

CHAPTER ONE

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"Once there was a forest. A great forest of huge trees, vast and magnificent---and old growth forest, a forest that had never been logged. It consisted of elm, hickory, walnut, maple, and other hardwoods (as well as conifers) and it stretched from the Atlantic coast over the Appalachians as far as the Mississippi River and even beyond. But it was in Kentucky where it was at its most magnificent. None of this forest is left now. It is all gone, all cut down. Yes large parts of this territory are covered with trees today, but it is not the same, and does not consist of the same mix of tree species as it did then, before the Europeans settled the Atlantic seaboard and pressed westward over the mountains. Once it was intact and perfect, except for patches where fires had burned (some set by indigenous people for agriculture or for grazing grounds), where it had been felled by terrific storms that would sweep up the Mississippi Basin from the Gulf of Mexico. It is all gone. Only a ghost forest remains." Joseph A. Altsheiler

My favorite boyhood author was Joseph Alsheiler whose novels featured teenage boys who came into Kentucky's 'forest primeval where there were wild animals and wild Indians'. I read everyone of his novels, I have several of them on my bookshelves today, and I had wanted to roam the forests he wrote about but the virgin forests had been logged. So over many years I have drove many thousands of miles weaving in and out of the mountains of eastern Kentucky to see the 'Ghost Forest'; which is still beautiful.

This book will primarily tell of the logging in the Kentucky River Basin. This basin contains 33 counties and drains 7,000 square miles. The three forks of the Kentucky River, the North, Middle and South Forks are referred to as 'The Three Forks'. There are countless smaller streams, branches, runs and creeks that flow into the Three Forks but unless there is a story attached to these waterways they will not be mentioned.

The first white men and, at least one free Black hunter named Carr, to penetrate the mountains of eastern Kentucky were the Long Hunters who had a few clashes with the Indians. The last man killed by the Indians was on Goose Creek in 1795. The Long Hunter Dillion Asher had been impressed with the mountains and about 1800 he returned and built a two room cabin of hewed logs that lacked windows but did have a rock chimney at one end. Dillion liked women and had four wives at the same time. He would have 20 some children and tradition says he made a 'Treaty' with Cherokee Chief Red Bird. It's said that the Asher children 'mingled and played' with Red Bird's children

The second Long Hunter who settled along the same stream as Dillion Asher had was John Gilbert who had but one wife and had been middle-aged before he married. John's grandson Abijah Gilbert told of being with John, "When I was fourteen years old, he and

I was passing the mouth of Hector's Creek (where John's favorite bear dog Hector had been killed by a bear). He said, 'Here in this bottom just above the mouth of this creek is where Red Bird was killed. Red Bird and his companion, Jack were asleep. A party of white men came along. A young man in the party had lost his father by the Indians and he had taken a vow he would kill the first Indian he should meet. This was his first. He took the tomahawk of these sleeping Indians and with it killed them and then threw them in the river.'

"Grandfather said he came along a short time after the murders was committed and saw their bodies. I think he helped bury them." John told Abijah, "Red Bird was a peaceable Indian and should not have been killed." So the Red Bird River and Jack's Creek which flows into it received their names.

Those who settled along the Red Bird and other streams in the mountains were 'a people of the forest'. For two and three generations their forbearers had made clearings for their homes and tiny farms in the dense forests that ranged downward from Pennsylvania, through Virginia and into the Carolinas. When they crossed the Appalachians they sought out the dense forest to settle in.

The foremost historian of Kentucky was Dr. Thomas Clark who wrote, "A discerning woodsman in a single cove off the Red Bird could have identified the 'Chestnut, black walnut, black ash, linden, black gum, holly, red haw, beech, paw paw, pine, spicewood, swamp alder, cedar, wahoo (magnolia), dogwood and sumac." The woodsmen could not only identify, he knew the uses each tree could be called upon to provide for his family.

The first trees felled were used to put up a simple cabin and provided firewood to cook the family's meals and heat the cabins in the winter. The black walnut produced an edible nut and the hull of the nut and the trees bark made a dark dye for the clothing the family wore. The split rails of the walnut lasted for twenty-five years and kept the hogs out of the women's gardens. The hickory dropped nuts that free ranging hogs lived on and humans ate. Hickory firewood produced a hot fire and my mother sent me and my brothers out to pickup hickory bark to use in baking biscuits in her wood cook stove. Hickory wood was tough but had an elasticity that made it desirable for use a stool handles, rake teeth and ox yokes.

The Rock, Chestnut, Red and Scarlet oaks were used for tanbark to produce leather. The Black oak was used for firewood, fencing, barrel staves, and shingles and made a yellow dye. The White, Black, Red and Blue Ash were light in weight but had strength and elasticity to make farming implements, oars, handspikes, pulley blocks and in the Blue Grass Region carriages were made from them. The Beech tree was used for tools, shoe lasts and charcoal. The crooked slow growing Dogwood made great tool handles and its inner bark was used as a substitute for quinine. The Elm was a rare tree in the

mountains and the Slippery Elm was the only Elm with a use; it's inner bark was used as a poultice to draw out infections.

