



# Under the Rhododendron Canopy: Angling in the Great Smokies

*by David Klausmeyer*



*One can find snippets of information on fly fishing in southern Appalachia in some of our early sporting and angling periodicals, and oftentimes in period and contemporary regional angling guides. But for the most part, this component of our American fly fishing tradition has gone unnoticed and unexplored.*

*David Klausmeyer is supremely knowledgeable in all matters piscatorial. It came as no surprise to those of us who know David to learn that he had discovered that a rich angling heritage exists in southern Appalachia, a tradition that is responsible for, among other things, the introduction of several species of trout and the development of flies unique in origin, design, and materials. We think this is a major discovery which, happily, adds yet another chapter to the history of American fly fishing.*

*D.S.J.*

WHEN I TRAVEL AND FISH new waters around the country, local anglers always ask me about the quality of fishing in the southern Appalachians. These new acquaintances offer that they have scant knowledge of southern trout streams, and that what they do know has been acquired only through one of the very occasional pieces which appear in fishing publications, rarely from first-hand angling experience.

This is understandable.

When I was a small boy, sitting in my grandfather's easy chair, turning through the pages of the popular out-of-doors periodicals he kept in a brass-handled kindling rack which served as his magazine stand, I always got the feeling that I was peering into some cool, remote place. The photographs and art work generally depicted bright salmon

flies, weathered canoes, and the best waters New England and eastern Canada had to offer. I grew up believing that fly fishing meant the North Woods, with evenings spent in a cabin tying flies of bold and exotic materials. Indeed, upon examining the overall body of American fly fishing literature, one will note a shift of emphasis from the Northeast only in recent years. Oh yes, anglers wrote about and discussed other destinations, but the concentration was definitely on the Northeast portion of the continent.

In recent years, the focus has shifted to the streams and rivers of western North America. Today many consider the well traveled angler not to be one who can discuss a wide variety of waters, but instead one who makes an annual trek to Montana. This attitude is reflected (or perhaps is led) by today's fly



*Opposite: A hand-colored lithograph entitled "The Smoky Mountains," by R. Hinshelwood, 1873. Courtesy Great Smoky Mountains National Park.*

fishing literature. Sure, the storied waters such as the quiet, gliding limestone streams of Pennsylvania and the free-stone rivers of the Catskills are still being written about, but large pieces of the country and their angling potential are still being sparsely reported. Consequently, much parochial angling history is being lost as senior anglers put away their rods for the last time, and younger anglers become convinced that the fish are always bigger in the next stream.

I was also a victim of this thinking. In preparation to moving to Knoxville, I looked for any information I could find about the local cold-water angling. I knew that trout were available, but I wanted specifics, and I became apprehensive about my angling prospects as I learned that very little had been published about southern trout streams. The angling must be very poor, I thought, if it's not even worth the price of ink and paper.

Since moving to eastern Tennessee, however, I have discovered that southern Appalachia has a rich fly fishing heritage. This tradition, as unnoticed as many of the streams that flow under the mountain rhododendron canopy, has passed through time in a quiet, almost secretive fashion. Occasionally the high quality of the fishery will be recorded in the popular angling press, but the lore and charm are always absent. The establishment of three species of trout, flies unique in origin and materials, and a lodge which catered to some of fly fishing's greatest personalities all contribute to a local tradition which forces us to broaden our thinking about the overall history of American fly fishing.

The development of fly fishing in the Southeast, as with other parts of the country, can be traced in time along with the economic development of the region. In very broad terms, the turn of the century was a time of extensive logging operations in the mountains of eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina. Timber rights were divided among eighteen logging concerns, the largest being Tennessee's Little River Lumber Company, which owned over 77,000 acres. These companies, eager to supply growing cities with lumber and tanneries with the bark necessary to tan hides, sent loggers to clear the forests and haul out the felled trees on the backs of narrow-gauge trains. The large scale of this logging (the Little River Logging

Company alone cut over two thousand acres of land per year between 1902 and 1924) had two effects on local angling. First, many miles of stream containing native brook trout were destroyed due to silt run-off and a general warming of the water's temperature. Not being able to survive in this disturbed environment, the brook trout became restricted to a decreasing number of undisturbed headwater streams. Secondly, the lumber companies paved the way in opening the southern mountains for future generations of visitors (and anglers). Many of the roads found in the area were actually constructed on old railway beds.

