

The Economy of Dry Fork

Land brought the first settlers to the upper reaches of Dry Fork. The land gave them the opportunity for economic independence, which was their guarantee of freedom. Farming the creek bottoms and timbering the mountains sustained the families and provided basic needs for the home. The close proximity to the coal fields and the location of the railroad station at Ingleside just over East River Mountain provided outside job accessibility that enabled Dry Fork to thrive, while other communities slowly dwindled. Finally, the isolation of Dry Fork provided one last source of income, moonshine whiskey.

The Dry Fork Community became prosperous during the first half of the twentieth century. M.H. Ferguson was a full time farmer. All the land was cleared from his house down to his son Reuben's place. Pete Ferguson recalls his ancestors in this way.

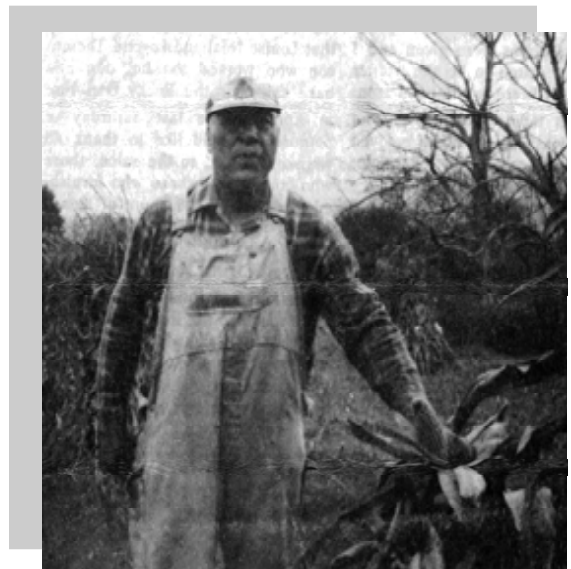
“I just heard 'em talk, like I say, the old people, they didn't do too much talking. They just come in here and they went to work to cleaning up property, and cleaning up the land, and raising their families and kids and stuff and trying to survive.”

They did more than just survive. M.H. was Pete's grandfather and he remembers his two story house and his large barn.

“It's torn down now, they tore it down, and he had a barn - aahhh wow, he had a barn. He had a log barn built over there, and that barn would stable. . . . two, four, six, eight mules. He would stable eight mules in that barn, and he had it built. He could put two, four, six - he could put six, he could put six wagons of hay, six wagons, I say, six wagons, on one side of it. And right up on the other side, he could pull up under, and there'd be at least three end-to-end wagons out there. And right over on the north side of it, that's where he stabled alot of his farm equipment. He could stable farm equipment in all of it.”

Farming was the most direct bounty of the land and the most beloved. It was the full time occupation of the first generation on Dry Fork. It is always recalled with fondness, it was a labor, but a labor of love. Martha Cobb recalls..

“What ever they needed for the farm. like plows and then they had what they call a harrow to drag the ground and tear up the clods and then they come back and lay the rows off and plant it. They had things like corn planters and stuff like that where you could do it walking. It had like two handles on it, stick it in the ground and do like that and the corn would come out and you go to the next one all the way. Potatoes



.....you would have to drop them in the ground, they made hotbeds and grewed their own tomatoes and sweet potato plants and stuff like that, peppers or whatever they sold.”

As time passed, the economic pressures on the small farmer increased. Mechanization made farming small acreages less and less viable. All over the South and Appalachia, farming became a marginal occupation at best. The blacks of Dry Fork had a very important advantage in the struggle to survive in the South. They were not share croppers or tenant farmers, they owned their land.

There was much timber in the mountains and sawmills were located at various locations through the years. Pal Saunders operated a small saw mill, as well as a grain mill along Dry Fork. His son, Fred remembers him bringing sawmill and moonshining men from Floyd County to work with him. The saw mill was operated by a steam engine and the grist mill was powered by the dammed waters of Dry Fork. Fred recalls that the grist mill would sometimes operate late into the night. As a small boy he often would be called upon to hold liter knots to provide illumination for the workers.

“And when I was a boy, they would work all night, and I used to go to the pond, to hold the liter knot for the men, and I’d go to sleep there, and that hot tar dripping on my hand! Ha ha ha! That would wake me up !”

Pal Saunders did well, and he was the first man in the community to own an automobile. He bought it from Dunn Motors in Bland, and it was surely a prized possession. Other residents of the community at various times had small sawmill operations. Pete Ferguson and his brother Mack went in together and ran a small operation. A railroad was built up Wolf Creek from Narrows to Rocky Gap. Its purpose was to bring back tanning bark for the Snowflake Tannery in Narrows. Lee Tynes remembers his dad, Ferguson Tynes, talking about the tanning bark trade.

