9-30-2010 Greenville News

Divers touch Jocassee history

Attakulla Lodge, girls' camp preserved on cold lake bottom

By Anna Simon
STAFF WRITER
asimon@greenvillenews.com

SALEM — Debbie Fletcher floated on Lake Jocassee in an envelope of icy bubbles rising to the surface from divers exploring the old Attakulla Lodge, owned and run by her family since the late 1800s and now resting on its side 300 feet beneath her on the lake bottom.

Fletcher's eyes were on the mountain peaks framing the lake as they once framed the Jocassee Valley of her youth, but her thoughts were with the divers rediscovering a place that was covered with water four decades ago by Duke Power, now Duke Energy, for a hydroelectric project.

The surface temperature was 82 degrees and the bubbles from the 44-degree lake floor felt like tiny ice cubes, but Fletcher was warmed by memories of the lodge that passed from her grandparents to her mother and was anxious to hear what the divers would find.

"The emotional part comes when all the divers are back on board and I know everybody's OK and they talk about what they saw," Fletcher said.

Seven technical divers from four states — South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee — made the dive to the lodge on a recent cloudless morning. The water at the bottom was exceptionally clear, giving them a 40- to 50-foot view. That much visibility is rare at this depth, even in Jocassee, which is very clear, said Bill Routh, who led the dive and owns the Lake Jocassee Dive Shop.

The following day, five of the divers descended to Camp Jocassee for Girls, where for nearly half a century young adventurers spent summers swimming, splashing and canoeing in the Whitewater River. The river still cuts a watery path across the lake floor from Whitewater Falls, the divers said.

They dove to a steel bridge where the old Highway 11, now underwater, crosses the river at the camp gates. The pair of tall stone columns at the drive into the camp still stand, and one side of the gate is still attached, the divers said.

One of the divers, Steve Parker, from Birmingham, swam to the riverbed, where girls once played and sat on the rocks under the bridge. Silt covers most objects under Jocassee, and the lodge looks like it's covered with a dusting of snow as divers approach, but Parker saw no silt on the rocks in the bed of the river. It appears they're swept clean by the river's current, he said.

The Whitewater River joined with the Toxaway River a short way downstream from the girls' camp to form the Keowee River. The Keowee River flowed on, past where the 385-foot tall dam at the Jocassee Pumped Storage Hydroelectric Station now stands, crossing the old riverbed.

See DIVERS on page 7A



COURTESY OF DEBBIE FLETCHER
An aerial view shows Jocassee Valley, with the Attakulla Lodge visible at the end of the clearing.



ANNA SIMON / Staff
Bill Routh prepares for a dive to the bottom of Lake Jocassee.

DIVE INTO HISTORY

Go online and read Anna Simon's childhood memories of attending Camp Jocassee for Girls and hikes along the Whitewater River. You also can see photo galleries from the dive and historical images of the valley at GreenvilleOnline.com

DIVERS

FROM PAGE 1A

Tricky adventure

The two dives were highly specialized operations and the roles of each participant were planned out to the exact minute. In addition to the seven technical divers going to the lodge, three others were safety divers, stationed at various depths like guardians of the deep to shuttle air and mixed gas tanks and monitor and escort the seven divers back to the surface.

The divers had 20 minutes from when they dropped below the lake surface until they had to begin a nearly two-hour ascent to allow them to safely decompress.

It took only five minutes to drop down to the lodge. Divers followed a guide line that had been set in place shortly after Routh discovered the location of the lodge on the lake floor in 2004. Once at the lodge, they had 15 minutes to explore before starting back up. More time on the bottom would have meant exponentially more decompression time, as there's a point of diminishing returns, Routh said.

With the short time at the lodge, their activities on the bottom were meticulously planned. One task was to install a guest register at the lodge. The register, the size of a sheet of office paper, is made of waterproof material and has a special waterproof pencil attached so that what divers write on it will be preserved.

There won't be many visitors. Few are certified to dive this deep. The maximum depth for recreational sport diving is 130 feet. Both the lodge and girls camp are about 300 feet below the surface.



Debbie Fletcher's mother, Betty Richardson, stands outside the Attakulla Lodge in a 1930s photo.

Only 4 percent of all divers "attain the skills, training and equipment required for a dive to 300 feet," said Steve Lewis, spokesman and a trainer for Technical Diving International. Jocassee is one of the five deepest man-made lakes in the U.S., Lewis said. The deepest point in the lake is at 357 feet, said Sandra Magee, a Duke spokeswoman.

Another task for the divers was to check on a copy of a book Fletcher had written, "Whippoorwill Farewell: Jocassee Remembered," about the Jocassee Valley and her childhood memories, that her husband encased in Plexiglas. Divers took it to the lodge in September 2004, placing it on what they thought was a front step.

The book was where they left it, Charles Johnson, a diver from Clover who'd made the earlier dive, told Fletcher when the divers returned on the recent dive. But the book wasn't on a front step.

Overturned lodge

It was not until 2007 that divers realized the building had turned on its side and wasn't upright.

The chimney, which went through the house rather than up an exterior wall, was holding the lodge in place, although the underwater currents, Routh believes, toppled the structure on its side. The book was on a pile of rock and mortar — remnants of the fireplace and its foundation that the divers discovered on this dive. It had been left by the hearth and heart of the house.

That's fitting, said Fletcher, because it is the chimney that anchored the lodge in place, allowing it to be a part of her present as well as her past.

Although materials were scavenged from the lodge before the valley was flooded, the frame of the building is intact. Most of the tin roof, siding and other salvageable materials had been removed, much of it by pillaging vandals.

One of the divers, Luc Rheaume of Clover, picked up a piece of wood that turned out to be one of the cedar shake shingles that had been on the roof under the tin. He brought it back to show Fletcher. In spite of the years, the wood was solid and the grain sparkled with an amber hue in the sun.

The divers shined their flashlights along the exposed studs that, along with the plumbing, are all that remains of the interior walls, although the bead-board ceiling and hardwood floor are mostly intact. Routh filmed pieces of what Fletcher calls the gingerbread — decorative wood under the tall front gable of the house.

Back at the dive shop, when Fletcher looked at the video, the vent under the gable and the gingerbread, clear because of the clarity of the water on this dive, were the most recognizable objects she was able to pick out on the old lodge she thought she'd never see again.

One of the new discoveries divers made on this dive was an old metal bed. It was the first time they'd gone into this room in the house. Their approaches are cautious.

Next time, they'll look around more, Johnson said. Maybe he can bring the old bed up. The divers will be back. The lure of the unknown and underwater discoveries waiting to be made keeps bringing them back.

"It's something out of the ordinary to see that deep, as well as being a little bit of history," said Bobby Smallwood, a diver from Atlanta.

"The history part of it is a big driver," Johnson said. Of his many dives in many places, those to the lodge "have been the most rewarding."

That's because Fletcher's stories of her childhood summer visits to the family lodge have brought the past alive for the divers, and they've been able to return a piece of that past to her.