

A RIVER'S LEGACY

From early explorers to the movie "Deliverance" to modern-day outdoors anglers like Stephen Geldard, the river's waters have flowed purely throughout history.

MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

New battle set over scenic and storied Chattooga

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The Chattooga River is as much a character as it is a setting for the stories that unfold on its unpredictable waters.

The river, unencumbered by artificial dams, flows both leisurely and violently through secluded haunts for centuries barely touched by man, a refuge of wildness that is a naturally beating heart of the urban Sunbelt.

A Southern Gothic tale filmed along the Chattooga would leave an indelible legacy on the river, both foreshadowing and kindling environmental conflicts boiling over today.

In the 1972 rendering of the late James Dickey's classic novel "Deliverance," four Atlanta businessmen try to tame the fictional Cahulawassee River and find themselves consumed by its wildness.

As years passed and myth turned into history, the Cahulawassee and the Chattooga were inexorably wed.

Today, naturalists are at war with one another. Government bureaucrats have spent untold resources to manage the hostilities. And still along the banks of the river are the gnawing feelings of distrust and humiliation held by locals four decades later.

The government has been steadfast in preserving the Chattooga as a place both difficult to get to and impossible to master.

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ah Kindree of Canada takes on Bull Sluice on the Chattooga River. The Chattooga was the sixth river Kindree boated in a six-day span. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/

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The battle lines have been drawn, from the streams of Cashiers, N.C., down 21 miles through the Ellicott Wilderness to an unassuming rural bridge linking Georgia and South Carolina that the government has marked as the end of the Chattooga's headwaters.

These pristine headwaters, stocked each year with thousands of trout, are forbidden to paddlers, who face fines and perhaps arrest if they were to violate a ban invoked for more than 30 years on the most-challenging portion of rapids.

The ban — or as anglers who treasure their haven of solitude would suggest, "zoning" of the waters — is the center of a struggle being fought in the digital ether and under the artificial light of federal courtrooms in downtown Greenville.

The effort, encompassing thousands of pages of consultant studies, disassociated bureaucratic edicts and protracted legal challenges, has cost a sum of tax money that the U.S Forest Service says it can't accurately estimate.

Disparate environmental groups — feuding coalitions of paddlers and back-country anglers prominent among them — have positioned themselves to stake their claim to the headwaters.

An amicable end, lawyers and bureaucrats say, is elusive. The government says a final decision is due by July.

Meanwhile, the ancient river sparkles as it flows in the springtime sun.

A river's course

"The first explorers saw this country, saw it just like us. In a canoe. I can imagine how they felt." Lewis (Burt Reynolds), "Deliverance"

In 1968, the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers Act named the Chattooga as a candidate in a new, comprehensive waterway conservation program designed in part to counterbalance the rush of construction of hydroelectric dams in the South.

As the government and environmental groups considered the potential designation — ultimately granted in 1974 — Hollywood moved to Clayton, Ga., and the banks of the Chattooga for the filming of "Deliverance."

Dickey's novel had risen to No. 2 on the bestseller lists, but it was the film, which won the Academy award for Best Picture, that introduced the Chattooga to the world.

"It was a virgin river at the time," Ronny Cox, a star in the film, said in a recent interview with GreenvilleOnline.com. "In many ways, the filming of 'Deliverance' sort of spoiled the river."

The year before the movie's release, boating use was about 800 floaters per year but swelled to 21,000 in 1973.

Cox in his acting debut played the part of the introspective, bespectacled Atlanta city slicker Drew, who played 'Dueling Banjos" with the child savant in the film.

In the novel, the character "Ed," played in the movie by actor Jon Voight, muses on the "country of the nine-fingered people," whose homeland will soon be flooded to make way for a hydroelectric lake.

In Christopher Dickey's 1999 memoir "Summer of Deliverance," detailing his tenuous relationship with his mercurial, alcoholic father, the son describes the phrase as a reference to "so much inbreeding and so many bad accidents that everybody's missing something."

Still today, the movie's infamous backwoods rape scene eclipses Burt Reynolds' survivalist character's pensive reflections on mankind selling nature's soul.

"Squeal like a pig" was an improvisation not found within the novel, introduced to sharpen the horror of the act that James Dickey had said was employed "to put the moral weight of murder on the suburbanites."