The next major event which had an impact on local trout fishing was the establishment of a national park. The Great Smoky Mountain Conservation Association, formed in Knoxville in 1923 by businessmen who were concerned as much about the profit potential of a national park as in preserving the dwindling virgin forest, began to promote the park concept to state and federal officials.

In 1925, the Tennessee legislature and Knoxville city council authorized the purchase of the Little River Logging Company's holdings as a sign of good faith to the federal Park Service that the state would actively support a national park (while the Smoky Mountains are an hour's drive from Knoxville—even on today's roads—the state required that the city pay one-third of the purchase price). This land was then donated to the federal government for initial inclusion in the new park. In 1925, the Congress passed, and President Coolidge signed, a bill authorizing the establishment of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. This legislation was passed, however, with the condition that actual park development would begin only after the states of Tennessee and North Carolina donated a combined total of 300,000 acres to the project. With the commitment of federal, state and local parties, a campaign of extensive fundraising began in order to secure the more than 1600 individual pieces of property which comprise today's park. By the early 1930s, it became obvious that the states would fall short of acquiring the necessary acreage. Rising land costs and expensive litigation resulting from contested purchases ate into the available land acquisition funds. So, in August of 1933, President Roosevelt stepped forward and pledged the necessary funds to complete the purchases, and in 1934 the new national park became a reality. Later, the northern and southern districts of the Cherokee National Forest were established at each end of the park to further protect these southern mountains. This then provides the land and water in which the

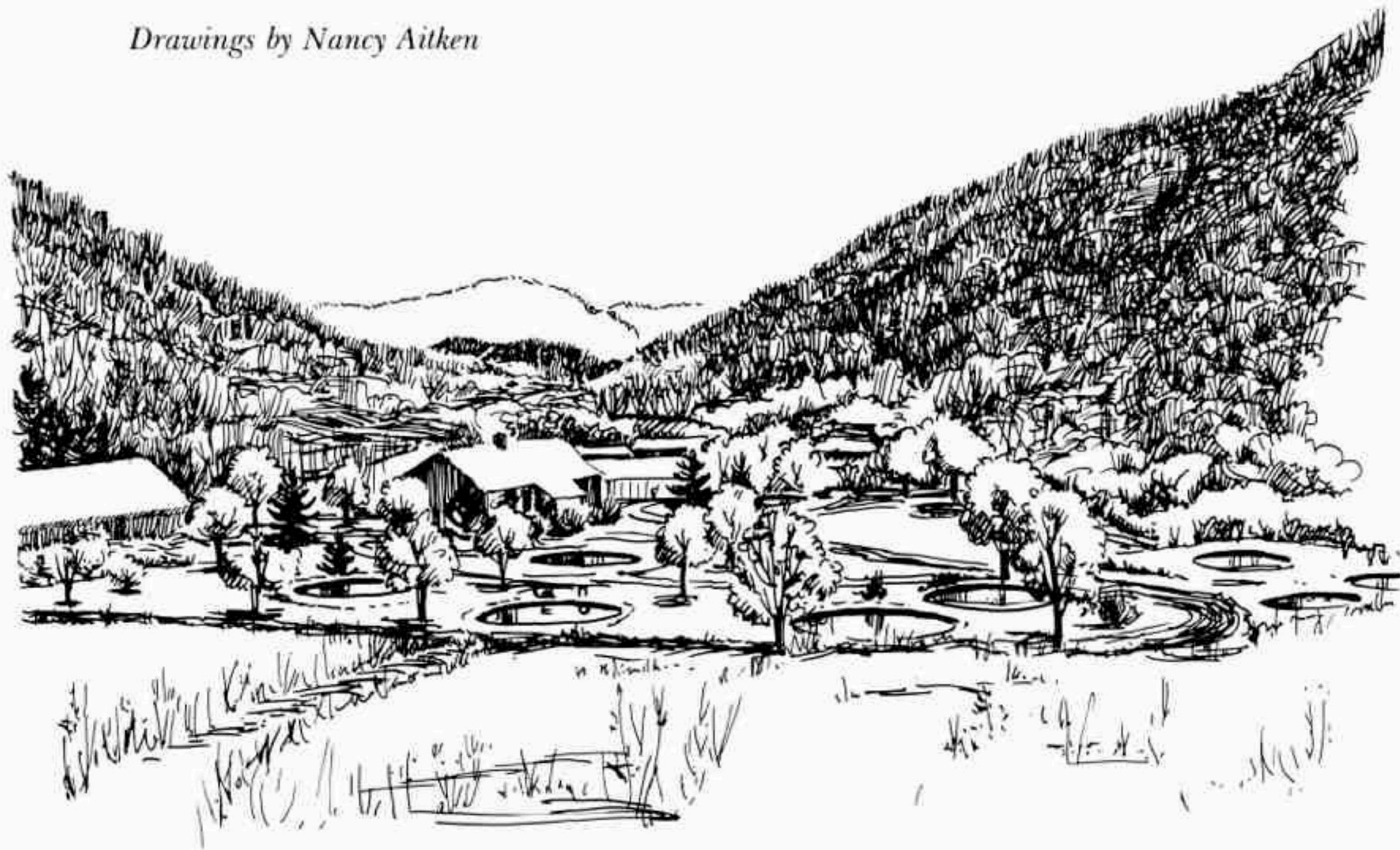
fly fishermen of southern Appalachia pursue trout.

