

SHEDDING A LITTLE LIGHT ON THE DARK CORNER

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The Dark Corner.

The very words give one a feeling of danger, mystery, and foreboding, much like the title of one of Kentucky author Jesse Stuart's story collections: *Beyond Dark Hills*. And the fact that most people know little, if anything, about the place and how it got its moniker gives it an even more mysterious patina.

Perhaps we should begin with what *is* known. Maybe that will solve (or increase) much of the mystery of the area.

Geographically, the "Dark Corner" refers to an area in the northernmost part of Greenville County in the South Carolina Upstate. It is bounded on the north by the North Carolina border in the Blue Ridge Mountains; on the west by U.S. Highway 25; on the east by South Carolina State Route 114; and on the south by the foothills running on a line between Travelers Rest, Tigerville, and Gowensville.

That eastern extent is near the border that was established by a treaty between the white settlers and the Cherokee Indians, which is also basically the modern boundary dividing Greenville and Spartanburg counties. Bisecting the Dark Corner from east to west runs State Route 11, the Cherokee Foothills Scenic Highway, which runs along the base of Glassy Mountain, the very heart of the Dark Corner.

Thousands of years ago, this was the domain of the Cherokees. As first white hunters, then traders, and later settlers entered the area, interactions occurred between the two peoples. What began as mutually beneficial trade led to confrontations as the white people wanted more and more land and the Indians were willing to give up less and less of it.

As late as 1776, the Cherokees controlled most of the South Carolina Piedmont as a tribal hunting ground. But in the Treaty of DeWitt's Corner that year, they ceded all but the northernmost parts of Oconee, Pickens, Anderson, and Greenville counties. The whites immediately moved into the newly gained territory and built fortifications. They erected a blockhouse near the modern town of Tryon, N.C., and built forts near the modern towns of Gowensville (Fort Gowens) and

Duncan and Landrum (Fort Prince). These fortifications stood on the Cherokee boundary and approximated what is now the dividing line between the two counties.

Trouble was not long in coming. There were rascals on both sides of the equation. The War for American Independence had begun, and, encouraged by the British, Indian violence erupted along the frontier, too. Each violent act by one side led to retaliation by the other side. The intensity of the confrontations escalated. Massacres occurred, including in the little town of Greer. Before long, the white men's patience reached its limit, and they decided to put a stop to the Indian problem.

An army of Indians and British-sympathizing Tories were encamped near Round Mountain. Informed by a "good Indian" named Skyuka of a way behind the coalition army, the white frontiersmen surprised their enemy and soundly defeated them. Not satisfied with that initial victory, the militiamen pushed on through Swannanoa Gap, killing and destroying as they went. As a result, the area, like Kentucky, became known as a "dark and bloody ground."

After the Americans won their independence and established a government, they began to emphasize internal improvements. By 1820, the state of South Carolina had begun construction on a toll road from Charleston, S.C., to Asheville, N.C. The plan included a magnificently designed, stone-arched bridge, called the Poinsett Bridge, in the heart of the Dark Corner. The bridge still stands today, a short distance from Highway 414, although it is no longer used for traffic.

Later, several covered bridges were built in the state, but the only one still standing is the Campbell covered bridge, built in 1909, in the Dark Corner, not far from Highways 14 and 414 south of Gowensville. Charles Irwin Willis, builder of the 12 x 35-foot bridge, used four Howe trusses, criss-crossed braces with two one-inch-diameter vertical tie rods, on each side. That special design, often used on railroad bridges, transferred the weight of passing vehicles to the rock abutments of the bridge. A corn grist mill operated just below the bridge during the 1930s, but it closed in the 1950s. The structure is no longer standing, but its foundations are still visible. In the last decade, Greenville County turned the bridge and the surrounding area into a beautiful but underused park with picnic tables and hiking trails.

In the early 1830s, however, the attention of the people of South Carolina was not on scenic parks. The Andrew Jackson administration imposed a higher tariff that was especially harmful to the primarily agricultural South. South

Carolinians, led by Jackson's own vice president, John C. Calhoun, led opposition to the tariff. Despite those efforts, the tariff passed Congress and Jackson signed it into law. But the South Carolina legislature voted to nullify the law, essentially declaring that it did not apply in South Carolina.

Not everyone in South Carolina, however, favored nullification. Opposition to it was strong in the Upstate, especially in northern Greenville County. A government official sought to convince the people there of the folly of opposing nullification. Standing in a wagon so that all could see and hear him, he waxed eloquent on the righteousness of standing against the national government on the issue. At some point in his speech, he hit a raw nerve, and some of his listeners overturned the wagon and spilled him unceremoniously in the dirt. Forced to end his speech, he dusted himself off, declaring that "the light of nullification will never come to this dark corner of the state."

