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Florence Kidder Memorial Scholarship Essay

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North Carolina is a place of constant change. Through man-made and natural occurrences, sites all over the state are unrecognizable from how they appeared even a century ago. A place where this is particularly true is Hazel Creek, a tributary in Swain County that now feeds into the Fontana Dam. While it might not look like it today, this area was once home to a cluster of pioneer communities and a thriving logging town. The history of Hazel Creek provides a fascinating account of early life in North Carolina, and how the forces of industrialization and environmentalism have shaped our lives today.

Hazel Creek was first inhabited by the Cherokee, who used it for hunting and foraging. The area remained largely undeveloped until 1830, when Moses Proctor, his wife Patience Rustin, and their infant son William emigrated from Cades Cove (Holland). They settled atop a little hill that is now the site of the Proctor Cemetery (some speculate Moses chose this spot for its incredible view) (Neufeld). Without many settlements nearby to rely on, the first years were no doubt difficult for the Proctors. However, by using their wits and intimate knowledge of the outdoors, Moses and Patience were able to establish a successful farm and have seven children (Holland, Neufeld). Over time, more settlers joined them, starting with the Cables in 1835. By the 1850's the Bradshaw family had built a gristmill, and downstream, a small school/Church had popped up (Neufeld). Unfortunately, the Civil War put immense pressure on the community, and threatened the livelihoods of many of its residents. The Proctors, for instance, lost two sons in the fighting (Duane). Moses himself died in 1864 after retrieving an injured William from the

front lines, while Patience lived until 1870 (Holland, Familysearch). Hazel Creek continued to be remote and sparsely inhabited after the war, but it would soon face modernization.

The antebellum period marked the arrival of industry to Western North Carolina (Starnes). The Ritter logging company purchased the land around Hazel Creek, and by 1902, they had negotiated with the Southern Railway for the construction of a railroad line in the area (Holland). Within a few years, Hazel Creek became a hub of modern industry. The particular town that sprung up around Ritter's operation was called Proctor, but it bore little resemblance to the quaint farmstead Moses and Patience had tended less than a century ago. By 1920, Proctor was a bustling town with some 1000 residents, complete with movie theaters and an ice cream shop (Holland). Ritter's operation continued until all the available timber had been cut in 1927, after which they departed with most of the townspeople (Starnes). Around fifteen years later, the few families that stayed were forced out anyway by the Tennessee Valley Authority, who were building the Fontana Dam. Construction began in 1942, and by 1944, the landscape was submerged.

Very little physically remains of Proctor. Only a few ruins, some cemeteries, and a house maintained by the park service mark its existence at all. Even accessing these relics requires a trip by boat, which I actually took with my eighth-grade class. On this week-long camping trip, we learned about the history and explored the ruins to get a glimpse of what early life in North Carolina was like. In fact, seeing the contrast between Hazel Creek then and now is what inspired this essay. With most of the town underwater, it is easy to say Hazel Creek has been lost to history, but I would argue the opposite. While the landscape suffered extensive damage under the tenure of Ritter, it has largely recovered. Now, one can walk the same trails, sleep in the same woods, and see the same views as Moses and other pioneers did. If anything, preserving the

land has brought us closer to that bygone era than ever before. The memory of Hazel Creek, too, has been preserved. The North Shore Historical Association routinely decorate cemeteries around Fontana, and twice a year the park service ferries locals across the water for a memorial picnic (Holland). Through activities like these, it is my hope that we will continue to remember and learn from the lives that made Hazel Creek special.

Works Cited

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