The brook trout, referred to as "speckled" trout by many locals, is without a doubt the most beloved game fish among the mountain anglers. While never reaching the size of the "exotic" rainbow and brown trout (a large specimen may reach ten or eleven inches), it is the only member of the *Salmo* family indigenous to the Smoky Mountains. Its beautiful colors, scrappy fight, and the lush green mountain environment it inhabits make even a poor day of angling a fulfilling experience.

While logging and heavy fishing pressure (including the use of dynamite and nets) took its toll on the brook trout population, the introduction of rainbow and brown trout also had a severe impact on the native species. With the streams damaged due to years of abuse, coupled with the desire to increase the angling potential of the Great Smokies, the decision was made to introduce the hardier rainbow and brown trout. Stories abound of local anglers and officials transporting the new arrivals in horse-drawn barrels to the higher elevations even before the establishment of the park. Once released, the new, more aggressive fish began to compete with the brook trout, claiming territory and further restricting the range of the "specks." The Kephart Prong Hatchery (named for Horace Kephart, local outdoorsman and writer) was built at the juncture of the tumbling Oconoluftee River and Kephart Prong tributary in North Carolina. This hatchery played a major role in park stocking activities, allowing officials to more easily introduce many thousands of trout to the park's waters. Today, second-growth forest has taken over the long abandoned hatchery—all that remains are foundation remnants, old pipe, and the outlines of one or two rearing pools. The most outstanding feature is a large, wordless stone sign which once greeted visitors to the birthplace of the fish that still inhabit the surrounding streams.

One of the most noteworthy yet least known features of southern trout angling is the Hazel Creek Fishing Club. While several hunting lodges catered to the needs of bear, boar, and deer hunters prior to the formation of the national park, the Hazel Creek club stood alone as the gathering place for local fly anglers. Started by North Carolina businessmen who enjoyed the finer piscatorial pursuits, a tract of land along Hazel Creek was purchased and a lodge erected in the early 1920s. With the start of this exclusive club, Hazel Creek gained in prominence and eventually came to be considered the finest dry fly stream in the Southeast. As word spread of the quality of the fishery, noted an-





*The Kephart Prong Hatchery as it appeared during the heyday of stocking activity. After a National Park Service Photo published in The Smokies Guide by G.M. Stephens (1947).*

glers such as John Tainter Foote, George LaBranche, and Ferris Green-slet came to fish the club's waters. In 1944 the club faded into angling history when title to the property passed to the Park Service for inclusion into the still growing national park. When the Tennessee Valley Authority completed Fontana Dam, the resulting lake flooded the main approach to Hazel Creek (ironically called Dry Weather Road). Today, one must ferry across Lake Fontana to the mouth of Hazel Creek in order to enjoy its now lonely pools.

