

Tennessee State Parks Celebrates Its 70th Anniversary!

By Stuart Carroll

".....Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, that for the purposes of the Tennessee Department of Conservation the term 'park' shall mean and include any and all areas of land, heretofore or hereafter acquired by the State, which by reason of having natural and historic features, scenic beauty or location, possesses natural or potential physical, aesthetic, scientific, creative, social, or other recreational values; and is dedicated to and forever reserved and administered by the state for recreational cultural use and enjoyment of the people.

".....Be it further enacted, that every park under the provisions of this Act shall be preserved in a natural condition so far as may be consistent with its human use and safety and all improvements shall be of such character as not to lessen its inherent recreational value."

- Tennessee Public Acts of 1937, Chapter no. 266, Sections 1 and 2.

Such is the official start for the Division of Tennessee State Parks and the Department of Conservation. But the true beginnings of the state parks system go back much further and are connected to movements on both the state and national level.

The struggle between the Native Americans, who first inhabited this land, and European settlers left no room to contemplate putting aside public areas. That struggle was followed by the brutal Civil War, which rolled back and forth across the state. In fact, one of the first public lands in the region was the Chickamauga/Chattanooga National Battlefield which was established in 1890 as a commemoration of that series of battles for Chattanooga.

In 1893, the Brushy Mountain Coal Field was acquired by the state. This area was purchased after area miners rose up in violent protest to the state's leasing of convicts to work the coal fields and the loss of the miners' jobs. Tennessee ultimately gained Frozen Head State Park from this area.

Another public area that came into the public trust in response to conflict was Reelfoot Lake. In 1911, a group of developers attempted to acquire the rich hunting and fishing area for private interests. The local people rose up, and even one death occurred. In 1914, the State Supreme Court reversed an earlier ruling and said the area could not be owned by private interests, but only as a public area (that decision hinging on whether or not the lake was navigable). In 1925, then Governor Austin Peay dedicated Reelfoot Lake as a hunting and fishing area.

As early as 1919, State Geologist Wilbur Nelson proposed a state park system with Reelfoot Lake, the Brushy Mountain Coalfield, and the Herbert Domain (in Bledsoe County) as the basis. In 1925, Governor Austin Peay created the Tennessee State Parks and Forestry Commission. While no state parks were created under this commission, the commission started lobbying for a new national park in East Tennessee and ultimately convinced the legislature to appropriate around \$1.5 million dollars for the same area.

This work combined with the efforts of North Carolina and with a generous gift from the Rockefeller family to create the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It is the most popular national park in the nation (with more attendance than Yosemite and Yellowstone combined). It is ironic that we owe this incredible National Park to the vision and work of leaders in the states of Tennessee and North Carolina, and yet we owe the origin for 15 of our first Tennessee State Parks to the federal government.

When the administration of Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, one of the first priorities was to provide some economic relief to the people. A bevy of organizations were created and swung into action throughout the country. In Tennessee, the National Park Service started work on five areas: Fall Creek, Meeman-Shelby, Mont-gomery Bell, Steele Creek, and Reelfoot Lake. Steele Creek, as Watauga State Park, was later turned over to the city of Bristol, and the National Park Service development of an area on Reelfoot Lake was abandoned.

Another New Deal agency, the Tennessee Valley Authority, organized and developed the following state parks in the 1930s: Cove Lake, Norris Dam, Big Ridge, Harrison Bay, Pickwick Landing, Booker T. Washington, and Paris Landing. One of the first scenic drives in the country was constructed at Norris Lake. The National Forestry Service developed



CCC Company 3459, from Mississippi, works on a shelter at the Pickwick Dam area in 1936. *Photo Credit: Tennessee State Parks*

Cedars of Lebanon, Natchez Trace, Chickasaw, and Standing Stone. The Farm Security Administration developed Cumberland Mountain State Park.

Most of the work at these depression-era parks was supplied by the Civilian Conservation Corps, young boys organized into an Army-like hierarchy, and the Works Project Administration, older workers who often lived in the area instead of camps. The WPA often supplied photographers, writers, and others to document and advertise these developments. Later the WPA actually supervised and instructed Boy Scouts and other groups that came to use the newly built structures in the parks.

The advent of World War II marked the end of development at New Deal park areas. Land acquisition was halted, budgets were slashed, CCC camps were emptied as the boys went off to war, and visitation to the fledgling park system plummeted as materials, time, and money became scarce. As the country was putting its full energy into the war effort, even state parks played a part through dances and outings, planned at places like Cedars of Lebanon, for soldiers on leave.

By the mid-1940s, most of the federal areas had been turned over to the state's new Division of Parks. While the work of the National Park System and the National Forestry Department in guiding the development of state parks largely ceased, TVA continued to play an important role in the planning and implementation of state parks.

