

GRAHAM COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



HONORING THOSE WHO PIONEERED
THE RUGGED MOUNTAINS
OF GRAHAM COUNTY



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Tere Moore, Editor



Joyce Kilmer Wilderness Trail

NEWSLETTER

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RENEW YOUR
MEMBERSHIP



GCHA's Quarterly
Newsletter is a
Membership Benefit

GCHA meets the 1st &
3rd Mondays of each
month (except holidays)
at 5 pm at United
Community Bank, 132
Rodney Orr Bypass,
Robbinsville

Contact us for telephone
call-in information.

GCHA VISION STATEMENT

To maintain a heritage center located on Main Street, by focusing on education, history, and community activities, to assure that Graham County's place in history will be secured for future generations. Participate in the revitalization of downtown Robbinsville, NC, and promote cultural tourism and economic development in our area.

GCHA MISSION STATEMENT

Our mission is to preserve, interpret, communicate, and celebrate the unique culture and rich history of the Southern Appalachian Region and Graham County, North Carolina through exhibition, demonstration, and education. Vital to this mission is our establishing and maintaining a Cultural Heritage Center located on Main Street in Robbinsville, North Carolina, that would further economic development by contributing to the revitalization of the historic downtown area, promoting cultural tourism, and showcasing area artisans and their work.

WINNER OF THE 2024 WINCHESTER RAFFLE:

DONNIE BURCHFIELD



GCHA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

EDD SATTERFIELD – PRES CAROLYN STEWART – V. PRES LAVINA WEST – SEC'Y
TERRI PHILLIPS – TREAS'R DOYLE BROCK MAX BUCHANAN
JAMES CALHOUN TERESA GARLAND JACK B. WIGGINS

GCHA HOLIDAY DISPLAY

The GCHA Museum building was under construction this holiday season and our annual holiday decorations were presented at the Museum Preview at Graham County Travel & Tourism.

Thank You for Visiting our Display!



GRAHAM COUNTY EMERGENCY SERVICES

References: Troy Grindstaff

www.main.nc.us/grahamcoems/Fire.html

and www.grahamcounty.org/ems.html

GRAHAM COUNTY EMERGENCY SERVICES

Graham County Emergency Management is located at 70 West Fort Hill and is directed by Brian Stevens. In emergency situations it is manned around the clock. This agency is responsible for planning for disasters taxing our local resources. Planning consists of identifying potential man-made and natural disasters. During a disaster, Emergency Management is a lead agency in coordinating resources in our county and resources that other state and local agencies might be able to supply Graham County. It is also responsible for planning for accidents involving hazardous materials and mitigating the effects of a release or spill.

Search and recovery is another responsibility of Emergency Management. Recovery includes recovering people killed from a variety of causes including logging accidents, hunting accidents, plane crashes, falls, suicides and murders, and water rescues.



Graham County Emergency Response Team

EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES

Graham County Emergency Medical Services has served the citizens of Graham County since the early 1970s, initially with basic EMTs. In 1987, Graham County started its Advanced Life Support program with the EMT-Intermediate and EMT-Advanced Intermediate. Finally, in 1992 Graham County established the first EMT-Paramedic program in North Carolina west of Haywood County. This was accomplished through many long hours of training that our original paramedics volunteered to do. We owe a very special thank you to William (Skip) Myers, for the

training they received. If Skip had not driven from Asheville at the time there would not have been a Paramedic Program in Graham County.

As of this date, the Graham County Rescue Squad and Graham County Fire Department have become a single unit. Plans were announced for the merger of both departments at the squad's December 2024 meeting. The reasoning was that many of the members served in both departments already and it would increase access to funding, as there is little outside funding available to rescue squads but considerably more for joint fire and rescue units. Operating expenses can be costly, such as when a fire engine or rescue vehicle needs replacing. Both units are staffed by volunteers who receive no salary for their services.

911 EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

Graham County E-911 Communications was formed in 1992. The purpose of the department was to answer all emergency calls for Graham County, including Fire, EMS and Law enforcement. By late 1992, Graham County was fully E-911. In 2007, the 911 Communications department moved to its current location on West Fort Hill. In 2009 it became a stand-alone department and the 911 supervisor was made the Director. In April of 2013, Graham County Communications became Certified in National Academy of Emergency Medical Dispatch and implemented EMO in Graham County.



911 Desk

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICES

Graham County Fire and Rescue is an all-volunteer fire and rescue unit in Western NC and has served the citizens of Graham County since early 1962, in a county with a population of around 9,000. Although not in Graham County, with agreement with Swain County, NC, it also provides rescue and fire services to the Cherokee Skyway, as well as Tail of the Dragon (US 129) since it is the closest fire and rescue team to it.

