

# Smoke Signals

21 October 2009

Western North Carolina

## Smoky Mountain morning



**Driving the Blue Ridge Parkway into Great Smoky Mountains National Park**

### *Keep the gubmint outta my Medicare*

No place in the United States is more resistant to government intervention – hell, even participation – in the economy than the South.

And no place in the South is more rabidly dedicated to self-reliance than here, deep in the coves (translation: valleys) of the Great Smoky Mountains. The local hero, pictured on the menu where I ate

breakfast today, is a bearded guy named Popcorn Sutton, who posed for the photographer in front of one of the moonshine stills where he made corn likker all his life because he didn't believe in the nontoxic tax-paid stuff.

About the 30<sup>th</sup> time they hauled him in for bootlegging and were about to send

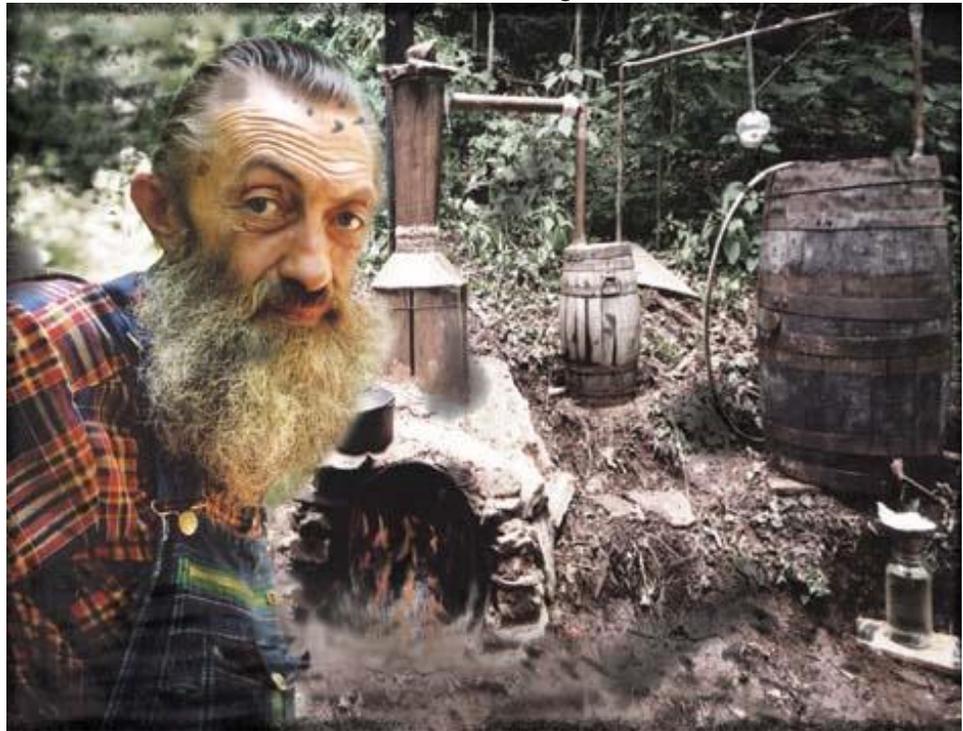
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# Keep the gubmint outta my Medicare

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him up for 18 months, Popcorn decided he would not accept jail time and killed himself last March.

He was buried in the white oak casket he kept in his bedroom. Inside the casket he had stored: 1) plastic flowers for his gravesite next to his mother and father, 2) the shovel to dig the hole, and 3) a tombstone engraved with the epitaph "Popcorn said Fuck You."



**Bootlegger Popcorn Sutton and one of his moonshine stills.**

Knowing that, my cousin Beth and her partner Nan, who live in the Appalachian metropolis of Clyde, N.C., and I had to spend our day together touring the two giant pieces of Franklin D. Roosevelt's legacy that undergird the entire economy of these parts: the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, built to save local forests from complete devastation by logging companies and bring tourist dollars to the impoverished region, and Fontana Dam, tallest of a series of hydroelectric dams built the Tennessee Valley Authority that provides every single kilowatt in Tennessee, half of Mississippi, parts of Kentucky, Alabama

and Georgia, and most of Western North Carolina.

We started at dawn in the Cataloochee Valley, an isolated area on the North Carolina side of the park reachable only by a tortuous dirt road over a 4,000-foot tall ridge. Cataloochee was named and first inhabited by the Cherokees and later by about 1,200 white families, who finally sold their land in 1938 so it could be included in the park.

We were less interested in the valley's old church and homes dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century than we were in a government experiment to return elk to the Smokies.

Once at home in most of the eastern United States, elk, which grow to 700 pounds and can have antlers spreading 5 feet across, were hunted to near-extinction in the United States. In North Carolina, the last elk was believed to have been killed shortly after the Revolutionary War.