The Red Maple was made into saddle trees, spinning wheels, bedsteads and chairs while the bark made a purple dye and ink to write with. The Pine was cut for boards and firewood. Tar was extracted from the Pine for use as medicines' an grease to lubricate cart wheels. Red Cedar posts withstood the ravages of time. The Sweet Gum and Wild Cherry wasn't much used in the mountains but down in the Bluegrass their wood was made into beautiful furniture, furniture as high prized today as it was back then.

The Buckeye tree was made into bowls, cups, spoons, trays and rolling pins. It was hard to find a straight Sourwood tree and because sled runners needed to turn up in front they made excellent runners. Sourwood blossom honey is extra sweet. Women made a tea from Sassafras and put a small chunk of the tree on meat they were cooking.

The Sugar Maple was tapped for its syrup, called 'sweetin' in the mountains. Sugar Maple lumber became in great demand for the flooring and by the 1920s there few trees left to tap.

There were other species of trees that thrived in select spots. All species of trees have their own growing requirements and the mountain men understood why certain trees grew where they did. All the conifers or evergreen trees grew on poor soil and could be found on the mountain tops. The Hemlock (called Spruce-Pine) were intermixed with Pines and was mainly found on the north side of a mountain in cool, damp hollows or coves as the hollows were called. The Walnut and the Hickory needed the rich soils of the bottom grounds. Men knew where to find the Buttonwood or Sycamore, the Tulip tree, a species of the Magnolia, Wild Plum, Paw Paw, Persimmon, Sourwood and the wild Crab Apple tree.

One out of every four trees in America had been the Chestnut Tree which grew on gravely hillsides. Men standing on top of a hill when the Chestnuts bloomed in June could watch the wind cross the yellow blooms like waves across the ocean. The late blooming Chestnuts would miss the last freezes of spring and there was always a thick crop of nuts. The Indian women had burned the grass under the trees before collecting the nuts. Chestnuts had a prickly outer covering and when they fell to the ground in the fall white child who had gone barefoot all summer put on shoes to collect the nuts. In lean years entire families survived the winter by gathering bushels of the nuts. In lush years free ranging hogs fattened on the nuts which were called 'Mast.'

An Asian Blight struck the Chestnut trees in 1904 and by 1940 the Chestnut trees were dead nationwide. Before the last of the fallen trees rotted men cut them for firewood. I have had old men tell me the biscuits their mother made with the Chestnut

firewood the best they ever ate.

There were other species of trees, such as the Poplar, which did not assume any importance until the saw logs were needed in far distant places. Men said that when you stood in a grove of Poplar trees they could hear a haunting murmur of a whispering sound. Trees surrounded the mountaineers and they cut them as they needed them but mostly they viewed the trees as tall weeds that needed cutting to make a corn patch or garden patch. Neighbors would gather for 'log rollings' after the giant trees had been cut down and then they would roll the large trees into huge piles and set them on fire.

At times these fires would set the woods ablaze but no one was upset for there was an endless forest. In the fall of the year men set fires in the woods to get rid of the ticks and to improve grazing for their livestock. Smoke filled the narrow valleys as the flames crept over the hills burning away the underbrush. Fires set after the leaves have fallen in the fall caused less damage to the trees. When the sap rises in the trees in the month of May many of the trees could be killed by the extreme heat.

There were those aware of the damage caused by the uncontrolled burning of the forest and sought to stop the practice. In 1834 an Act of the State legislature was passed to "Prevent the setting on 'Fire' of woods in Perry, Clay, and other mountain counties" by imposing "as penalty for such offence a fine of forty dollars, or for slaves' not over thirty-nine stripes." This was thirty-nine blows from a whip. This law, as many other laws, was not enforced in the mountains.

In 1823 a warning appeared in the Kentucky Gazette newspaper. "The destruction of timber-without any effort to reinstate it, is neglect on the part of farmers near Lexington which is altogether inexcusable. If the next generation should be as forgetful of its duty to prosperity, there will not be a stick left to burn in the country." The burning of wood was mentioned because until about 1850 wood, "was the primary fuel for heat, cooking, transportation and industry." The average home "burned more wood in a single year than had been needed to build it in the first place." By 1840 "one- fifth of all fuel-some 900,000 cords-was being sold as steamboat fuel. Wood needed in the Bluegrass was for burning and this type of wood brought low prices.

In his 'History of Kentucky' Charles Kerr wrote, "The timber supplies of the eastern section of the state were little worked before the Civil War (1861-1865), although the importance of this wealth was recognized. In Central Kentucky and especially in the Bluegrass part, the large spreading trees scattered over the country were soon felled, and a timber shortage was being felt there as early as the (18) 20's."

The men in the mountains heard of the timber shortage in the Bluegrass and in the 1830's some 3,000 logs had been taken downriver but the prices they received for the