Other visitors to the area, those who had no introduction to an establishment such as the Hazel Creek Fishing Club and its knowledgeable members, weren't entirely out of luck. Before the founding of the national park and the construction of better roads, a good guide and a couple of evenings camping out under the stars were almost mandatory if one wanted to sample the best fishing. A guide could be found just by inquiring at the desk of an area hotel. I have seen one period list of guides which numbered over twenty men, all considered highly knowledgeable in woodcraft and angling. I know of no one offering guiding services in today's Smoky Mountains. But then, in an open national park, a guide really isn't necessary.

For flies, fishermen used the popular patterns of the day. Robert L. Mason, for his early book *The Lure of the Great Smokies* (1927), polled the local guides as

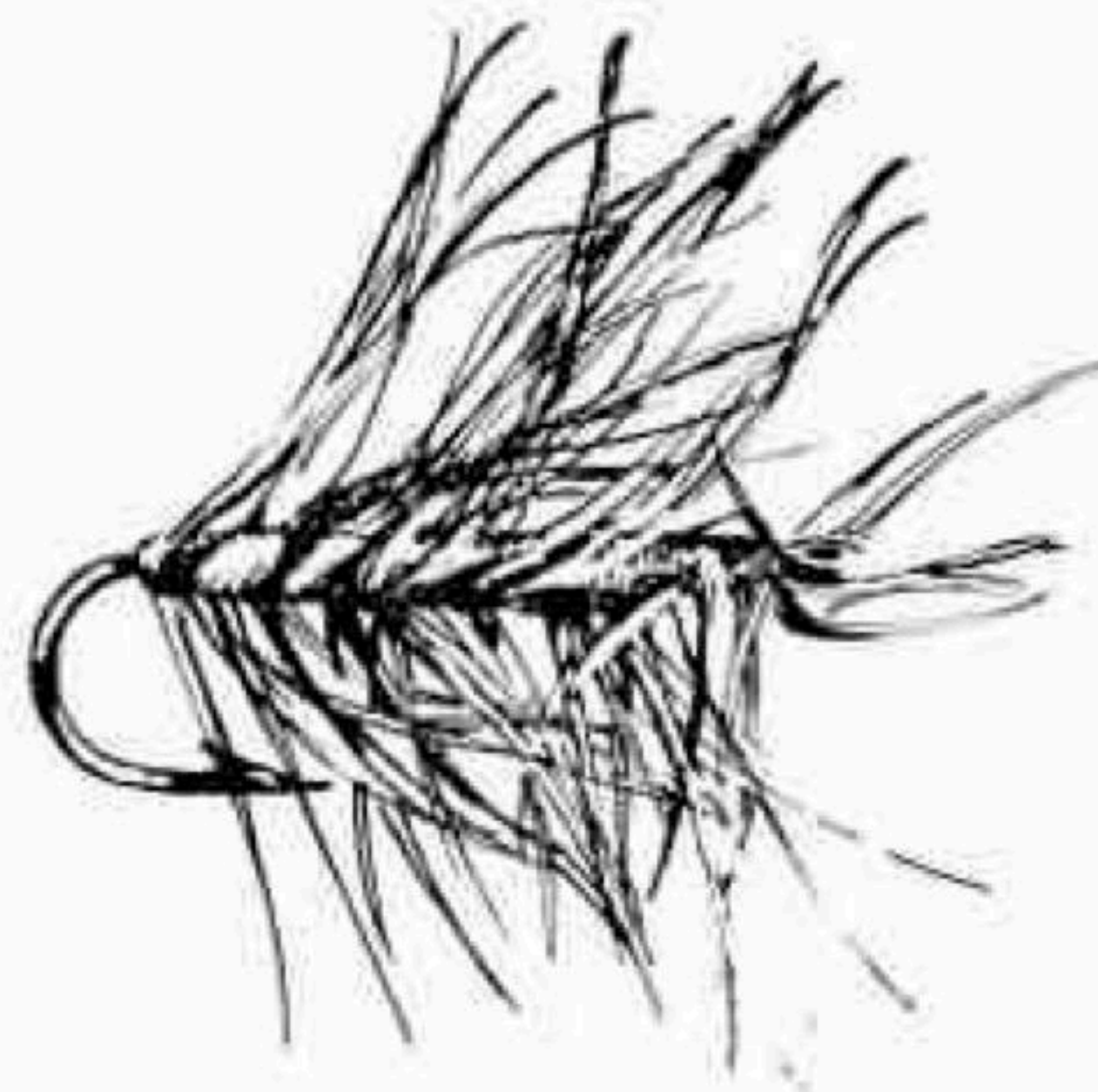
to what flies they were recommending to their sports. The Brown Hackle, Coachman, Cahill, Cowdung, Black Gnat, Queen of the Waters, Brown March, and White Miller were all offered as tried and true favorites. The Woolly Worm was also a popular pattern, tied on a straight-eyed hook so that it could be used in combination with a small spinner. But the curious omission in this list of favorites are the local creations: those wonderful sketches in feather and fur which reflect the history and surroundings of their makers.