In recent years, however, elk have been brought into the United States from the Canadian Rockies. In 2001 the first 25 were released in Cataloochee. A year later, 27 more animals were imported.

There were unexpected deaths in the early years, but now the population is  
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**At dawn, before sunlight has melted the ice on the valley floor, a bull elk and his harem of cows feed in Cataloochee Valley meadow. The cows wear radio tracking collars.**

**Continued from previous page** is increasing, and about 150 elk now live in and around Cataloochee.

They are best seen in early morning and late afternoon when they come out of the forest to feed in the meadows. October is the rutting season when bulls fight each other over the cows and they bugle their intentions with a lonely, warbling call.

Then we headed to the main North Carolina park entrance to drive up to the crest of the Great Smokies ridge, which

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forms the border between North Carolina and Tennessee.

In the park, this mountain wall tops 6,000 feet – about the elevation of Lake Tahoe for the Californians on this email list – and the tallest peak, Clingman's Dome, stands at 6,643 feet. It is the third tallest peak east of the Mississippi after two other North Carolina summits led by Mount Mitchell in the Black Mountains at 6,684 feet.

The half-mile hike from the parking lot, a 330-foot climb,

was more than Beth's knees would bear, but Nan and I went to the top and took in the 360-degree views of North Carolina and Tennessee from the observation tower. Snow and ice from last week's storm were still on the ground.

We finished the day by driving to Fontana Dam, which backs up the Little Tennessee River along the southeast border of the park inside North Carolina forming a 29-mile long lake.

The 480-foot tall, half-mile wide dam was completed in 1944 after

36-months work by 6,000 federal workers. Electricity was a new-fangled thing in the region at that time, but the dam supplied much more power than was needed in the sparsely settled mountains.

The reason for the overcapacity was the war effort – the need to supply power for plants producing aluminum for aircraft and a secret facility hidden in the tiny Tennessee mountain town of Oak Ridge, which would enrich uranium to manufacture the first atomic bombs.



**Great Smoky Mountains National Park is in southwestern North Carolina and straddles the border with Tennessee.**

# My North Carolina itinerary

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
October 11	12	13	14	15	<b>16</b> Red-eye to NC	<b>17</b> Hamlet High 40 <sup>th</sup> class reunion
<b>18</b> With sister in Pinehurst	<b>19</b> Speak to school classes and library group	<b>20</b> Visit in-laws on way to mountains	<b>21</b> Great Smoky Mtns Natl Park	<b>22</b> Winston-Salem & Cary	<b>23</b> Travel to Richmond, Va.	<b>24</b> With brother in Richmond
<b>25</b> Fly home to California	26	27	28	29	30	31

## Under the spreading chestnut tree ...

In addition to the reintroduction of elk to the Smokies, another species is returning.

The American chestnut, once the dominant hardwood tree in the Appalachians and in much of the East, went extinct earlier this century, victim of blight.

Using genetic material from blight-resistant chestnut species in Asia, a near-copy of the American variety has been developed and is now being grown in several secret locations.

The tree that once shaded village blacksmiths and whose nuts are roasted in a Christmas carol will be seeded throughout the park.

## My first newspaper



## Church to burn books on Halloween

From the Oct. 17, 2009 Asheville Citizen-Times

**CANTON, N.C.** – The Amazing Grace Baptist Church will celebrate Halloween by burning Bibles that aren't the King James Version, as well as music and books and anything else Pastor Marc Grizzard says is a satanic influence.

Among the authors whose books Grizzard plans to burn are well-known ministers Rick Warren and Billy Graham because he says they have occasionally used Bibles other than the King James Version, which is the sole biblical source he considers infallible.

According to the church's web site, members will also burn "Satan's music such as country, rap, rock, pop, heavy metal, western, soft and easy, Southern gospel, contemporary Christian, jazz, soul (and) oldies."

During the book burning, barbecued chicken, fried chicken and "all the sides" will be served, according to the church's web site.

# Today's picture pages



**Early morning in Beth and Nan's neighborhood in the Great Smoky Mountains**



**<<< Mrs. Moak baked an apple pie just for Beth and me when we visited Wednesday.**

**Since the Moaks – Emily's parents who live in Charlotte – don't have email, they check up on my latest newsletter.**

**>>>**





**<<< Nan and I on the lookout tower atop Clingman's Dome.**



**A great deal on firewood in Bryson City >>>**



**Looking down at Fontana Lake and the national park beyond**

**They're doing a dosey-do at Fontana Dam.**



**View from atop Fontana Dam**



**Leftovers from last week's snow on the road to Clingman's Dome**



**Two bull elk who haven't yet won themselves a harem**



**<<< Nary a sign of the governor of South Carolina.**



**Blue Ridge Parkway winding through the Plott Balsam Mountains**