

IRISH CREEK: HISTORY AND DIVERSIONS

By D. E. Brady Jr.
The Fortnightly Club, November 1981

AS YOU LOOK TOWARD the Blue Ridge from any vantage point in the Lexington area, one of the deepest and most penetrating gashes into the Range is the Irish Creek gorge. The creek and its valley form a deep slot through the mountains. More of a babbler than a roarer, the main stream has a rather gentle fall for its entire length, taking fifteen miles to drop from its origin near Montebello, at an elevation of 2,800 feet, to the South River at Cornwall. The Little Mary Creek at Vesuvius does the same in less than three miles. One of Irish Creek's tributaries, Nettle Creek, comes in from the south and has one of the most beautiful waterfalls in this area, a clear drop of about seventy-five feet. When the leaves are off and the sun is right, the falls can be seen from the Boston overlook on the Parkway.

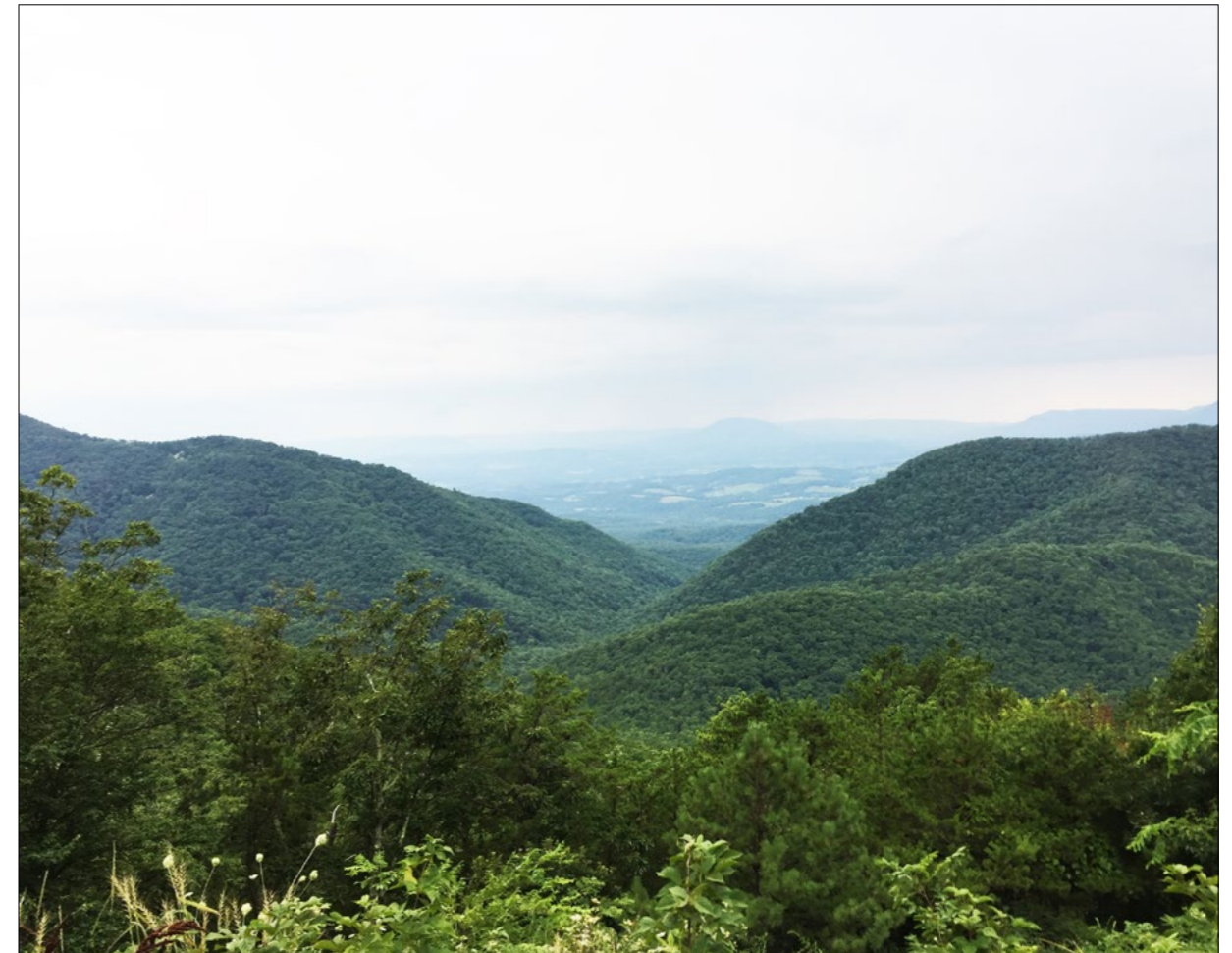
Today, one can take a pleasant auto trip up Irish Creek on a paved roadⁱ to within a short distance of the top of the mountain, but it was not always so. Not many years ago the road was characterized by numerous fords as it crisscrossed the creek — it was quite rough and had many steep slopes and sharp turns. As a result