“Cause I heered my—my Daddy said that down here at—where they's the Stower's store--Mr. Honaker had a store there, see, he was in debt for a lot of feed—a lot of stuff down there and they hauled 'em and rode a wagon and hauled tannin' bark and paid it off—and they was children. Nothin' but boys, you know. They was pretty good sized boys.”

Marvin Tynes remembers his grandfather, father, and uncles working in the lumber trade.

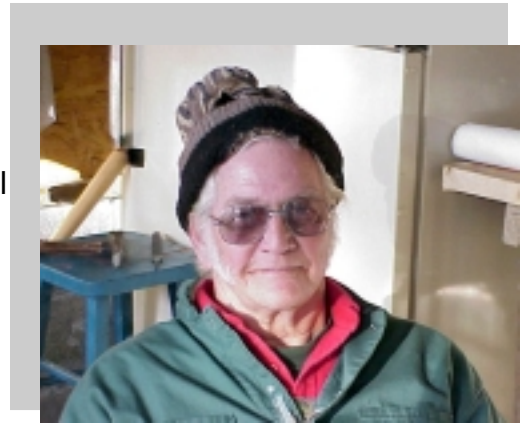
“The truck, they bind it with a chain and a pole. It use to ship out of Rocky Gap,down here, by train. My granddaddy used to ship lumber out of Rocky Gap. When grandpa Jack died, Uncle Jim and Daddy hauled it on the road with a wagon from here to Rocky Gap, hauled railroad ties, ship building stuff. Grandpa Pal got a letter from England saying he had the best stuff that had ever been sent over there. That was grandpa Pal, my mother’s father.”

Camps were built for some of the larger mills and some workers were brought in from the outside. Charlie Taylor was a white man who owned a great deal of land beyond

the black settlement up on Pond Mountain. He engaged in many timbering operations along with others. Camps were made for outside workers to stay. The blacks helped to build them and also worked in the timbering operations.

There was also work helping the white neighbors on their farms below the black community. Noah Charleton spent the week living with the Frenchs and working on their farm. This was not always employment that was looked up to in the community. Nate remembers his father this way.

He worked with white folks. That's all he did. My dad was always the kind of man, he never stayed at home--- he stayed with white folks. Right down the road at that empty house...? Right down the road--- Billy French. He stay down there, y'know. He stayed down there with them and come home on the week-ends. He'd go back on Sunday evening. He didn't stay at home. But it wasn't my daddy bringing nothin' up there---cuz he was bringing stuff up there on the weekends. He'd bring enough to eat on the weekends and then he' leave on Sunday. Nah, he'd... I don't guess he hated us or nothing like that, but he was a man just like granddaddy. He just lived with white folks all his life."



Nate's grandfather, father, and Nate, himself, were butchers and would help whites and blacks with killing and butchering their stock. The work went both ways and often whites would help blacks with their farm work. Hog killing and processing was by necessity a group activity and by choice a social one. Benny Lockhart, a long time white resident of Dry Fork, would help Ferge and Lige Tynes every fall in working up a bunch of hogs. This was a time to tell stories, drink moonshine whiskey, work hard, but have a good time as well.

"Course we had 3 or 4 old big iron kettles and 4 or 5 tubs sittin round outside. We had them full of good clean water too. Course we had runnin water there and we get t'ere bout good daylight and start killin hogs. And when we got done that day why, get em all hang up. We hung em up high where a dog or nothin couldn't get to em. And be a couple colored women up ere. They'd come down t'ere that day and start cookin, they was good cooks and they was clean too. We would never quit for dinner time. Most time be 2 or 3 o'clock before we got all the hogs cooked. Then we all went in and sit down eat a good hot meal. And laugh and talk and the women they'd go home, and we'd uh sit d'ere till the next morning. You had 3 or 4 nice clean couches in the old Jack Tynes house, 3 or 4 cots if you wanted to lay down you could. And next mornin we get out t'ere, some go to cuttin up, some grindin sausage, some rendering lard, all that stuff. And we'd work t'ere till we get em all in and fixed up and salted down and ever thing, sometimes it'd be way in the night. I stayed up ere as high as two nights at a time. You know stay d'ere the night we killed and after we killed then the morrow we go to workin them hogs up and sometimes it'd be dark. and Lige had some lights down ere and we just work right on till we had ever thing took care of. Then 2 or 3 days after that after we got all the meat fixed up, took car of, why we go back up ere, sit round

and talk and clean up ever thing round t'ere. Rake up a hair, put up a tools we used, and drain the water out the pan cover it up Then it was over with then. Till the next year.”

