

WILSON'S CREEK – THE HISTORY BEFORE THE FLOODS

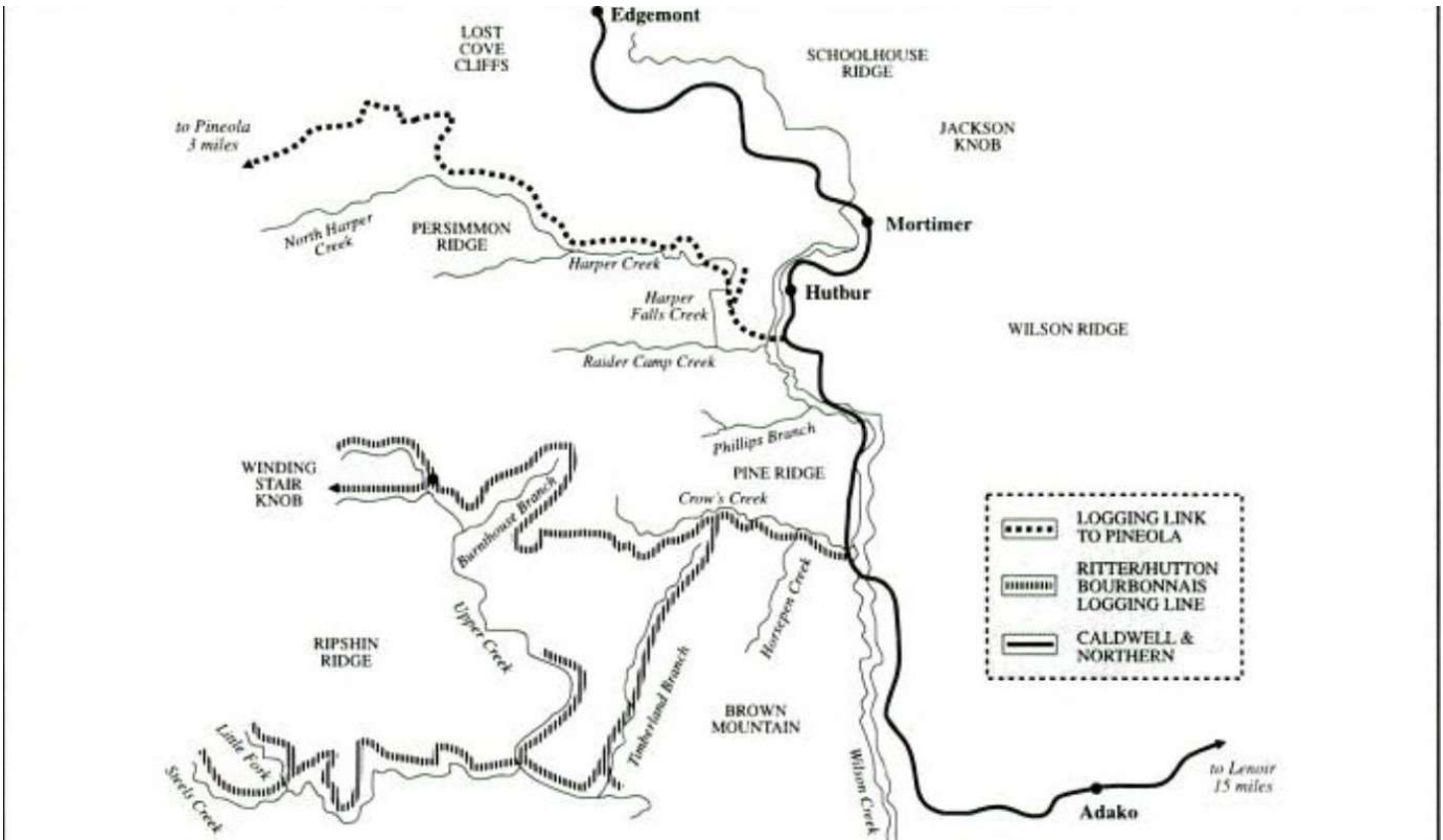
“On the line with Charlie Walker”

With extracts from "Legacy of the Carolina & North-Western Railway" by Matthew C. Bumgarner

Many of us enjoy fishing the many creeks and rivers all around our great nation. We enjoy the beauty that they hold, like the terrain, the clarity of the water, the amazing sounds of the water rushing over rocks, the bountiful fish that they provide and the serenity that sets a peace in our hearts and minds. There are so many reasons that we all come out and fish these incredible areas and yet, there are places that we fish all the time without knowing the history behind them. For this avid fisherman and lover of the outdoors, I found this to hold true with one my favorite fishing spots around the area, “Wilson’s Creek”.

The water is beautiful and mesmerizing as it cascades down from Grandfather mountain, making its way down through the small town of Edgemont and Mortimer, that is now consider “a ghost town” and continuing its way down through the gorge as it empties into the Johns River.

The dirt roads that twist, turn and snake their way along the path that is cut through the Pisgah National Forest to these towns are so tight in areas that only one vehicle at a time can make their way through. With high rock walls on one side and shear drops 200ft down to the bottom of the gorge on another, one can’t help but wonder how these tight dirt roads came into existence. The truth of the matter is they were the actual paths that the railroad followed. Yes, that is right, the roads you drive on were actually where the Narrow gauge railroad that ran to the towns of Mortimer and Edgemont.



