

Stories of Tallulah Gorge

By John Simpson

Tallulah Gorge was created in 1913. At one time the Tallulah River ran through all of that area of northeast Georgia which included Lake Rabun, Burton, Seed, Tallulah Gorge, and the Terrora River. The idea was conceived in the late 1800's to create a series of lakes for hydro-electricity. It was certainly an engineering marvel because the dams created four lakes (Rabun, Burton, Seed, and Tallulah) and also created Tallulah Gorge. I believe the dam at the end of Tallulah Lake was completed in 1913. Environmentalists have been upset for years, however I believe that everything will remain the same. The engineering feat of people at that time without all of the electronic equipment that we have today is beyond my comprehension. As you drive into the Y Camp road on the left you can see one of the power plants with two huge pipes that run into the side of a mountain. These pipes were drilled into the mountain and come out at the dam at Lake Rabun. How they did this with only a transient, mules, wagons, picks, and dynamite, I will never know. I don't believe that there is much more than a bucket of dirt in Rabun County and the rest of it is rock. If you don't believe me, try to dig a hole.

But this is not a history lesson, as there are many folks that know a whole lot more than I do about this. I am just totally fascinated about what was done at that time with the equipment that these people had. When I was a little boy growing up, I thought that Tallulah Gorge was owned by the Athens Y Camp. In the years that I was a camper on through the leadership program, I really don't remember seeing anybody in the bottom of the gorge when we went. So my thought process, even when I was a leader, was that the Athens Y Camp had some degree of ownership of Tallulah Gorge.

My first memory of Tallulah Gorge was when I was six or seven years old on my first gorge hike. As well as I can remember, the hike was an all-day hike. I believe that we walked out of Y Camp on the trail behind the Chattooga Dam and somehow got on the railroad trestle going over the Tallulah River. I remember looking at those railroad ties and thinking that I could very easily slip between them and down into the water which looked to me as if it were 5 miles down into the water down below me. The leaders of the younger boys' unit probably were carrying or at least supporting us as we walked along the railroad trestle. From there we walked up Hwy. 441 (now old 441) to Stuckey's, which was the building across the bridge going over the Tallulah River on the left hand side. It later became some type of car storage place but it was Stuckey's when I was a camper. We would go around behind Stuckey's and go down a trail into the gorge. I use the word "trail" loosely. However I just followed whoever was in front of me. When we got down to the bottom of the gorge we walked through the gorge into what we had begun to call Slippery Rock. There we swam, ate, and I believe we came out at that point up through where Wallenda's tower is now. Of course this was well before Wallenda walked across the gorge. So as of right now there are four different routes into the gorge. One is the one that was built by the state which is a series of steps that goes in through Tallulah Gorge Park which is east of our camp, the other was by Stuckey's, the other was by what is now the Wallenda trail, and the last being at the far end of the gorge by Lake Yonah where the water pipes come in and there is another dam. This has the trolley riding out coming out of the bottom. Over the years the Athens Y Camp has used a series of routes going in one way and out the other. Unfortunately, I believe now the camp is having to go down

the steps which takes so much away from the authenticity of Tallulah Gorge. The highlight of the trip was Slippery Rock. Several of the leaders always laid down to run the water over to the left side where there was a little crevice in the rock. We didn't know what swimsuits were, in fact, I don't believe I ever owned a swimsuit until I was a teenager and durn-near drowned. We swam nude and with the leaders running water over to the left hand side, if you would slide to the left and then raise your left cheek, it would twirl you back into the middle which made the ride even more enjoyable. I remember as I became older, everybody tried to go through the gorge without using their hands. Only "wimps" would use their hands. It reminds me of a cartoon that I saw years later that showed one little boy saying "Look Mom, no hands" and the next little boy saying "Looking Mom, no teeth". Many teeth have been lost in the bottom of Tallulah Gorge.