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HISTORY OF GRAHAM COUNTY - PART XVIII

Cont'd

Some of the missions they are responsible for include structure fires, brush fires and forest fires, vehicle and high angle rescue, plane crashes, drownings, searches for lost, missing or injured individuals or groups and drowning victims. During large-scale disasters that affect the county, the rescue squad assists in clearing roads, delivering food/supplies, checking on victims of storms.



Old Roughy fire in vicinity of Branch Creek – Nov 2016



High-Angle Rescue on US 129 (Tail of the Dragon)

FIRE AND RESCUE STATIONS

Graham County has two Fire Districts, Robbinsville and Stecoah. County Chief Jeff Millsaps heads the Graham County Fire and Rescue Department, along with Assistant County Chief Troy Grindstaff and Rescue Division Chief Brian Johnson and consists of four stations.

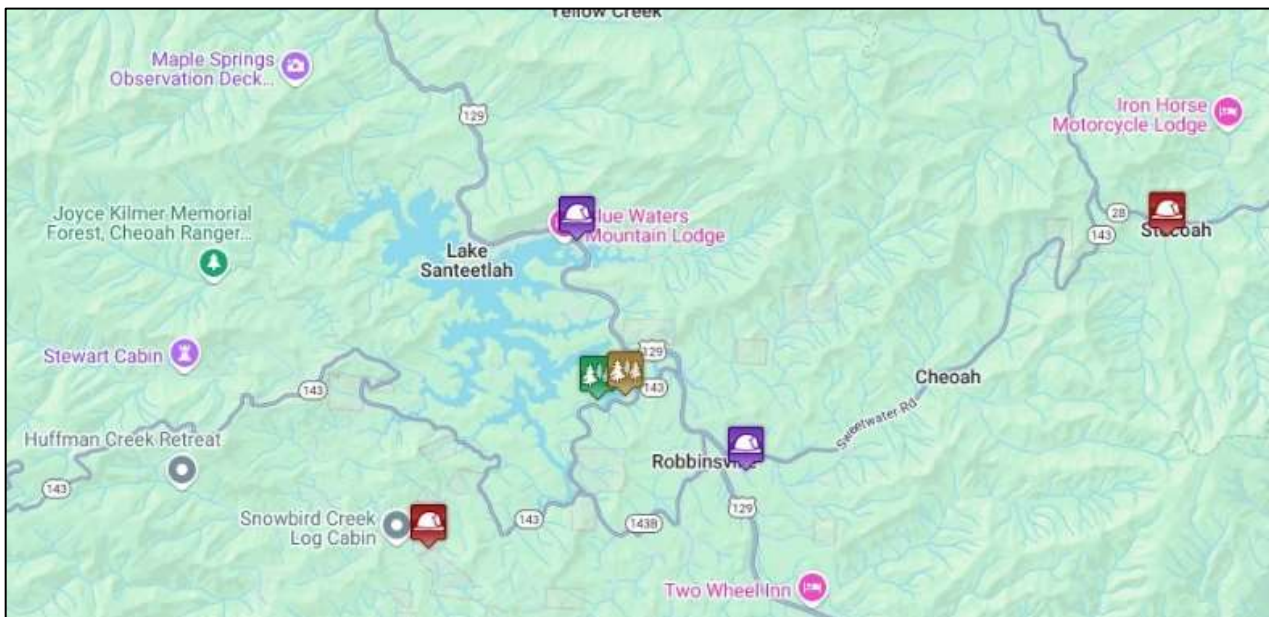
Station 1 (Fort Hill) is located at 70 West Fort Hill Road and is led by Chief Brent Eller and Assistant Chief Ethan Pannell. This station serves the six-mile district around Robbinsville, including the town of Robbinsville and Lake Santeetlah.

Station 2 (Snowbird) is located at 63 Cornsilk Branch Road and is led by Chief PD Royal and Assistant Chief Billy Lewis. This station serves the six miles around the Snowbird station.

Station 3 (Santeetlah) is located at 4497 Tapoco Road and is led by Chief Josh Turner and Assistant Chief Scott Cunningham. This station serves the six miles around Santeetlah Lake, including the Town of Santeetlah.

Station 4 (Meadow Branch) is located at 262 Meadow Branch and is led by Chief Brett Williams and Assistant Chief Jamie Hyde. This station serves around the Tapoco area.