TVA saw its role of improving the quality of life for folks in the Tennessee Valley as important as its role in flood control and producing electricity. Planners within TVA recognized that Tennessee State Parks could be an important outdoor recreation provider and offer help with access to the public lands and waters that TVA controlled.

Overall, 14 of the current 54 Tennessee State Parks came from TVA. At one point, TVA encouraged Tennessee State Parks to take over 235 river and lake access areas as part of their recreation mandate. For a variety of reasons, Tennessee State Parks declined, and the Game and Fish Commission (now named Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency) assumed responsibility for those areas.

Throughout the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, TVA and the State Planning Commission provided much of the guidance to the overall park system. With TVA providing much of the vision and the State Planning Commission pushing Tennessee State Parks to develop the mechanisms necessary to run an efficient park system, Tennessee State Parks started to recognize themselves as a statewide system and to coordinate on matters of logistics and budget.

But it didn't help in the early days of state parks that the "spoils" system was alive and well. The old timers still recount how, after elections, the county party boss would show up at parks and point out who would be leaving, who voted right, and who still had their jobs. Fortunately much of that patronage system was dismantled in the 1970s in an effort to support the non-partisan professionalism of Tennessee State Parks.

The 1960s and 1970s also saw the addition of many gems to the park system: Stone Door, Roan Mountain, Old Stone Fort, Rock Island, Panther Creek, Big Hill Pond, and Bone Cave.

Efforts to put Tennessee State Parks management on a professional track moved forward in the late 1970s with an overall planning strategy for state parks called the Tennessee Outdoor Recreation Area System. This was an inclusive plan that looked at the resource base of the individual parks, established systems for inventory, management, and protection, and then set the future plans for those parks to align with the resources of the individual park.

TORAS represented the most comprehensive inventory and development plan ever utilized by State Parks. This emphasis on effective resource management continues today. Tennessee State Parks is the first parks group in the nation to participate in the All Taxa Biological Inventory (ATBI) program as a system. Thirty state parks are currently collecting information on plant and animal species at their sites in order to better understand and manage the natural resources at those parks.

This same spirit of resourcefulness helped Tennessee State Parks overcome the disruption produced by the park closures and budget crises of 2000 and 2001. Since that tumultuous time, all of the state's 54 parks are now open and access to each of them is once again free as park Access Fees were eliminated on July 1, 2006. With a renewed commitment to parks professionalism, Tennessee State Parks has garnered national attention for quality while hosting more than 25 million guests each year.

Looking forward to the Next 70 Years

Looking back at the conservation legacy and services that State Parks have provided for the past 70 years, it is important to chart a course forward for the next 70 years. It is instructive to look at other states in the eastern U.S. for lessons. In those states where population is much denser than our own and development more widespread, legislatures have tried to provide more money for land acquisition. In New York, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to acquire land and protect New York City's watershed. In Florida, hundreds of millions have also been spent to restore the Everglades normal water flow, to retain public natural beaches (which also are much more resistant to storm surges and hurricanes) and to acquire public lands.

In these more densely populated areas, conservationists often go toe to toe with developers, paying significant prices just to keep the land and its associated systems in a natural state. In fact, the highest percentages of public land in the Eastern United States are in those states where the population is the densest, and public lands are needed to offset rapid growth. As development pressures increase in Tennessee, we need to be just as aggressive about setting aside public lands to counter this impact.

Another model of conservation success is the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. Split out of the Tennessee Department of Conservation in 1949 to increase the professional management of game and fish, TWRA has actively pursued the acquisition of land for future generations. In the past 20 years, TWRA's public land holding has grown from 170,000 acres to nearly 450,000 acres. During the same period Tennessee State Parks have only added around 20,000 acres.

Besides assuring hunting and fishing areas for future generations, these TWRA lands are also important for air quality, watershed protection, viewshed protection, and other recreational uses besides hunting.

There is something spiritual about the public lands that we have set aside for future Tennesseans. These are places where folks can go to reconnect with their history, hike, bird watch, canoe, enjoy wildflowers, cave, or participate in a myriad of other activities. Some people visit these public lands simply to let the fatigue of the cities be lifted, as stress and tensions are replaced by the beauty and rhythm of the natural world. These public lands are also important buffers for the natural systems of clean air, clean water, temperature, and biodiversity. Even if the city dweller never visits these public lands, they still benefit.

Tennessee State Parks have grown into a celebrated public asset during our first 70 years as we have "forever reserved" important public lands for recreation, cultural use and enjoyment of the people. However, this vital work is never done. The real test will be the success of our conservation efforts during the next 70 years.

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