have grown from the soil. Grazing cattle appear as natural as a herd of deer.

While many North Carolina counties are fortunate to include the Blue Ridge Parkway, the scenic road has a special significance to Alleghany. Running along the county's southern and eastern margins, the route includes Doughton Park, one of the largest recreation areas along the entire scenic drive. Robert Doughton, for whom the park is named, represented his native Alleghany County in Congress between 1911 and 1953, and chaired the powerful House Ways and Means Committee for a time. Doughton used his political influence to ensure that the

Parkway would be routed through North Carolina rather than Tennessee as originally proposed. His former residence, Doughton Hall, is now a bed and breakfast in the Laurel Springs community. Alleghany also holds the distinction of being the location where construction began on the Parkway, at Cumberland Knob near the state line.

Alleghany's portion of the Blue Ridge range is very steep and rugged — almost vertical in some locations. Rock formations named "Fodder Stack" and "Alligator Back" allude to the precipitous drop in elevation. Beyond the crest of the escarpment, however, the topography is considerably gentler. Alleghany is somewhat distinct among North Carolina mountain counties because its landscape is more characteristic of a plateau, rather than the scattered mountains and high summits found elsewhere along the Blue Ridge.



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The most noteworthy peaks in the county are found in the Peach Bottom Mountain range in the northwestern portion of the county. The rest of Alleghany, however, is generally characterized by rolling hills and moderate terrain.

In addition to the Blue Ridge escarpment, the New River is one of the prominent natural features in the county and a significant recreation attraction. After flowing into Virginia from Ashe County, the New loops back into Alleghany before continuing north once again into Virginia. The Little River is a major tributary of the New that traverses the eastern segment of the county. Alleghany

Brinegar Cabin (opposite), located within Doughton Park, provides a glimpse of Alleghany's past.

Above: Mt. Carmel Church of the Brethren near Laurel Springs serves as a gathering place for the county's wide-flung citizens.

Right: Early morning offers spectacular views from the Blue Ridge Parkway near Sparta.

ALAN WATSON

shares New River State Park with neighboring Ashe County. At the base of the Blue Ridge, the Alleghany/Wilkes County line divides another state park, the one at Stone Mountain, between the two counties.

Ties to the land

Archaeological evidence indicates that North Carolina's northern mountains, including Alleghany County, were home to prehistoric American Indians. Their settlements, however, were short-lived or seasonal, as the winter climate was not conducive to long-term occupation.

Historic native tribes, such as the Cherokee, hunted or traveled through the Alleghany area.

European settlement was also transitory at first. By the mid-1700s, hunters from the Piedmont and Virginia drifted into Alleghany and constructed cabins for seasonal shelter, but permanent settlement was delayed until later in the century due to frontier hostilities associated with the French and Indian War. Local legend tells of three late-18th-century brothers, members of the Maynard family of present-day Surry County, who hunted regularly in what is now Alleghany County. After living in the area for about six years, they abandoned their cabin and headed for Kentucky, claiming that the territory was becoming too crowded after the local population reached a total of seven families.

Because the Blue Ridge escarpment was an obstacle to migration from North Carolina's Piedmont, the New River valley became the primary avenue for settlement, funneling Virginians into Alleghany and areas farther south. First a part of Wilkes County, later an eastern appendage of Ashe, the territory



now known as Alleghany became established as a separate county in 1859, with the town of Sparta as the county seat and the sole municipality up to the present.

Much of the Alleghany landscape has been shaped by agriculture. Large farmhouses and elderly barns define the countryside. Mountain pastures thrive in the area's cool, moist summers, providing ideal grazing for cattle and sheep. Around the turn of the past century, Alleghany was North Carolina's third-ranking county in cheese production and fifth in wool output. Although the county's economy has changed over the past 100 years, a look around the county offers much evidence that agriculture remains important. The latest statistics

reveal that among the state's 100 counties, Alleghany ranks 10th in cattle, fifth in silage corn, and among the top three counties in Christmas tree production. The significance of these figures is underscored by the fact that the county is among the smallest in North Carolina, both in geographic size (235 square miles) and population (10,677). The county's Fraser fir Christmas trees are the best in the nation, with three trees from the Deal family's Alleghany County farm chosen to decorate the White House during the 2005 Christmas season.

