Edgemont – It Clung To Its Primeval Beauty

By NANCY ALEXANDER


EDGEMONT -- Edgemont is a sun-washed meadow and a blue-fresh Wilson's Creek.

This valley sprawling beneath Grandfather Mountain means swimming in tingling Crystal Pool, climbing Staircase Mountain, scuffling along a country lane, munching June apples, listening to a whippoorwill, wading fields of butterflies and daisies, sharing a white creek bank with strolling deer, exchanging stories by a campfire.

To others it's leaping rocks, wading trout waters. It's red-capped hunters bringing in boar, deer, foxes, rabbits from crisp autumn hills. It's the gobble of wild turkeys, the whirring of ruffed grouse, and the chatter of squirrels.

To some it's memory hurtling down lonesome hills to days of train excursions, baseball games, bulging hotels thumping with fiddle tunes.

There are, vine-tangled relies – tracks of bridges, bedraggled curtains flapping over empty windows of sagging buildings.

A half-century ago civilization made a power attack on Edgemont; but the valley resisted change. It held fast to primeval beauty and won.

Two who remember the lively, gay days are Mrs. Hugh Austin of Simon and Archie Coffey, postmaster and storekeeper at Edgemont.

Mrs. Austin was sitting beside a cottage at Edgemont, soaking up sun. Looking over a flower-flecked meadow, she said, “Over there during days of train excursions they used to have ball games and other entertainment.

“Its been 54 years since I lived here. This is the first time I’ve been back to stay. Nora McGee, the bookmobile lady, and I are vacationing here. When I was just a little girl in 1906 we moved here. My father, Sherman Setzer (called Judge by about everybody) had a contract with J. B. Atkinson to sawmill timber for him.

“We moved up here on the train which ran to Mortimer a few miles below Edgemont. The rest of the way we traveled by wagon.

“We lived in an old log house, the Estes house. There were seven of us children. We took in about ten boarders; so the house was usually running over.
“When we came there was no school. My daddy started a little school in a one-room log building for us and some of the neighborhood children. Then he built the little school house that still stands.”

The next year the train came and brought life to the village. A hotel was built. It still stands over there empty and hidden in the trees and weeds. Up the mountain top a big clubhouse was built.

“At the lower end of the valley at Mortimer the Ritter Lumber Company was humming. Houses were built all up and down the coves,” Mrs. Austin said.

"Excursions were run with the train overflowing with people. They’d come and stay at the hotel and boarding houses. There were nightly dances at the club. Ball teams from Hickory, Lenoir, Gastonia and Chester would ride up and put on big games. On holidays especially there was plenty of entertainment.

“The first car I ever saw was one belonging to Lucius Nichols, a railroad official. That was about 1908. A little later the train brought up cars and drivers for races to the top of the mountain near Linville.

“Then in April of 1916 trouble started. A big forest fire swept Edgemont and burned the clubhouse and other buildings. Then in July of that same year the big flood of the century came and washed out about everything.

“But the people loved Edgemont enough to start rebuilding. The train tracks were replaced. The hotel started operating again. A few years later Rainbow Camp for girls was opened. I guess the Thirties were the biggest heydays at Edgemont. Granny Seehorn ran the hotel, and people would come up here just to eat her food and rock in the shade of the porch . . . “ Her voice faded.

At the combination country store and postoffice, Archie Coffey was taking down a potbellied stove where hunters and fishermen had warmed during winter months. Outside a flag rippled in the breeze above the white clapboard store.

“That flag is the only one flying over a postoffice in this valley. The other postoffices hereabout – Globe, Gragg, Mortimer – have all been discontinued. This one’s been here since before 1900.

“My brother operated the store and postoffice from 1927 until 1939 when I took it over. That was a bad year for Edgemont; for it was in 1939 the railroad discontinued the train.

“Then the 1940 flood washed out about everything – the hotel annex, other buildings, the girls camp and my store. Six feet of water came over the road from the creek and knocked it down.

“Then a few years ago Crystal Pool was closed to the public. That kept a lot of people from coming back.

“There are more people who come here today than many people realize. There are actually about 300 cottages here; but most of them are hidden by trees and shrubbery.
“There’s plenty to attract people – the climate, the beauty, the hunting and fishing. There are plenty of deer here. About 2,000 deer were killed in the Pisgah preserve of the Grandfather district last fall.

“This is bear country, too – black bear – and wild boar. The first wild boar hunt was held here last fall.”