The magic of Horse Cove

Valley provides a window into the resilience of nature and colorful times past

By Carolyn Morrisroe

Main Street in Highlands meanders to the east as Horse Cove Road, dropping down hairpin turns on a route older than the town itself to a valley rich in history and biological diversity.

Horse Cove lies in a bowl-shaped valley surrounded by ridges and peaks: Sagee Ridge; Blackrock Mountain, Little Fodderstack and Fodderstack mountains, Rich Mountain and Chestnut Mountain. Over the years, a cove that once was quiet mountain bogs has been witness to expeditions, settlement, logging, the removal of the Cherokee, and now a resurgence as the trees come back and efforts to protect Horse Cove gain steam.

Conserving the cove

The Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust preserves much of this delicate and storied valley through conservation easements.

"The center of that valley now is protected by conservation easements. Not all of it, but a lot of it," HCLT Executive director Gary Wein said during an HCLT-led tour of Horse Cove in July. "We've been busy. We recognize this as a really, really important place."

Photos by Carolyn Morrisroe

Gary Wein, executive director of the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust, points out distinctive historical and ecological features of Horse Cove from Sunrise Rock on during a tour this summer.

HCLT Stewardship Coordinator Kyle Pursel said a conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and the land trust that protects the property. The landowner conveys the development rights to the land trust, which agrees it

Oconee bells in Horse Cove by Carolyn Morrisroe

Once full of mountain bogs, the cove still is home to moisture-friendly pitcher plants.

will never be developed. The land trust periodically checks up on the properties for which it holds easements, including those in Horse Cove.

"Basically we just make sure that they don't negatively impact the conservation values." Pursel said.

Some of the easements in Horse Cove are agricultural in nature and others protect views, such as of Blackrock Mountain, whose looming granite presence is ever-present in Horse Cove.

Wein said it's important to remember that properties such as those in Horse Cove that are protected now from development were not always that way.

"You should not delude yourself into thinking this is a pristine forest," he said. "Forests change."

Horse Cove underwent intensive logging, as did most of the forests in the Southern Appalachians.

"This forest has some old-growth elements in it, but an awful lot of land around it has been logged," Wein said. "And in fact, an awful lot of this valley was cleared and was pasture and then they planted or pine trees seeded into it."

Wein said ecology borrows the law of thermodynamics from physics: "Things change."

"A hundred years ago, this would look very different than it does now," he said.

Natural elements of the cove

The land trust has good reason to be keen on protecting lands in Horse Cove:

The Padgett Poplar — actually a tulip tree — stretches more than 100 feet in the air and several centuries back in time.

The valley is home to rich biodiversity and ecologically rare habitats.

One example of the impressive natural features that can be seen in Horse Cove is the Padgett Poplar, a very large tulip tree that's said to be four centuries old and was named for a local resident who was a proponent of saving stands of old-growth trees.

Pursel said the region was instrumental in a paradigm shift that occurred in the 20th century about timber.

"There are a couple of foresters and former foresters, largely based out of this area, that started creating a ruckus, being like, 'No, clear-cutting is not always the way," he said. "Some of those people were Bob Zahner … and Bob Padgett. Bob Padgett in particular is known for saving this little piece right in here and in the next cove over from getting logged."

A rare wildflower with glossy leaves and white flowers known as Oconee bells, or Shortia galacifolia, can also be found in Horse Cove. Pursel said a famous French botanist mischaracterized the plant on his first encounter with it in the Highlands area in 1787.

"Andre Michaux, when he was walking through the area, picked up a specimen and labeled it as a weird galax," he said.

The remnants of Horse Cove's bogs also provide a home for a particularly special flora: pitcher plants.

"This, combined with the other ones that are in another part of the wetland in Horse Cove, are one of 14 known natural populations for this particular subspecies," Pursel said as the tour group looked at an outcropping of pitcher plants.

Horse Cove does, in fact, have horses, thanks in part to conservation easements dedicated to agriculture. Blackrock Mountain rises above the relatively flat valley.

Rich cove history

Horse Cove was home to settlers long before Samuel Kelsey and C.C. Hutchinson drew their famous "X" to mark the spot where the town of Highlands would be established on the plateau above the valley.