Alan Souther's family farm exemplifies the current transitions in agriculture, not only in Alleghany, but throughout North Carolina. A long-time burley tobacco grower and beef cattle producer, Souther has diversified into organic vegetables, greenhouse

crops, and ironically, sheep production, which was prevalent in Alleghany 100 years ago. "My whole family is involved in the operation," Souther says. "The different crops and livestock keep us busy."

Rural refinement

Like many North Carolina counties, Alleghany has experienced difficult economic times lately with the closing of manufacturing facilities. Surprisingly, however, the county's oldest manufacturer is still in business. A little-known aspect of North Carolina's tobacco history is the fact that smoking pipes have been produced in Alleghany County since the 1940s. The original manufacturer chose a western North Carolina location for the plant because the pipes were made of native mountain laurel wood. European briarwood was the preferred wood, but World War II disrupted the supply of it, and mountain laurel provided an acceptable substitute.

The establishment of the plant provided not only manufacturing jobs, but also income for residents, as the company purchased laurelwood directly from enterprising locals who harvested the wood in the wild in Alleghany and other mountain

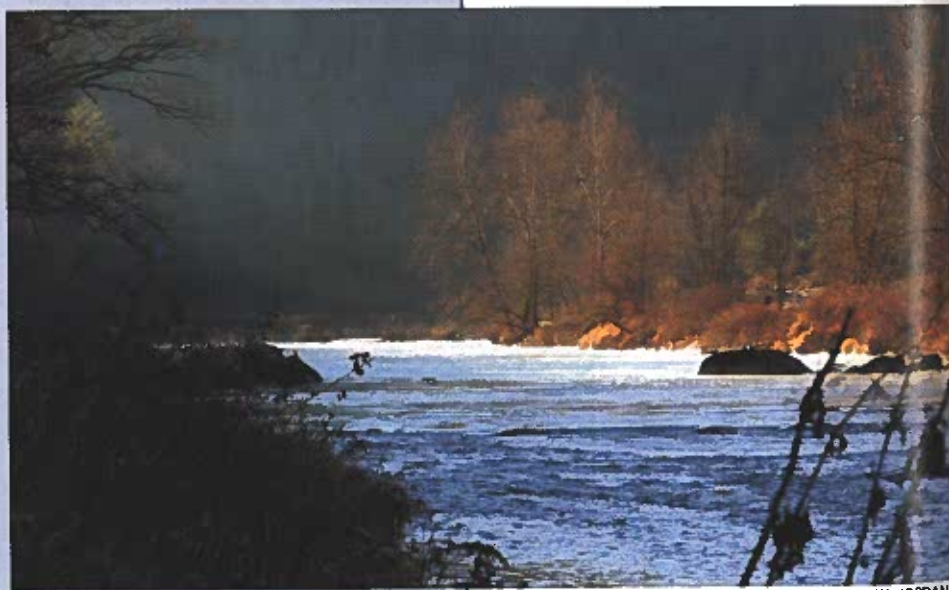
What's in a Name?

The name "Alleghany" (alternatively spelled "Allegheny" in other parts of the country) is a Delaware Indian word with a complex history and meaning. The word is conventionally translated "a fine stream," but a deeper investigation reveals a more varied and fascinating interpretation. James Mooney, in his authoritative 1900 classic *Myths of the Cherokee*, explained that in the distant past, the Indian tribe we know today as the Cherokee lived in the northern reaches of the Appalachians (modern-day western Pennsylvania), where the Delaware referred to them as the "Alligewi."

The Alligewi were eventually overpowered by the Delaware, and forced to migrate to the southern mountains. The Delaware, however, continued to refer to their former territory as the Alligewi. Europeans interpreted the Delaware usage in various ways: as the name of a river in western Pennsylvania, as the name of the entire Ohio River watershed, and as the name of the mountains. Being translated from an unwritten language, "Alligewi" was spelled phonetically but soon evolved into its modern pronunciation and spellings "Alleghany" or "Allegheny." Early maps indicate that the word was used interchangeably with "Appalachian," referring to the entire mountain range.