"The movie went out of its way to degrade the local people, more than even the book," said Doug Adams, who in 1965 as a graduate engineer made Clayton his permanent home after first discovering trout fishing on the river a decade earlier.

The characterization of river locals as inbred, subhuman hillbillies angered locals then and today, Adams said.

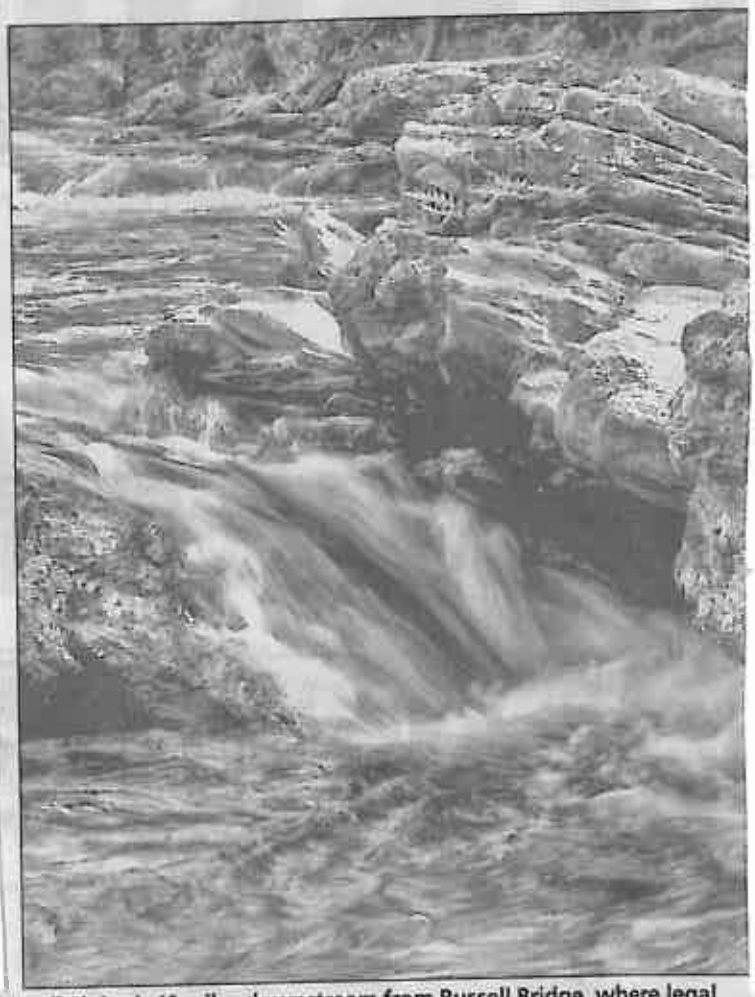
"There was conflict," he said. "When the movie came out there was humiliation of the local people. Things just changed dramatically."

Perfect wilderness

"You don't beat this river. Machines are gonna fail. And the system's gonna fail."

The sky here along the Chattooga is clear blue, the spring air dry enough to ignite a spark of static electricity.

If you stretch your gaze upward and beyond what you



Bull Sluice is 10 miles downstream from Russell Bridge, where legal paddling begins MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF



can imagine, the atmosphere offers little obstruction as blue shades darken into a glimpse of outer space.

Coruscating beneath the late morning sun is water just as clear, reflecting trees whose green not only contrasts, but radiates.

The Chattooga River is what they say it is.

A few hundred yards upstream from the State 28 bridge — forbidden to paddlers — two anglers twirl their rods, swooping their lines into shallow waters.

Their bubble of personal space extends just to the bounds of shouting distance.

Stephen Geldard, owner and operator of Seneca-based Shipshape pier and sea wall construction company, wades in the stream, carefully unhooking a diminutive trout from his line and releasing it.

Geldard has fished some of the most pristine waters in North America.

"I've lived in Alaska, northern New Mexico," he says. "It's perfect out here."

Geldard wades downriver, carefully navigating the contours of each time-worn stone, and fades into the distant trees.

Ten miles downstream, Leah Kindree and Wayne Donison are the only kayakers parked at an access area to Bull Sluice.

The two have traveled from their bedroom communities outside Toronto to float rivers in the Southeast, and the Chattooga is, they say, the "classic river."

They have yet to unload their kayaks, hoping a group of like-minded strangers with similar interests will give them an eight-mile car ride back from Tugaloo Lake.

