

Ballew, Betty: The Place I Love Best On This Earth ^[1]

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Betty Ballew: The Place I Love Best On This Earth

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 2/14/1999. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Betty Ballew grew up in one of the most beautiful valleys by the Blue Ridge Parkway: the North Fork, just north of Black Mountain. Earlier this century, thousands of Appalachian families were displaced to make way for reservoirs, hydroelectric projects, and national parks and forests.

Ballew was among the dispossessed. She lost her home in 1954, when Asheville dammed North Fork creek to create a reservoir to supply the city with drinking water.

Recently, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill historian Kathy Newfont and I visited Betty Ballew at her home in Burnsville. As she told us, the reservoir flooded her family's farm, but at least an old forest still covered the hills and mountainsides. Then, in 1987, she looked toward the North Fork Valley and saw a gaping muddy scar of clear-cut land. "It broke my heart," she said. The city of Asheville was allowing a timber company to clear-cut her former home.

As a member of Citizens Against Clearcutting the Asheville Watershed (CACAW), Ballew helped lead a grass-roots campaign to save the North Fork. It was a long, arduous struggle against city officials and the timber industry, but ultimately CACAW did halt the clear-cutting. Many CACAW members opposed the clear-cutting because it would have polluted the water supply and destroyed a scenic forest. Mrs. Ballew's feelings ran deeper.



Betty Ballew. Photo by Chris Seward, 1999. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

In Betty Ballew's words:

I used to tell Mama that when I died, God was going to let me come back and look out for North Fork. My people have lived there, and died there. I never felt like North Fork belonged to anybody else. It was our home. I didn't want them to go. My great-grandfather was Lorenzo Sevier Pressley. He walked home to the mountains after the Civil War. He came back and married his sweetheart in Jackson County. Then they walked to the North Fork and settled in the very head of that. We lived on the land and farmed it, and took care of it just as though it belonged to us. My uncle and parents took care of it because it was there and it was alive and it needed to be looked after. They farmed the bottomland, not the mountain. They had cows and chickens and horses and pigs and the whole business. I can remember my uncle plowing with a horse and cultivating corn. He would get on the horse and ride to Black Mountain to have the corn ground, then would come. We had running water into the kitchen. Didn't even have a bathroom in the house. We used oil lamps - and I thought I could see! I can remember sitting on the porch at night and hearing the hootie owls. And I remember standing on a great big hill. It's hard to describe the way I saw North Fork then. It was free and easy. I ran around like some little wild animal in the woods, I guess. Barefoot! Mama never knew where I was going. I'd be in the woods, over at the creek, just wandering around. Every Fourth of July, my aunt and uncle and my mama and daddy, and my brother and me, would go up to the very head of the valley. There was a pine forest that was old and beautiful, right beside the creek. And underneath it was complete. I never was afraid back there. Never. I think that's part of the reason why I loved it and didn't want to see it destroyed. Because it was a safe, wonderful, quiet place where nothing should be endangered, not even the trees. And when it happened. When they moved us out, they also had to tear down the church and move it. And move the cemetery. For all of us who had family buried there, it was hard. Very hard. They took off a front of a mountainside and filled in a valley with dirt. It was. All those years later, when I saw the clear-cut, it broke my heart. The city forester saw money growing there instead of trees. He didn't grow up in that mountain area. He didn't have an appreciation of it. It's different with mountain people. The mountain people that I grew up with had a bigger influence on my life than I knew at the time. As I get older, I see myself growing into them, and I know that's not a bad thing. They brought me to my Christian experience, and they taught me. Sometimes we get so busy, that we let our world change without making an effort to see if it's changing for the better. Other than working in my church and doing things with the children at school, I had never really done anything with the pub. I could not let them barge in there and tear down a beautiful place and not try to stop them. I think some things just need to be cherished and left alone. That place is one of them. The dam was enough. It had to be - they needed water. I can't

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for A Change](#) ^[3]" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ^[4] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Additional Resources:

[Audio Recording](#) ^[5]: Interview with Betty Ballew by David S. Cecelski, 29 January 1999, K-0258, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/13017> ^[5]

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