In modern times, the geographic scope of "the Allegheny Mountains" has

narrowed, referring primarily to the mountains of West Virginia and Pennsylvania (the Allegheny Plateau). The name is also attached to the Allegheny River in Pennsylvania and various other places and features in the Eastern United States. Even though the word "Alleghany" originated in the Northeast, the name is nevertheless quite appropriate for North Carolina's Alleghany County, as it, too, lies



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within the Ohio River watershed, and, of course, the Tar Heel state is now home to the tribe the Delaware called "Alligewi" — the Cherokee.

The New River and its tributaries draw visitors to the area for rafting and fishing.

counties. The company, originally known as D&P Pipe Works, acquired the Dr. Grabow brand — a common “drugstore pipe” — in 1955. Now owned by an international firm, the Sparta plant eventually returned to using European briarwood, but still produces more than 300,000 Dr. Grabow pipes annually.

Despite economic setbacks, Allegheny is still home to manufacturers who produce a remarkable variety of products. Allegheny native Rocky Proffit has developed a homegrown industry that manufactures paper products, game boards, and packaging materials. The company, NAPCO, continues to grow and has customers nationwide. Other products produced by Allegheny industries include wrought iron furniture and structural products, like truck trailers and bridge decks, using high-tech composite materials.

The county is growing in its educational opportunities, too. A state-of-the-art cyber campus, serving both high school and college students, offers the best distance learning

experience found anywhere. The facility has classrooms equipped with audio and video technology that enables students to hear, see, and interact with teachers in classrooms at schools like Appalachian State University. “For a rural place, we’re becoming more sophisticated,” observes resident Sue Fender.

That increasing cosmopolitan element is evident in the planned Sparta Teapot Museum. Fund-raising and design work are under way for the construction of a \$10 million building to house a world-renowned, 6,000-piece teapot collection owned by California collectors Sonny and Gloria Kamm. This collection is considered by the arts community to be the best of its kind. The museum is set to open in 2008, but selected pieces are currently making the rounds as a traveling exhibit among the nation’s top museums. In addition to cultural enrichment, the Sparta Teapot Museum will have a considerable economic effect on the county as well.

Allegheny County is mountainous

but not remote, traditional but not antiquated, agrarian but not unrefined. Much has changed since those 18th-century hunters wandered over the Blue Ridge, but the appeal of Allegheny remains. If the restless Maynard brothers entered Allegheny County today, perhaps they would now find reasons to settle down and stay. ↗

R. Kelly Coffey lives in Blowing Rock.

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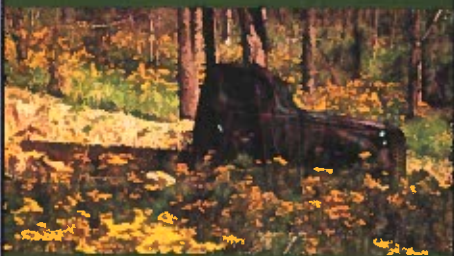
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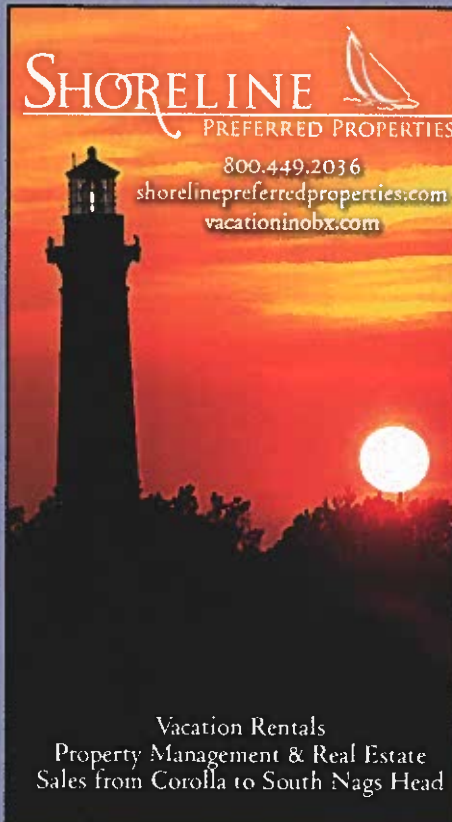
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