

The Riceville Valley sits in a beautiful corner of the southern Appalachian Mountain Range. All we have to do is look around us to know that we are living in a special place with a very old story.

The story of this place begins with mountain-building, a process that began more than 300 million years ago when the land mass we now know as N. America and the land mass we now know as Africa collided. The result of these continental collisions was the formation of the Appalachian Mountains, one of the oldest mountain chains on the planet. Some geologists say that the Appalachians were once as tall as the Himalayas. We still have the highest point in eastern N. America with Mt. Mitchell being 6,684 ft. and we have 43 peaks in our mountains with elevations over 6,000 ft.

Over millions of years the mountains have gone through a sequence of transformations. They have been worn down, lifted up again, and worn down some more. The slow, steady forces of wind, water, and chemical decomposition have reduced the mountains to the low, soft profile we know today.

The region we live in is called the Blue Ridge Province of the Southern Appalachians. It consists of the mountainous terrain in southwest Virginia down to Mt. Oglethorpe in North Georgia. Because the mountains have been here for so long and this region has never been below sea level since they first formed, life has had a long time to evolve here.

The topography defines our weather. As the moist weather systems come up from the gulf and the southern Atlantic, they have to rise over our mountains. As the clouds rise, they cool and release their moisture in the form of rain. It rains so much in many parts of our region along the Blue Ridge escarpment that these areas can be considered a temperate rain forest. The rain has soaked into the ground and into underground caverns and rivers have been created that are very ancient. Some geologists say that the French Broad River is the 3rd oldest river in the world. The Swannanoa River that flows close to Riceville is a major tributary of the French Broad. The headwaters of

the Swannanoa begin in Black Mountain, however there is major tributary near its headwaters which is Flat Creek on the slopes of Mt. Mitchell.

The varied exposure, elevation and soil types have lead to a wide range of habitat conditions within this region and diversity is the key word in understand-ing the ecology of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Our topography in the region, as well as here in Riceville, consists of dry ridges that bear the full force of wind, sun, and severe weather systems while protected coves are dark and moist. In the Blue Ridge changes in elevation create a wide range of temperatures, which can drop 4 to 5 degrees with every 1,000 ft in elevation. This means when traveling from downtown Asheville up to Mt. Mitchell one can experience a drop in temperature of 15-20 degrees.

The glaciers from the last ice age made it as far south as central Pennsylvania and many species migrated here ahead of the ice and found refuge in the colder mountain tops. When the ice retreated, they continued to live atop the mountains in areas that are like islands of northern habitats. We can travel north on the parkway and see examples of this.

We are extremely fortunate to be living in an area of incredible plant diversity. There are approximately 2,000 species of vascular plants in our mountains, including many that are rare and endangered, and there are over 100 species of trees, more than in all of Europe.

We live where there are a variety of forest types. In the low to mid elevations we find chestnut oaks, hickory, pine, and tulip trees. In the rich coves we find dozens of species and some of the remaining old growth forests that were too hard for the loggers to reach. Here maples, sweet birch, cucumber trees, white ash, American beech, yellow buckeye and white basswood may be found along with other numerous canopy and understory species. Hikers going into these hard to reach spots may be rewarded with the company of 300 year old trees.

If we travel up the Parkway a little higher than Riceville we reach the northern hardwoods which are made up of such species as beech, yellow birch, northern Red Oak, sugar maple, and the beautiful mountain ash. Climbing higher still we may encounter the high mountain balds which may be grassy or covered with plants in the heath family like the beautiful rhododendron.

At the highest elevations the spruce/fir forests crown the mountain peaks, remnants of the last ice age. It is here that the endangered spruce-fir moss spider makes its home and exists on the planet only on six mountain tops in this bioregion. Other remnants from the last ice age include plants that grow on high elevation, rocky outcrops, that otherwise only appear in alpine tundra. These include such plants as Deer Hair Bullrush, Heller's Blazing Star, and Live Forever Sedum.

Many species of animals also make this region their home. The Blue Ridge contains more lungless salamander species than any where else on Earth. Rare bats and turtles can also be found here. Fish like the muskellunge and brook trout that are ordinarily found in northern waters can be found in these mountain streams. There are invertebrates, mussels and fish here that are restricted to a single watershed or mountain peak. The Riceville Valley has a rich animal history. As late as the 1780's Riceville was part of an eastern bison "highway system" which ran from the Piedmont through the gaps in the mountains on up to the Ohio Valley. The ancient trails established by these wandering buffalo herds later came to be traveled by Native Americans and European alike. Today we can still hike the old stage coach road that goes along Bull Creek that was originally a trail created by the bison. Local history claims that Joseph Rice killed the last buffalo around 1790 up at Bull Gap. The Riceville valley today is home to black bear, coyote, bobcat, raccoon, fox, possum, squirrel, and chipmunks.

These mountains serve as a north/south boundary area to many bird species. This is the southern most territory for cedar wax wings and the Saw whet owl that live in Canada. The forests here provide nesting grounds for a variety of migrating warblers. In

the early fall, the raptor migrations going south along the Blue Ridge Parkway can be magnificent to behold. Recently folks who have been walking along Jones Cover Road have heard the call of the Bobwhite, a bird whose numbers have been significantly declining. Here in Riceville we are also graced with the presence of wild turkeys which we see herding their poults along the roadsides.

There is a rich cultural heritage in our human family as well. The Cherokee, a great mound building culture, lived here for thousands of years. They had villages around the Asheville area and used the Riceville and Swannanoa Valleys as hunting grounds. They altered the forest with burning to clear for agriculture and selected for trees and plants that they favored for food and medicine.

Spanish explorers came into these mountains in the 1500's looking for gold and a fast way to China. Next, early settlers from Germany, England and Scotland came down the great wagon road from Pennsylvania to make their homes in this new frontier. Riceville bears the family name of Joseph Rice, the first white settler in this area and who we will learn more about later. After Joseph Rice, more families settled in this beautiful valley, families whose names describe locations such as Jones Cove, Shope Creek, Dillingham Circle, and Parker Rd. From Cherokee hunting grounds the valley began to transform into an agricultural community. Some cattle still remain here although farms in Riceville are becoming few and far between. Land has been divided up and more houses have been built but we still are blessed to have some large areas of green space. We can still take our children and grandchildren on hikes in the woods along clear streams in the upper valley. We can still feel in awe of the wildlife when we see local bears and feel hopeful when we hear the song of the Bobwhite.

The story of Riceville continues to unfold and it includes all of the people who are living here today. We are the ones who will be making the decisions that will impact the

future of the human children and the offspring of all the other creatures who live here. It is our hope that by learning more about the history of Riceville, we can continue to build a sense of place and community, get to know our neighbors better, and become more informed about how we should proceed into the future. Thank you.