The notoriety of the Dark Corner only increased during the War Between the States. The residents of the area were divided over slavery; therefore, a constant struggle raged between Unionists and Confederates. The whole southern Appalachian range, including the Glassy Mountain area, became a haven for deserters and draft dodgers of both the Union and the Confederacy. It also once again became bloody ground as soldiers from both sides sought to capture the deserters, draft the dodgers, and punish their abettors. As enforcement of conscription laws tightened, resistance to them increased proportionally. And gangs of fugitives preyed upon the residents of the land for survival. In many instances, long-standing feuds were settled behind the convenient guise of civil war. In some instances, animosities continued beyond the war itself.

During the war and the economically sparse times of Reconstruction, the mountain farmers had a hard time making a living. No matter how efficiently they produced corn and other grains, they could not survive on what little cash that crop produced. Corn sold for only about 50 cents a bushel. Farmers discovered, however, that if they used the grains to make alcohol—moonshine—they could make much more cash. A bushel of corn yielded about two and a half gallons of whiskey, and whiskey sold for about a dollar a gallon. A farmer operating a 50-gallon still could make 10 or 11 gallons of whiskey a day. The math was simple.

So moonshining became a common business enterprise in the rugged mountainous expanse. The problem was that the national government wanted to tax liquor. To make alcoholic beverages without paying a tax was illegal. But the mountaineers who ran the stills didn't want to pay taxes. So a battle of wits and

weapons erupted. The mountain people could trust no stranger; he might be a “revenoor.” Friends and family members of the moonshiners refused to help the government agents. If the residents suspected that a government agent was in the area, the moonshiners conveniently disappeared into the surrounding gaps and hollows. If agents discovered a still, they destroyed it. When the competing interests collided, shots were often exchanged. The conflict continued well into the 1960s. Some people say that it is still a problem today.

All of these events have been suggested as reasons the area was—and still is—called the Dark Corner.

During the early 1900s and into the Great Depression, residents of the area were shaken by an exodus from the Dark Corner. Poor farmers and even moonshiners longed for a regular paycheck and the semblance of economic stability, so they began taking jobs in the cotton mills of the Piedmont. Jug heads became lint heads. When World War I disrupted American life, the residents who remained on Glassy Mountain were shaken literally, too, as the U.S. Army set up an artillery training range along what is now South Carolina Route 11 and sent live artillery rounds slamming into the mountain.

Then came the logging companies and stripped the land of its trees. Behind them came the government and flooded the lands on the north side of the mountain, creating the Poinsett Reservoir of the Greenville Watershed to provide water for the city dwellers in and around Greenville. And right behind the watershed builders came the land developers, who sought to build posh resorts, golf courses, ritzy subdivisions, and summer homes for the out-of-staters and Low Country wealthy who began moving into the area. Today, Glassy Mountain and the surrounding foothills abound in large, impressive homes, including those in The Cliffs, an exclusive gated luxury community.

For a long time, people were reluctant to tell inquiring strangers where the Dark Corner was.

“It was an elusive place,” Dean Campbell, a long-time resident of the area, explains. It was “a place that you could never find because it was always ‘a little further up the road.’”

People who were asked where the Dark Corner was were afraid that the inquirer might be a lawman or other sinister character. So the residents cagily replied that it was farther on. Anywhere but where they then were. But later, as the

notoriety of the area evolved into fame, residents, when asked where the Dark Corner was, responded proudly by inflating the area covered by that name, ensuring that where they lived was included in the sought-for area. As Campbell, who is called the “Squire of the Dark Corner” because of his extensive knowledge of it, states, “We have flip-flopped from being an elusive place to a very exclusive place.”

Campbell has sought to define the area’s boundaries more strictly, thereby restoring some historical objectivity and credibility to the question. The light he has shed on the subject has done much to remove some of the mystery surrounding the Dark Corner.

Yet, the story of the Dark Corner remains intriguing. Its tales still abound in the local folklore. Visitors still come to see what the mystery is all about. And they discover, as Campbell puts it, “the gem that is the Dark Corner.”

(sidebar)

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND NEARBY POINTS OF INTEREST

If you would like to learn more about the Dark Corner, consider reading James A. Howard, *Dark Corner Heritage* (1980; reprint 2006, Greater Gowensville Association), or Dean Campbell, *Twice-Told Tales of the Dark Corner* (Landrum, S.C.: Tamaczar Productions, 2013). A DVD is also available: *The Dark Corner* by Dark Corner Films, Inc., 2008.

Other attractions near to but technically not part of the Dark Corner include Table Rock, Caesar’s Head, and Jones Gap State Parks on the west. To the south and closer to Greenville is Paris Mountain State Park. To the east is the quaint little town of Landrum.

Across the state line in North Carolina are several historic towns. Tryon’s official web site touts it as “close enough to everything, but not too close for comfort.” Saluda was once the high point on the steepest railroad grade in the nation. A little farther away are the towns of Cedar Mountain, Brevard, and Hendersonville, each with its own unique attractions and easy access from either Highway 276 or I-26.

Any or several of these places make for an interesting side trip for anyone visiting the Dark Corner.