ⁱ State Road 603, east from South River Road at Cornwall.

there were not many visitors, and the trip from there into town took considerable time. When you consider that the means of transport was a horse or a horse drawn wagon, it is easy to understand the isolation of the area. The Camille flood [in August 1969] destroyed much of the older road and when it was rebuilt, access was much improved.

Except for detail, Irish Creek could be anywhere in the southern Appalachians.

There seemed to be no trend for particular national or ethnic groups to settle the area. After the Revolutionary War, some Hessians had settled along the Nettle Creek part of the watershed, and in 1866 there was an attempt to form a settlement of Polish people in the Irish Gap area, but the settlement did not succeed.



By the early 1920s, Irish Creek had a reputation of backwardness and lawlessness. The people were spoken of as “Irish Creekers” or, worse, “Dominickers” by non-mountain people. Usually the references were to a number of families of

Douglas E. “Pat” Brady was mayor of Lexington from 1965 to 1971 and a town and city council member before that. He was a leader of Historic Lexington Foundation, Rockbridge Historical Society, the Stonewall Jackson House and Hospital and the Red Cross. Owner during his lifetime of Buffalo Forge, a National Historic District, he died in 2001.

Irish Creek



U.S. Geological Survey, 1993

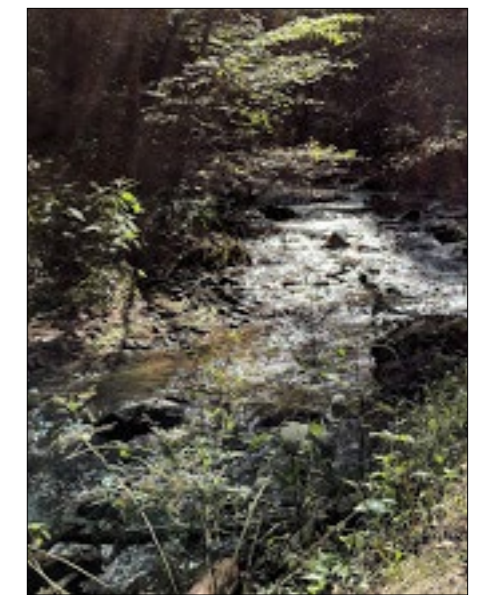
- █ Irish Creek
 - █ South River
 - █ Nettle Creek
 - █ Blue Ridge Parkway
- ❶ Cornwall
 - ❷ Norvell Flats
 - ❸ Irish Creek Mission (Mount Zion church)

mixed blood — white, Indian, and possibly Negro. There are few of these people left there; they seem to have been among the first to migrate to the towns.

It may be due to my limited contacts and this may be an unfair generalization, but I believe that the present people are eager to be friendly and are outgoing to strangers, while often being suspicious and unforgiving of their own people.ⁱⁱ

I have some feeling that the natives have little regard for game laws except when their own property is involved. They do not hesitate to call the “law” when they think that someone is poaching on their land, but spotlighting of deer is common and some stocked fishing waters have remarkably low trout populations when the season opens.

ⁱⁱ This observation goes against the stereotype that they are insular and suspicious of outsiders.



Irish Creek; Nettle Creek.

Norvell Flats is named for a black man who had a cabin there. Non-blacks had a kind of superstitious fear of him. One man, finding himself near the cabin on a cold night, asked for shelter and was kindly received, but the rough way of life, along with strips of snake meat hanging to cure, gave him a sleepless night, and he left before breakfast.

In the 1920s, some old English words were still in the mountain vocabulary, “anent” was commonly used for opposite, and “engen” was the word for onion. Today if I ask about these words, very few people know them.

Religion and education came to Irish Creek about the same time. In 1908, Miss Sally Bruce Dickinson founded the Irish Creek Mission at a settlement about eight miles up the creek from South River. The site was described by Dr. Howard Wilson as “an isolated, spiritually underprivileged mountain community.” Soon enough, a drunken element burned the mission school. The people of the area then furnished the materials to rebuild it and then to erect a new chapel. In 1912, after an appeal to the governor, teachers paid by the state came to the school. These Christian women taught small children in the morning, youth in the afternoon, and adults at night. Soon a Sunday School was started and preaching services were held, with the Presbyterians supplying the ministers. The church, called Mt. Zion, was formally opened in November 1912. During its existence as a Presbyterian Church, all of the deacons were Clarks and about two-thirds of the elders were of that name.

While many ministers served there, perhaps the high point of the little congregation was reached during the term of Joe Williams. He was from southwest Virginia and had been reared in a community similar to Irish Creek. He knew and



Mount Zion Baptist Church on Irish Creek Road — descended from Miss Sally Dickinson's 1908 Irish Creek Mission (later, Mount Zion Presbyterian Church).

understood the ways of the mountain people and reached an accommodation with them. He recognized that they were quite isolated because of the poor road, and that there was not much employment except in lumbering, farming, and hunting, none of which brought in much cash. He also knew that an enterprising man or group of men might do very well with a corn patch and a liquor still. Mr. Williams's pact was that he would not preach against their stills and illegal rum-running as long as their economic situation was so bad — but when they were able to get jobs and live better, look out.

During this time the church membership had reached 146, and throughout most of these years, Miss Sally continued her teaching and Christian work. She spent forty years at mountain mission work, much of it there on Irish Creek.

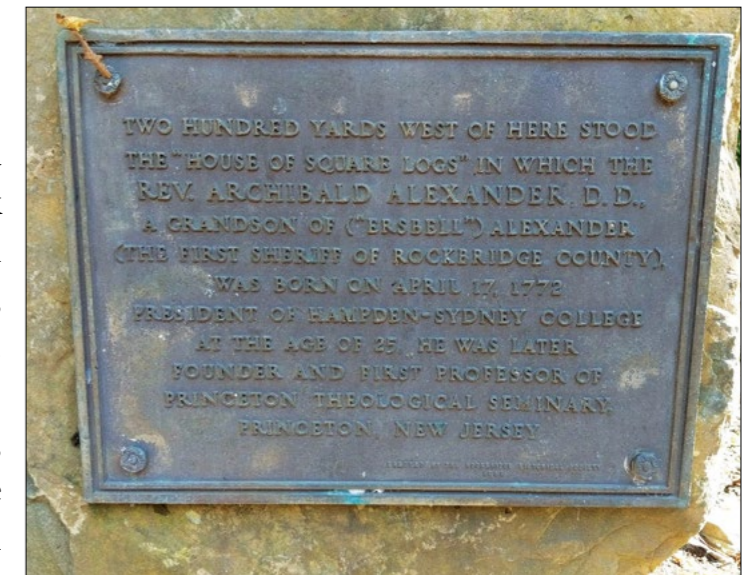
Eventually, however, Mr. Williams launched a plan to get the road to South River improved. He organized work gangs, built bridges and did wonders with the road. And then he began to preach against the liquor traffic. People began to migrate from the area and the church dwindled, finally being dissolved as a Presbyterian mission in 1962. Today [in 1981] the building is well painted and appears quite prosperous.

In a way the Creek made another contribution to Presbyterianism. Dr. Archibald Alexander, the Presbyterian scholar who founded the Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, was born near the mouth of Irish Creek. The Rockbridge Historical Society located the site of his parents' cabin and erected a marker. The Camille flood obliterated the site and washed away the monument. Col. McCluer Gilliam found the plaque and took it to the Campbell House [RHS museum], but the cabin site was never relocated.