Stecoah Station is located at 30 Loyd and Lydia Drive and is led by Chief Lynn Cody. The Rescue Squad was organized in 1963 and provides rescue in all levels and provides EMS transport and EMS training. This station covers a six-mile area from Fontana to the Swain County Line.



Graham County map showing Fire Stations and Forest Service Offices

In the Next Issue read about the Graham County Sheriff's Department

FUNDRAISERS

THE GRAHAM COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION IS LARGELY SUPPORTED
BY DONATIONS, MEMBERSHIP, AND FUNDRAISING



Low Inventory!

Email: grahamcountymuseum@gmail.com

Graham County 150th Commemorative Blanket \$50



GC Centennial Book \$35



GC 150th Anniversary Magazine \$5

GC Early Families Shirts \$25



GC Photo Tumblers \$25



SEE LAST PAGE FOR ORDER FORM



FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS OF GC SEARCH AND RECOVERY

Some of the well-remembered disasters in Graham are an Air Force plane crash at Johns Knob, the Blizzard of 1993, and the Jim Michelic Recovery.

The following accounts are from Marshall McClung's experiences while serving with the US and NC Forest Service and the Graham County Search and Rescue Team, as recorded in his GCHA Oral History Interview taken in 2024.

LOCKHEED C-141 STARLIFTER PLANE CRASH



On August 31, 1982, the aircraft departed Charleston in the early afternoon on a training mission, carrying a crew of nine. Weather conditions worsened enroute with sky overcast at 4,500 feet, top of clouds at 8,000 feet and zero visibility below 4,500 feet due to rain falls and fog. The airplane struck the slope of Mt Johns Knob (4,908 feet high) located at the Tennessee-North Carolina border. The wreckage was found 118 feet below the summit and all nine occupants were killed.

"I guess the worst, or the most recovered at one time, was when that big Air Force plane hit Johns Knob. There was nine men on there.

"The Air Force requested assistance from the Forest Service because it was on Forest Service land. Actually, part of the wreckage was in Tennessee and part of it was in North Carolina. The state line goes right across the top of that mountain. They didn't request the Forest Service from Tennessee, they requested it from here.

"So me and another officer went up there the next morning after it had crashed the afternoon before. It was raining and stormy wet when they crashed or we'd have had a forest fire from it. There

was so much intense heat that it had blackened the bark on the trees and the leaves, even though they were wet, were blackened too.

"The smell of the fuel was extremely strong there. The plane had exploded when it hit those trees, and of course it just started tearing the plane all to pieces. The biggest piece of the plane I saw was a piece of the fuselage out of the side, where you could see windows, about as large as a conference table hanging up in the trees. The plane had went on across the top of the ridge and down into a rock bar or rock cliff.

"They had a good size crew of Air Force people there and they were armed to the teeth, had pistols and were carrying what we'd call like an AR-15 or something similar. They acted like they sure was glad to see us. We were there to help with the recovery and help protect the site if they had any problems. Which they had some problems that we had to deal with that I would have thought they would have dealt with themselves, but I guess they had some military restrictions on what they can do to American citizens."

* * *

THE BLIZZARD OF 1993

The Blizzard of 1993, otherwise known as the "Storm of the Century", occurred from March 12–14, 1993.

"The snow started falling on Friday, March 12 and continued to snow into Sunday, March 14. I was in Robbinsville around noon March 12 and saw the snow working its way down the mountain from Joanna Bald. Soon it was snowing in town with the largest snowflakes I had ever seen. It looked as if large white feathers were falling.

"They called us out first to clear roads, and there was trees after trees after trees. Curt Griggs was working for

the fire company then and he wanted us to see if we could clear Cross Creek Road, which is a

section of old 129. He said that if we could get back in there to the main line, we could get a lot of the



FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS (CONT'D)

north end of the county put back on. So we started cutting that road out. It's not but about a mile or something, but we cut 33 trees in that distance, mostly pines that had broken down.

"Then they had us to start 129. We got a section of it, and then they wanted us to clear Yellow Creek Road, wanting to get in and be able to get to Wachacha Bald where they had one of the repeaters for the 911 system. We started cutting on that and were just cutting out one line to get through and worry about getting the other line later. Yellow Creek, after you go up so far you cross under the pipeline and there's a long straight in there. "It took us until night to get to there, let alone the rest of the way on up through there. That was the first thing we did was clear that road. We also took some supplies to people that were snowed in that lived back on little narrow roads.

