

Perry's Camp was an idyllic tourist destination

By Carroll McMahan



In 1992, Flat Branch Cottages was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Formally known as Perry's Camp, the picturesque compound includes the terracing, rock walls, four cabins, and a log and stone home; remnants of the once popular tourist camp. The house dates back to 1850 and the cabins were built by Charlie Perry between 1928 and 1935.

In 1928, Charles J. Perry bought some property between Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg. Over the next few years Perry purchased additional land near the mouth of Flat Branch. By 1935, he had developed Perry's Camp. The rustic facilities included a two-story log and stone building with a restaurant and bar on the first floor and living quarters upstairs along with eleven cabins. The camp stretched from Flat Branch hollow across the highway to the opposite side of the west prong of the Little Pigeon River.

During the heyday of Perry's Camp there was a cabin on the hill east of the main house, two on the west bank of the river, and three on the east bank, in addition to the five buildings that are still standing. One of those on the east bank had been converted from an old mill into a tourist cabin. A sluice ran behind those three cabins which powered a generator in the building on that side of the river.

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A dam diverted some of the water into the sluice. A swinging bridge provided access to the four buildings on the east side of the river. Guests parked on the west side of the river and their luggage was carried across the water via the swinging bridge. At that time there was no road on the west side.

A water wheel was located behind the two-story building. Through a system of pulleys and belts the water wheel powered a ceiling fan in the dining room. The water wheel was also used to power an outdoor barbecue pit rotisserie. The smell of the slow-turning hams and pork tenderloins often permeated the air.

A bar made of half a poplar log was hollowed out, lined with copper and covered with glass. Spring water was piped into the log at one end and flowed through the unique contraption. From the opposite end, excess water flowed back into Flat Branch. The bar was stocked with small fish which could be seen swimming underneath the glass top.

Homebrew made fresh daily was sold for twenty-five cents a bottle when beer was illegal. Once the sale of beer became legal, bootleg liquor was sold by the fifth out of large handmade barrels on the back porch.

In the winter, the slow-flowing water above the dam would freeze and it was a gathering place for locals to ice skate. Since there wasn't many people who owned a pair of ice skates, most of the "skating" was simply sliding on the ice in one's shoes.

Guests at Perry's Camp enjoyed fishing, swimming, and hunting. Locals often joined the tourists stopping by to fish or swim.

A copper moonshine still was displayed in the parking lot. Reportedly, the bullet holes came from federal revenueurs rendering the still inoperable. A garage where Perry parked his 1928 Buick was dug out of a hillside. Iron rails were placed over the dugout and covered with dirt. Garage doors were installed at the front.

Perry built retaining walls on much of the remainder of his property and "rocked in" about 150 feet of Flat Branch. Native stones were also used around the basement of the house and two of the cabins. The chimney at the house was replaced with new stones.

Although Perry's Camp was a popular tourist destination, the proprietor had a somewhat shady past. Charles Jackson Perry was born August 4, 1879 in Bradley County. He moved to Knoxville as an adult and worked as a clerk at a soft drink business. On August 3, 1918, he and Maye Lawson McGhee eloped to Sevier County and were married by a Justice of the Peace, Hagen Bailey.

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During World War I, Perry worked at a Nitrate plant in Sheffield, Alabama. He returned to Knoxville and operated a lunch room on Western Avenue near Henley Street. He and Maye divorced and Perry remained in Knoxville where he was a known bootlegger. He had been involved in a shooting incident with a Knoxville police officer. He once killed one of his bootlegging cronies but it was later ruled self-defense.

When he moved to Sevier County, Perry brought a young woman named Josie Law whom he called his housekeeper. Actually, she was his common-law wife. For the next twenty years, the couple lived together and operated Perry's Camp.

On Monday morning September 20, 1949, a Swan's Bread deliveryman, discovered Josie Law lying across a bed in an upstairs bedroom. She had been stabbed to death. Sherriff Roy Whaley was summoned. When the sheriff arrived with the Sevierville Chief of Police, and the Sevier County Coroner, they found the lifeless body of Charlie Perry lying face down in a pool of blood. He had been tortured, beaten, and stabbed.

Arrested and charged were Claude Robertson of Sevier County and brothers Hermie Lee and Basil Jones of Washington County. All three were indicted and four days after the sensational trial began, Robertson and Hermie Lee entered guilty pleas to both murders and were sentenced to 99 years. Basil Jones was released.

Following the settlement of Perry's estate in 1950, Cliff Davis bought Perry's Camp and operated it for a couple of years. Davis sold the property to Mack and Agnes Marshall in 1952 and have they maintained ownership since that time.

In the late 1950s, the Highway 441 Spur - a 4.6 mile stretch of road between Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg- was built with two lanes on each side of the river. The project required that the state acquisition of a large portion of Perry's Camp. The result was the loss of the restaurant building, six cabins, the swinging bridge, the dam, and other buildings.

Today, motorist passing by the beautiful site may observe the beautiful log and stone house and the remaining cabins as well as the old water wheel.