About one-half mile into the gorge are the very faint remains of an iron furnace. The early-20th-century historian Oren Morton says that it was built in 1760 by one Daniel Dougherty.ⁱⁱⁱ Tradition has it that this was the first furnace west of the Blue Ridge and that cannonballs fired at Yorktown were cast here. One of its later owners was John Jordan. The site is now hard to find, but one may still come across pieces of slag and charcoal, and it appears that the paved road now goes through the actual furnace site.

TIN WAS ONCE MINED along the upper reaches of the creek. The Irish Creek tin mine operated from 1890 until about 1942, but it was by no means a continuous operation. There was a mill for refining the ore and a small tramway for hauling the ore from the mine. The refined ore was then brought to South River, where it was shipped by a train to a smelter. Some 3,200 tons of cassiterite ore [tin oxide] were shipped before mining ended. A geological fault had cut the narrow vein and the remainder has never been located.

It is hard to overstate the importance of this ore even beyond the local economy. Irish Creek is one of the few substantial tin deposits, possibly the only one, known in the United States. During World War II, when Malay tin was denied to the U.S., extensive core drilling was done at Irish Creek, but without much success. The ore has forty-six



The Alexander plaque has now been re-installed at the juncture of Irish Creek and Whites Gap Roads.

ⁱⁱⁱ Oren F. Morton, *A History of Rockbridge County, Virginia* (Staunton, 1920), p. 170.



minerals in it, beryllium being a principal one, but not in quantities to justify a mining operation.

When I was a boy I visited the site and saw the remains of a horizontal steam engine that seemed to be the largest machine I had ever seen. It is said that a thirty-yoke oxen team was needed to draw it up the mountain. The works were in a ruined state at that time,^{iv} but I think that some unrefined ore was hauled out later. Today, a summer cottage stands on the mill site and little evidence of the mine remains.

Dr. Stowe^v conducted many surveys for ore in the Blue Ridge. This was done by studying samples of sand taken from the streams and draws at the foot of the mountains. If minerals were found, the streams could be followed to determine the source. He concluded that there were no valuable mineral deposits in the Rockbridge area and that a rock-quarry operation would be likeliest to show a profit. At that time, there was at least one quarry in the Blue Ridge producing a silicate rock used in the manufacture of steel.

Tyree's grist mill operated near the old furnace site. To date, I have not been able to locate the remains.

^{iv} The author was born in 1916.

^v Likely Professor M. H. Stowe, a practical mining engineer, mentioned in several later-19th-century scholarly treatises on mining in Virginia, but not further identified in any of them.

The forests have provided the most employment in the area. During the early years, cabins were built of logs, then small saw mills began providing lumber. The Buena Vista Extract Company bought timberland with the intention of building a railroad into it to harvest chestnut bark. The railroad did not materialize and for a number of years tanbark^{vi} was hauled out by wagon. In 1916 the South River Lumber Company, a Pennsylvania firm, bought the Buena Vista Extract Company land and built a large sawmill on the South River at Cornwall, near the mouth of Irish Creek. A narrow-gauge railroad was constructed over the ridge into the Irish Creek Valley and then up the creek. It switchbacked up the mountain and spread out until it reached almost all of the Irish Creek watershed, branching out to Crabtree Falls in Nelson County and the Coffeytown area of Amherst County. At first, this operation employed local laborers with management brought from Pennsylvania, but as time went on more and more of the key positions were taken over by the natives.

Logging camps were set up to work particular areas; when it was time, they could be moved to other sites. Two notable camps were at Hog Camp and Norvell Flats. The Parkway now passes near the old Norvell Flats camp. It had a fairly large secondary sawmill and cabins for workers. I recently talked with an older lady who now lives at Montebello and I commented on the small size of the log cabin in a picture. She said that the size was common and that the company furnished one-, two- and three-room cabins, all constructed so that they could be transported by train to new camps when needed. She lived in one of these when she was first married and, she said, she did not feel disadvantaged.