"They got three rescue helicopters in, one from the Forest Service, one from TVA, the other from the National Guard. Hoot Gibbs and I had had a lot of experience working with helicopters on fires, so they had us start operating a helibase at the parking lot down beside the football field of the Community Center.

"Out of Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness and the Appalachian Trail and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, we rescued over a hundred hikers. Some of them had frostbitten fingers and toes.

"The Friday before the storm we were getting a lot of calls. It was in March and some colleges, you know, have a spring vacation then. We had a group call from up in New England somewhere wanting to bring their group in here for some winter survival training. Did they ever get it!

"Everyone I talked to, I tried my dead level best to get them not to come. No one had said you're going to get a blizzard, they just said heavy snowfall. I told the callers, If you get back in there and get in trouble, it's going to take a long time for us to get to you because there will be downed trees in the roads and we'll have to cut the road out before we can even get in the woods. They came on any way and had to be rescued.

"One of the helicopter pilots radioed me and said, We see a tent on Stratton Bald – and that's

back in the middle of nowhere over 5,000 feet. He said, Going to have the guys rappel down and see if anybody's in it, because if there's someone down there they're definitely stuck. Well, they rappelled down. The guy called me back and said, I watched them go out of sight in the snow, I can't see them – there was no one in the tent, they got out of there. He said that when they got back to the helicopter the snow was two feet over their head – and they was like 6 feet.

"The blizzard really didn't last all that long. It was one of those heavy wet snows and it melted rather quickly once it started. I knew there was going to be calls for help because the electricity was out, phones were out, everything was out. I had a 4-wheel drive pickup and got centered. The snow was so deep the wheels weren't even touching the ground. One of the other guys on the Rescue Squad had a service work truck that was 4-wheel drive and heavy, a lot of tools and everything on it, and he was able to get up Hares Creek Road and I came back out with him. Someone took a dozer and cleared that road. The motor graders like DOT had were useless. The National Guard came in here with the Humvees and got stuck, couldn't maneuver much. I measured the snow in my yard and it was 38 inches.

"Back then, in 1993, we'd communicate with each other by hand-held radios, and they were down too because the electricity to the repeaters on these mountaintops were knocked out. That was one of the reasons they were wanting Yellow Creek Road crew to get up to Wachacha Bald. Joanna was knocked out too."

* * *

JIM MICHELIC SEARCH AND RECOVERY

The search for a missing 25-year old Wisconsin man in October of 1998 ended in the recovery of his body.

"The longest search and recovery I was on was Jim Michelic from Wisconsin. We hunted for him almost a month. He had come into the Forest Service office and spent quite a bit of time there. He said he wanted to get away from people. So they told him about Stratton Bald, and he decided that's where he was going to go.

"He was supposed to have met some friends in Atlanta on a certain day and he didn't show up – and

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FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS (CONT'D)

this was like three or four days later – so they called. Then the family started wondering because they hadn't heard from him, either.

"So we started looking. It had come a heavy rain so there was no tracks to find. Hoot Gibbs and I went to Stratton Bald and it was so foggy you couldn't see 10 feet. We found his tent and the tent fly was open. It had rained and there must have been two inches of standing water in the tent. He'd got one little bag of his trail mix and hadn't eaten a handful out of it and the rest of it was in a bag he put up in the tree, bear proof, you know. I told Hoot, We're looking for a body.

"We started looking around in the general area. They started calling in a lot more rescue crews from different places and people with dogs and put up an aircraft. Aircraft are not that efficient here because we've got so much understory; even in the wintertime you've got the rhododendron and laurel. About all of the searches I can think of, ground crews was how they were found. I think we might have found one with a dog.

"We'd looked and we looked and we looked. I didn't know it at the time, but the very first day of the search I was within probably a tenth of a mile of him. It was so rough and the brush so thick, literally you'd have to walk on top of it or crawl through it. I thought to myself, *he wouldn't live through that*. I mean, even the locals don't hardly go in these places. So I turned around and went back.

"Well, when we got the dogs in there, there was a dog that alerted down that same place I'd went. It got down there about where I stopped and it stopped. I think what it was, there was a little stream there with enough water that would carry the scent away. Down in there was where he was.

"What we think happened is, in his tent he laid some candles out and realized that he'd left his flashlight and matches in the car and started out of there to go back to his car. That trail makes a series of switchbacks, making it easy to get turned around.

"Well, a couple fishermen decided they were going to take a shortcut into the upper end of Little Santeetlah Creek, which is the stream that goes through Joyce Kilmer Forest, and immediately regretted their decision. When they got down to

the base of the rock cliff there, there was a backpack and a pair of boots, this, that and the other. They knew we had been hunting for this guy, so they brought the items in to the Sheriff's office. Two of his brothers was here then and they identified it as being his.