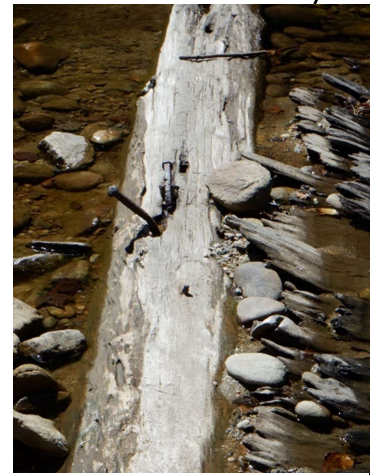
Back in 1904 these towns Rapidly came into existence when the Ritter Lumber Company bought much of the land around Wilson Creek for logging. This area with clear creeks became a town of 800 people that lived there and worked at both the saw mill and the textile mill. The town of Mortimer had a Hotel, a church, a store, movie house and the Laurel that Teddy Roosevelt danced in the ballroom at. Edgemont had a hotel and a Train depot there and a General store still stands that will now house a railroad museum soon.

There were two railroads that operated there, one was the narrow gauge rail system that Ritter Lumber company used for logging and the other was The Hutton-Bourbannis Company railroad. There was a company store, a blacksmith’s shop, a church, a school, a hotel, and numerous houses.



What was the railroad is now but a dirt road.

Mortimer and Edgemont became thriving areas. There were no roads at first and people would ride the rail, to come to visit and enjoy the recreational waterways of Wilsons Creek for canoeing, swimming and fishing. Yes, sir, those two towns were thriving and things were going good until the flood of 1916 that wiped out much of the narrow gauge line used for logging and the big flood of 1940 that wiped the town out. Later down the old railways became the roads you drive in on. You can still see the paths of the railroad in many areas and parts of the bridging, logs, with railroad ties still in them and section of the narrow gauge track left in the water by the great floods the trout now use for protection and an ambush point for food flowing to them.



Old railroad logs with spikes

As you wade along and fish the beautiful Wilson's Creek, let your mind fade back to a time that was a little more "raw" and beautiful and think about the hidden beauty, the history and what made Wilson's Creek the Wild and Scenic River it is today. Let's help to preserve and keep this area in the best possible conditions that we can and take whatever measures we need to do to ensure that the creek Lives up to being the Wild and Scenic river that is deserves to be.



Bird's-eye View Mortimer, N. C. Looking West.

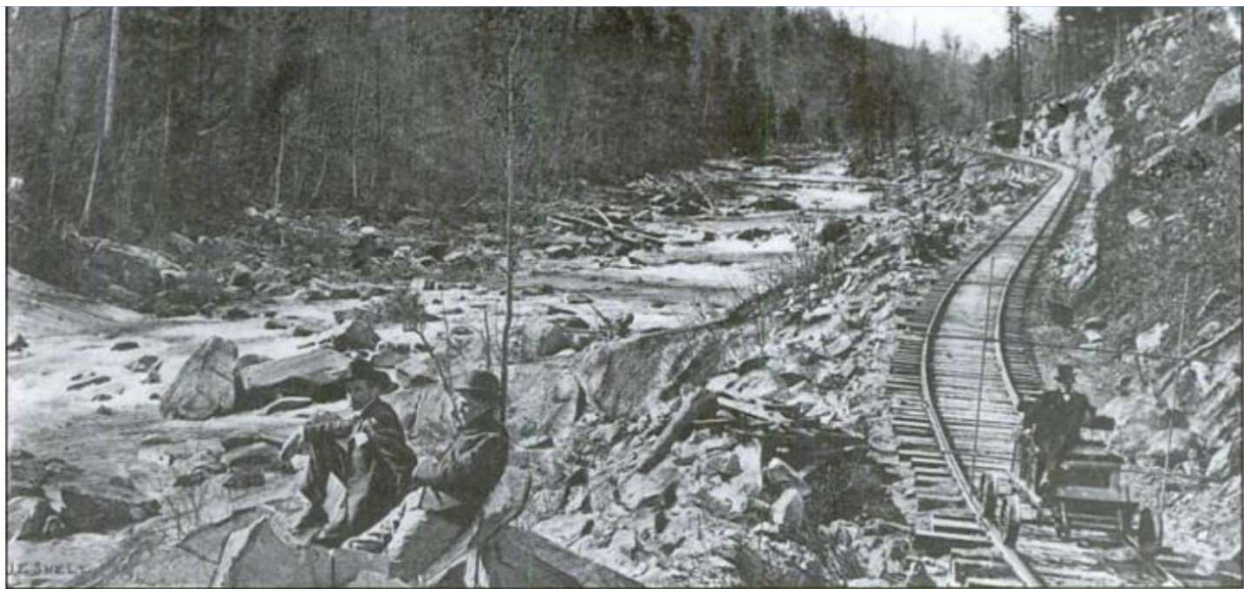


"Crossing" Mortimer, N. C.
Miss Sept - Sunday
with my girls
M. J. Smith, N. C. 1908.

After buying the Caldwell & Northern, the Carolina & North-Western immediately began widening the logging railroad to standard gauge. This 1903 construction shot west of Lenoir is a classic example of why narrow gauge lines were used to begin with. Note the existing narrow gauge Caldwell and Northern roadbed carved into the hillside behind the bridge. Now that the line is being standardized, an expensive trestle must be put into place to accommodate the larger equipment. (Courtesy of R. Doug Walker.)



Bridge and Railroad that ran along the creek that we now drive on.



It took almost a year longer than expected to carve the railway through the rugged Wilson Creek Gorge on the route to Edgemont. Note the motor car and clearance frame mounted to it. (Courtesy of R. Doug Walker.)