Many sought employment outside of the valley and were able to make a decent wage in the coal mines and on the railroad. These were two industries that would employ blacks to some degree and the combination of these various jobs at various times for different families enabled them to continue farming and prosper. Historically blacks were able to gain a foothold in some skilled and semi-skilled jobs in these industries before unions began to reserve the best jobs for whites. The geography of the area made this possible. Just over East River Mountain was the main railroad from the New River to Bluefield and then to the coal fields of Southern West Virginia and Southwest Virginia. Bluefield was a railroad center and jobs were plentiful. The life that the land could provide was limited, but with income from the mines or the railroad, a man and his family could have a better life. Marvin Tynes remembers his dad, Ferge working on the railroad for many years.

“ We were born in the log house, except for my brother George, he was born in Bluefield, my daddy was working on the railroad. He moved out of Bluefield and back to Rocky Gap and built a log cabin over here. He was only working like three days a week on the railroad. He walked across the mountain to catch a train and go up into Bluefield to work. He walked over to Hardy and then went to work. He worked second shift over there. “

Fred Saunders spent much time in the mines and Pete’s father, Rueben worked in the coal fields for thirty-one years. He would come home as often as possible. The wagon trail over the mountain to Hardy and Ingleside was well worn from Dry Fork residents trekking and returning from work. Nate Charleton worked on a railroad crew off and on for periods of time. Nate laid track.

“I’d go down to Norfolk and work on the railroad and I’d come back... I just worked on the railroad--- they’d take me anytime, I’d go back.”

Nate and a crew would live in a pump car on the tracks. They lived and ate separately from the whites, and they were paid less and their grub was even different,, but Nate enjoyed the life and he enjoyed the travel on his railroad pass. He worked and traveled, but he would always come home to Dry Fork.

Farming continued, but it was just part of the larger economy. It is hard to say exactly when moonshining entered the picture, but it definitely was an important part of Dry Fork life for quite a while. Floyd and Franklin Counties are known for their moonshine activities even unto the present day. Estellia Saunders mentioned that the first settlers, brought the knowledge of moonshine making with them when they settled Dry Fork. The legacy may go a far back as the Booth family, who owned Rueben Ferguson. According to Booth’s will he is listed as having four stills and over 800 gallons of brandy.

During the 1930's moonshine became an important part of the economy when an Italian man from West Virginia came and set up two large stills up the hollow behind Ferge Tynes house. Lee Tynes remembers his father working for him and keeping the stills going 24 hours a day. He would come home for breakfasts and Lee would go up and keep the fires going until Ferge would return. One still was called the community still and the profits from the other one went to the outsider. Hogs were fed from the mash and the entire community benefited. Many residents had small stills of their own. Various law officials were said to be aware of what was going on but looked the other way. A judge in Bluefield and a judge in Bland were said to be good customers of this valued product of upper Dry Fork.



Nate Charleton remembers working for a Mr. Hunt from Princeton. The still was as large as the bed of a pickup truck. Mr. Hunt wanted to be called "Sack Daddy," and he handed out dollar bills and bought new shoes for the residents. Nate and Arch Saunders ran the still way back up the holler. They lived in a still shack and kept the still fired all day and all night.

"Well, he had a 60 gallon barrel for a dumper, for a cap. I got down inside of it and cleaned it out. I could run a hundred-gallon in the day, and my buddy would take over at night. He run it a hundred at night. Seal it up so it won't lose no steam. He had a cream separator at, for a worm, the worm go around and around. It was pretty good whiskey. Shucks, it had to be. That man wadn't nothing but a, he was a perfectionist."

Occasionally the law would do its duty and stills would be busted and a few arrests would be made. Ferge Tynes would get off because he was the Judge's man. Nate Charleton wasn't so lucky. He got busted by the Feds in the 50's and would not tell who he was working for. He had to serve time. It was only nine months but it was a price that had to be paid. Today moonshining lives on in the stories and the memories of the people on Dry Fork. Aubrey Gore recalls it as an important source of income on Dry Fork during the 50's and 60's. Another source of income for many families was domestic service. "Dry Fork's Finest" were in high demand with the Bluefield professional families. It is recounted with some pride that Dry Fork ladies only worked for doctors, lawyers, and well heeled businessmen in Bluefield.

The community of Dry Fork was able to survive, when so many marginal agricultural communities did not, because of a combination of factors. The bounty of the land was lean, but sustaining. The resourcefulness of the people enabled many to take advantages of opportunities when they appeared, i.e. moonshining, etc. The relatively benign racial relations of the area allowed mutually beneficial economic relationships to develop. The availability of jobs on the railroad and in the coal fields was extremely important. However in the final analysis, Dry Fork would not still exist without the strong relationship of a once landless people to their first land; to the land that was both symbol and substance to their new freedom. The ties that bind continue through many generations to the present day.