"We said, Well, he's got to be around there somewhere. So we started in there the next morning. We got down in there – and decaying people, there's nothing else smells like that, once you've ever smelled it you immediately recognize it – and I told him, Well, I smell him, he's around here close somewhere.

"So we spread out. We're talking about you could step on a rock half as big as a car and it would move with you. I said, Gosh, be careful or they'll be carrying one of us out of here. I looked down between the rock I was standing on and the next rock and there was a leg bone from the waist down with a little bit of flesh left on it, not much. There had been a bear feasting on him because there was bear tracks and bear scat. So there was some of him here, some of him over there. So we brought him out of there.

"His driver's license said he weighed 160 pounds, and when I got the autopsy results back from the medical examiner there was 42 pounds.

His two brothers were here and they wanted to go in with me. I said, You do not want to go in and see that... it's going to be bad. They absolutely insisted on going and told me later they wished they'd listened to me.

* * *

GCHA's Oral History Project preserves History through Video or Audio Interviews

One of the most important parts of GCHA's mission to preserve Graham County's history is to collect, preserve and share Oral Histories. The real record of history is found in the lives of the ordinary people who lived it. GCHA began taking Oral Histories in 2019 and has collected 26 histories to date. Currently we are seeking individuals who are interested in sharing their memories of Graham County.

If you or someone you know might be a good candidate for this project, please contact us at grahamcountymuseum@gmail.com.

Pioneer Life – Wintering In



During winter, pioneer settlers in our western North Carolina mountains would primarily focus on survival and maintaining their homestead, including gathering firewood, hunting for food, tending livestock, repairing tools and clothing, preserving food, ice fishing, trapping small animals, making crafts from available materials, and activities around the hearth.

It was cold during winter, often below freezing. The cabin's only source of heat was a wood-burning fireplace. The slabs of stone inside and around the fireplace would heat up, so it was my favorite place to be on those cold winter days.

The cabin's fireplace was the center of attention in the home and created warmth when a person was close, but it did little to heat the corners of the home. In the evening, people would sit around the fire talking and working on small tasks and hand-crafted items.



I got a lot of work done, but the status of the fire never really left my awareness. A rhythm developed: fetch wood, tend the fire, fetch wood, tend the fire.

Here are some ways our early settlers spent their winters in the Western Carolina Mountains:

Hunkered down inside cabins – The early settlers in the Smokies lived inside log cabins, where they did their best to keep warm during the chilly months of winter. Due to the construction of these cabins, the cold wind could easily squeeze through the tracks or

even down the chimney! Keeping warm also required heavy night clothing, thick curtains, quilts and comforters, and children often sleeping several to a bed to help them all stay warm. Some people stayed in bed as much as possible in order simply to stay warm.

The snow fell frequently in the mountains, so families were often forced to spend most of the day indoors. Since loneliness and boredom could quickly settle in, in bitter conditions, “Cabin fever” was widespread during long snowstorms. Besides their chores, they would read their bibles, make quilts, craft furs or sew, sometimes even sing to pass the time.

Eating Stockpiled Food – In the winter, the pioneers would eat stored foods from the previous year and hunted animals and birds. Here are some of the foods they ate in the winter.

Nuts: Hickory nuts, black walnuts, and chestnuts.

Roots and Crops: Potatoes, carrots, beans, squash, wild onion and ramp. **Fish:** Brook trout, Sicklefin redhorse, Rainbow trout, Brim, Perch, Crappie, Sand bass and Black bass were dried or smoked. **Hunted meat:** Elk, deer, and bear were smoked, cured or jerked; fresh meat may include squirrel, turkey and rabbit. **Dried fruits and berries:** Wild grapes, blueberries, elderberries, mulberries, pawpaw, persimmon, choke cherry, serviceberries and wild strawberries.

Keeping Busy with Schoolwork – The children went to school during the winter months since there was no extra help needed on the farm during that time. The school year lasted only about 2 to 4 months, as it was back to farm business as usual once the weather warmed up in the spring! The average child received only 3 to 5 years of education, which was just enough to read, write and do simple math.



In our modern society, with everything available at our fingertips, it is hard to imagine what life was like for our ancestors. One would surmise that they were made of good and hardy stock with a determination to survive and fight for the life they envisioned.

For many, coming to our western North Carolina mountains was their stake on personal freedom and the chance at a prosperous future for their kin. ❄️❄️❄️