Most of the anglers felt that exact duplication of the naturally occurring insect was less important than simply getting a fly on the water—the fish would do the rest. This philosophy was

reflected in local fly development; today most would consider the flies developed by the anglers of the Smoky Mountains as "attractor" patterns. The only fly of local origin to gain a national reputation is the Tellico Nymph. This yellow-bodied fly, referred to locally as simply a Tellico (it's a lot like saying Hare's Ear—everyone understands), was generally considered to be an impressionistic stone fly imitation. Today, of course, most anglers carry frauds that are far more representative of the *Plecoptera*, but the Tellico is still found in most fly catalogs.

Going much further back than the Tellico Nymph, J.H. Stewart of Jackson, Mississippi, wrote Mary Orvis Marbury to describe "North Carolina Indian Flies." This letter, contained in *Favorite Flies and Their Histories*, certainly sheds light on one of the most unusual fly patterns to have evolved in southern Appalachia, the Yellowhammer. Mr. Stewart wrote in his letter that the Indians of North Carolina (undoubtedly referring to the eastern band of the Cherokees, who still have a reservation at the southern end of the park) would cut a thin strip of fur from a deer's leg. This strip was then wrapped on the hook in a palmered fashion, with the hairs pointing toward the eye of the hook. Mr. Stewart went on to say, "They use feathers occasionally in the same way." Certainly he was describing the Yellowhammer.

While many local anglers have heard



*The Yellowhammer*





*The clubhouse at the Hazel Creek Fishing Club. After a photograph which appeared in Jim Gasque's Hunting & Fishing in the Great Smokies (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1948).*

of the Yellowhammer, very few have ever seen one or are familiar with its construction. The mystery behind the fly is probably due to the materials required in the fly's recipe. The key ingredient in tying the Yellowhammer is the tail and wing feathers of the now federally protected yellow flicker woodpecker. These unusual feathers, black on one side and school-bus yellow on the other, were soaked in warm water (as described by Mr. Stewart), split down the middle of the quill, and wound on the hook as a hackle. I have seen two versions of the Yellowhammer (both tied on a straight-eyed hook to accommodate a spinner). One simply had the feather palmered over the entire shaft of the hook with the barbs pointing forward. The other had a peacock herl body and golden pheasant tippet tail, the yellow flicker feather being used more as a regular hackle. I have been told that both patterns are true Yellowhammers, but in light of Mr. Stewart's very early letter (dated 1887), I believe the palmered version to be the original pattern. With time, "Yellowhammer" probably came to mean any fly that was dressed with the feathers of the yellow flicker.

The Clay Hart, another local creation named for its originator, is a streamer also tied on a straight-eyed hook to accommodate a spinner (while I have never seen anyone use this method, senior anglers report that the use of small spinners was once very popular). The

wing of the Clay Hart is a mix of feathers and fur which makes the fly as singular as the Yellowhammer. A small bunch of red fox squirrel tail was tied in first, with a white and a grizzly feather tied in on one side of the fur (with the white feather on the outside) and a ginger and brown combination on the other (ginger feather out). The Clay Hart has a dingy, dirty, greenish-brown spun fur body which one angler described as the color of "manure in August." Today, the Clay Hart, like the Yellowhammer, is remembered mostly by those fishermen who can still recall the founding of the national park.

Along with this set of attractor fly patterns, there was one angler of local reputation who developed what we could call an "attractor" method of fishing. In

fact, I've noticed that it's the same group of fishermen who can tell you about things as obscure as the Yellowhammer and the Hazel Creek Fishing Club who can also tell you about Mr. Mark Cathy's "dance of the fly."

Mark Cathy, of Bryson City, North Carolina, believed that any fly could catch fish; it was simply a matter of proper presentation. He didn't believe that stealth, a fine leader or a drag-free float was at all important in catching trout. Instead, he would attach to his line a leader more suitable to angling for bass than trout, stand on a rock in full view of every fish in his chosen pool, and begin skimming his fly back and forth across the surface of the water. Occasionally he would dance the fly on the top with a few quick pops of his rod tip. The fish, their attention now shifted from Mark to his forgery, would strike at his lively offerings. And, as was recorded by Jim Gasque in *Hunting and Fishing in the Great Smokies* (1948), Cathy was known to always creel his limit.

Mark Cathy died in October, 1944, while hunting. According to his obituary, his body was found in the woods, leaning against a tree with his squirrel rifle lying across his lap. Today, over forty-five years later, he and his unique style of angling are still remembered.

The parameters of fly fishing are quite broad. From fresh water to brine, and from teasing pan-sized brook trout to turning a homeward-bound salmon, to-



*The Clay Hart*





*An untitled watercolor of the Smoky Mountains by Charles Christopher Krutch (1849-1934). Courtesy Great Smoky Mountains National Park.*

## The Mountain Painter

Charles Christopher Krutch (1849-1934) is considered to be the first artist of note to capture the mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina. Entirely self taught, he earned the esteemed reputation among his fellow artists as "the Corot of the South."

Born in 1849 in South Carolina, he lived most of his life in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he was employed as a photographic retoucher by McCrarry and Branson in 1893 and then in 1904 until his death by Brakebill & McCoy Studio. A quiet and gentle man, he loved music and was for many years an organist at St. John's Episcopal Church in Knoxville.

Krutch early established his reputation as a "mountain painter." Never married, he often said his true love was painting the Great Smokies, and he spent weeks at a time living with friends and sketching in the mountains. He best

loved LeConte and Sugarland Valley, with Chimney Tops also a favorite subject. Originally a watercolor painter, he later changed to oil for many years, but returned again to watercolor and used both media with equal facility as he perfected his techniques. As his reputation grew, many of Knoxville's finest homes boasted of having several of his landscapes.

In 1933, one year before his death, Krutch received national recognition when he became the first artist commissioned under the Public Works of Art Project, for which he painted at least two large canvases, now in the collection of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. When he died in 1934, his valuable legacy was a record of the Great Smoky Mountains—the beauty of their form and color—in earlier days.

MARGOT PAGE

day's piscators have a wealth of angling opportunities that would astound many of our forebears. Exploring new environments and making the acquaintance of new species of *Salmo* are certainly a part of the enjoyment of fly fishing. Yet

much of the angling history and lore of the Great Smokies, and certainly other parts of the country, is being lost with time. It is my sincere hope that while we fly fishers enjoy the opportunities afforded us through modern travel and

the wide dissemination of information, we also recognize our parochial responsibilities in preserving regional traditions. To borrow a phrase from our conservation-minded friends, fly fishing is more than just catching fish. □