Early on, the cove drew visitors from afar.

"When people came from Walhalla, they'd rent a buckboard or a horse or sometimes there was like a cab driver

Luther Turner describes how his ancestor, Stanhope "Squire" Hill first built Hill House, right, in the cove in 1845. The house is still owned by the family.

and they would drive up through the Chattooga River Valley," Wein said.

Stanhope Walker Hill, who later became the first mayor of Highlands and helped lay out the roads for the fledgling town, built a farmhouse in Horse Cove in 1845 — a structure that still stands and is owned by his descendents.

One legend about Hill is that he resigned a commission in the military at his wife's insistence when he was asked to help round up Cherokees and lead them to a reservation. Luther Turner, Hill's great-great grandson, said Hill's wife is also said to have aided Cherokees in hiding out in the large rocks at the base of Blackrock Mountain.

"His wife was Celia Edwards Hill and she didn't really like the way the Indians were being treated," Turner said. "She said, 'Since you're a volunteer, I'd like to ask you to retire or resign.'"

Turner said Hill did resign and opened a guest cottage business down Walking Stick Road in Horse Cove.

"Most of the people who would come up were from the coast, Charleston and that area, and he would take his horse and buggy and go down and pick 'em up at the train station in Seneca," which was a two-day trip, he said.

Turner said visitors would often spend the entire summer in Horse Cove — some of them more memorable than others.

"One little fellow came up, he was a teenager and spent a good bit of time, and his name was Woodrow Wilson," he said.

Turner said the valley has always had a special appeal.

"Horse Cove has been a wonderful area to live in," he said. "It developed pretty rapidly, as Highlands began to be formed uptown, a lot of people decided they wanted to come down here as well."

The Civilian Conservation Corps was one organization attracted to the area, building a camp in the cove during the Depression, Pursel said.

"In the '30s, there was a large Civilian Conservation Corps project in the area," he said. "CCC accomplished much work in Horse Cove."

Turner said his grandmother built a house on the site where the CCC camp used to be.

"I can remember as kid looking at the CCC camp," he said. "They built a lot of things around here: They worked on the

Appalachian Trail; they also built Cliffside Lake."

The level land of Horse Cove provided ample space for crops, the legacy of which can still be seen in orchards.

"In the old days, their biggest crop, I'm told, was apples and grapes and a lot of different kinds of vegetables but they had a big huge apple crop that was apparently very successful for them," Turner said.

Turner's grandmother, Helen Hill Norris, collected columns she wrote on the history of Highlands and Horse Cove for The Highlander in "Looking Backward," published in the early 1960s. In one piece, she recalled the pleasant memories of those apple orchards in the fall:

"Reckon fall, and the spicy apple laden air — the roadsides still flowering in royal blue wild asters and saffron-yellowed goldenrod — and the call of a business-like crow as he flies over a ripened cornfield — and we house-keepers busy in a fragrant, spice-filled kitchen aroma, as pickles, jams and jellies go into jars and freezing cartons, are thankful and happy over the bounteous yield of field and orchard." ❖

Places to see in Horse Cove

Padgett Poplar

A short drive up Rich Gap Road and a very quick walk takes you to tulip tree that is 127 feet tall, 20 feet in girth and four centuries old.

Church of the Wildwood

The historic Church of the Wildwood features a hymn sing on Sunday evenings from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Any time of year, the church and cemetery provide an interesting look into Horse Cove's history.

Hill House

Though the house is private, still owned by the family of Horse Cove settler Stanhope Walker Hill, the white farmhouse is visible from the road. The back section was built in 1845 and an addition was built in 1885.

Secret Falls

This not-so-secret waterfall is accessed by a Forest Service trail that leads to a gorgeous cataract and pool that invites a dip on warmer days. From Horse Cove Road, take Walking Stick Road 2.9 miles, turn right on Forest Road 4567. Drive a short way to a parking area on the left and a trailhead for Secret Falls.

Nearby hikes

The Bull Pen and Whiteside Cove areas, which can be accessed via Horse Cove Road, offer several scenic hikes, such as Granite City, Ellicott's Rock, Iron Bridge and the Chattooga River. See our hiking guide on page 44 in this edition of Legacy for more information.