The South River Lumber Company operation was beginning to show a profit when the chestnut blight struck. The logging continued but the value of the product was much reduced. Then the Great Depression came and the mill ceased operation. Chestnut lumber on the yard was sold at give-away prices, today it would be worth a fortune.^{vii}

The area also made its contribution to the world of music. One Sam Downey, an illiterate teamster, had music in his soul. As he drove along he would make up jingles and tunes and sing them over and over. One of his songs, "Ole Joe Clark," came to be included in books of folk songs and was much played by so-called hill-billy bands. I expect that some of the verses used by the bands never passed the lips of Sam Downey. Dr. Tompkins tells in his book of a patient who had known Sam.

^{vi} Often oak or hemlock; used for tanning hides into leather.

^{vii} A good account of the impact of the chestnut blight can be found in Horace Douty's thorough and lively [history of South River Lumber Company](#) in *Rockbridge Historical Society Proceedings XIII* (2009), pp. 45-58, notably pp. 55-56. He notes that the South River operation had planned to complete its chestnut harvest by 1940 and barely did so, just as the blight, which erupted around the time of World War I, reached Rockbridge.

Old Joe Clark

Old Joe Clark, he had a house, Eight-teen sto-ries
I went down to Old Joe's house, Stayed to have some
Rac-coon has a bush-y tail, 'Pos-sum's tail is

high, Ev-'ry sto-ry in that house was
supper, Stubbed my toe on the ta-ble leg and
bare, Rab-bit has no tail at all, ex-

filled with chick-en pie. Fare ye well,
stuck my nose in butter.
cept a bunch of hair.

Old Joe Clark, Fare ye well, I say, Fare ye well,

Old Joe Clark, I'm a-go'in' a-way.

Old Joe Clark had a mule
His name was Morgan Brown
And every tooth in that mule's head,
Was sixteen inches around.

Old Joe Clark had a cow,
She was muley born,
It takes a jaybird a week and a half,
To fly from horn to horn.

Federal patrol was making a sweep at Irish Creek, one horse broke a leg and had to be shot; hence “Yankee Horse Hollow.” The story got some reinforcement when the logging railroad was constructed through the hollow. Metal tack parts were found, some bearing “U.S.” markings.

My interest in the area stems from the fact that when I was small, my father did surveying for the South River Lumber Company, and Irish Creek became for me a mysterious and fabulous place. I once took a trip on the logging train, into the mountains. As it picked up riders along the way, I encountered one man carrying a chicken stuffed in the bib of his overalls. Then, wonder of wonders, I rode back in the cabin of the locomotive, arriving at the mill after dark. I was returned to the real world abruptly when I burned my hand on a poker as I dismounted.

SOURCES

Oral accounts; survey notes; “Wildcatting on the Mountain” by Benjamin F. G. Kline Jr. (1970); “Rockbridge County, Virginia: An Informal History,” by Dr. Edmund Pendleton Tompkins (1952); “The Lexington Presbytery Heritage, by Howard McKnight Wilson (1971).

“Yes, I knowed him; when he got too old to work he came to live with his married daughter near our house. One day he took a bucket of swill to the hogpen, he walked up on a ramp and poured the swill into the hog trough, as he straightened up he fell over backward, and when someone got to him he was plumb dead.”^{viii}

THIS IS THE LAND OF Yankee Horse Hollow, Duck Pond, Norvell Flats, Nettle Falls, bear hunts, trout fishing and perididdles.

A perididdle is a squirrel-like animal somewhat smaller than the common gray, with an appearance similar to the flying squirrel. A favorite haunt is the hemlock forest, where it eats small seed cones. It may become a pest around a home. I first heard of it from someone who suspected it of eating sweet corn in the garden. Folklore says that it goes into the nests of gray squirrels and castrates the baby males. I hope one day to see one of these critters to make sure that I am not the butt of a leg-pulling.

During the Civil War it was the practice to hide cattle, horses and men in the mountain hollows to prevent the Federal soldiers from taking them. Once, when a

^{viii} Edmund Pendleton Tompkins, *Rockbridge County, Virginia* (Richmond, 1952), pp. 91–93.