"It's just the way the paddling community is, especially here in the South," Kindree says.

The trip the two baby boomers have embarked on is much like their philosophy of the undammed Chattooga, which responds drastically to rainfall, providing a unique experience nearly every day.

"We were just lucky to catch it while it was running," Donison says.

Soon, an SUV ambles up the hill, with boats attached up top.

Jay Wolfe and Josh Williford — off-the-clock river guides and residents of Long Creek in their 20s — are putting in at Bull Sluice, 10 miles downstream from the State 28 Russell Bridge where legal paddling begins.

Wolfe says he imagines what the boating is like in the forbidden zone. He's heard of those who have experienced it, the old-timers, the scofflaws and those who were lucky enough to participate in a government study in the headwaters a few years ago.

Without hesitation, the pair agrees to give the Canadians a ride back.

The quartet pick their line and launch briefly above the rocks just beneath, then gently float from sight, downstream, around the bend.

"This is not the outside world," Wolfe says. "It's an example of how it could be done a different way. It's not about getting ahead of each other. It's coming out here to be and not conquering anything."

David Simpson, known in the paddling community as "Psyco" for his daredevil reputation, has made the trek for 30 years from Greenville to brave the Chattooga.

"If I don't do it soon, I'm going to be too old," Simpson said. "They're not making any more rivers. They're damming them up."

Simpson maintains that the rapids of the headwaters are so challenging that few boaters will ever try to tame them.

"If they want to have a natural experience, then they

should stop putting stocked fish in there and let them fish what was native at the time," he said. "It's an artificial set-up."

However, not all paddlers feel compelled to float the headwaters — nor is it necessary for them to have unlimited access, said RonBo Green, who once was Simpson's paddling companion before a boating accident in West Virginia required neck surgery.

The rapids in the headwaters aren't Class IV or even Class V, said Green, who will soon turn 70.

"I class the Upper Chattooga at the right level as terminal," Green said. "I know there's some rapids up there that, if you're a young man and a good boater, you want to take them on." However, he said, "I understand the fishermen. About his only choice is the headwaters."

Yet, Geldard doesn't see the headwaters as his alone.

The true protection that has preserved the Chattooga's magic, Geldard said, is the prohibition of development along the river.

"Fishing restrictions are good," he said, "but in public waters it's hard to restrict one thing and say people can use it for this and not for that. If the fish are there, and they're hungry, it's going to be good fishing."

Wolfe said he considers himself both a paddler and a fisherman. And whether navigating a boat or wading to catch a fish, he said, you must read the flow of the water.

"It's a good metaphor for life, really. You can fight against things that are bigger than we are, but in the end, if you don't just go with it, and do the best you can in the space of going with it, you're kind of fighting a losing battle."

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EXPERIENCE THE RIVER

See and hear the Chattooga as paddlers tackle Bull Sluice and anglers upstream master the art of fly fishing, with commentary on the conflict over river usage. Go to GreenvilleOnline.com.

"DELIVERANCE" FIRSTHAND

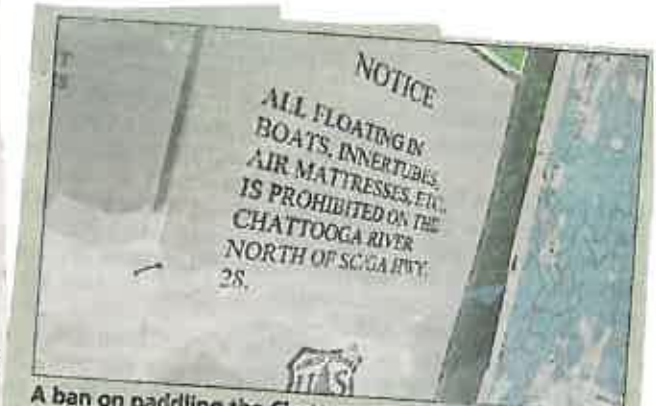
Listen to an interview with "Deliverance" star Ronny Cox. Cox talks about braving the Chattooga and the movie's effect on the river . Exclusively at GreenvilleOnline.com

READ FOR YOURSELF

Browse a sampling of key legal and administrative documents on GreenvilleOnline.com for a comprehensive history of the fight over the river.

INSIDE

Debate over river usage has deep roots. 10A



A ban on paddling the Chattooga's headwaters has been in effect for more than 30 years. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF