HISTORY IN THE deep

JOCASSEE RE-LICENSING REOPENS ISSUES FROM THE PAST



Luc Rheaume, right, prepares to launch first to the depths of Lake Jocassee to explore parts of the Attakulla Lodge. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

OUR NATURAL BEAUTY

Bygone world lies beneath the surface

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In the vast depths of Lake Jocassee, thick layers of silt cover much of a submarine world preserved in suspended animation — a world where the Whitewater River and a confluence of untamed sibling streams once nourished the majestic Jocassee Valley.

Three hundred feet below the surface, expert divers say, the river still runs its course, sweeping clean river rocks once claimed on a sunny day by those who farmed and summered in the valley.

Forty years ago, to stop the rivers, Duke Energy had to make its case to the government and to the people that its transformation of the valley into a lake for hydroelectricity wouldn't sacrifice its beauty.

For the first time since Duke

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GO BELOW THE LAKE

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Energy's colossal earthen dam first turned the rivers' flow upstream, the power company must now turn to the government and the public to renew its vision.

The talks are underway for a new covenant by 2016, the last chance for another 40 or so years.

Meanwhile, in the deep, underwater relics rest as symbols of how a pastoral time gone by suddenly collided with industrial progress.

Chief among them is the Attakulla Lodge.

The cold depths of these emerald waters ensure the one-time rest stop for weary travelers and treasured family gathering place remains locked in time as the world above it presses on to an uncertain future.

The link between present and future is buoyed by a simple beer keg just deep enough to help keep the location of the Attakulla Lodge a closely guarded secret.

New agreement

The original license granted in 1966 for Duke to operate the Jocassee hydro station expires in 2016.

By August 2014, Duke hopes to have its final re-license application submitted to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

Five presidentially appointed commissioners will review the application and make a final decision, which could extend the license between 30 to 50 years.

The length of the license is generally dependent on the cost of environmental measures that include development of recreation on the lake. The higher the cost, the longer the license.

The groundwork is being laid now in meetings with stakeholders representing more than 30 organizations. They are scheduled to reach an agreement with the power company in November 2013.

"I hope we would be in a position to support the re-licensing and hope in good faith that we would be in agreement," said Dana Leavitt, the Land Trust Special Projects director for the environmental watchdog group Upstate Forever and a member of the stakeholder group.

The re-licensing process is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have a say in the future of the Upstate's most pristine lake, whose 75-mile shoreline has been largely spared of residential and commercial development.

The terms of the original deal didn't sit well with all locals who had a stake in the flooding of the Jocassee Valley, Leavitt said.

Particularly, he says, Duke didn't give the amount of land it had promised.

However, the company doesn't agree with the assertion.

The original license called for Duke to contribute between 60,000 to 74,000 acres, a range preservationists would argue the company hasn't reached, Leavitt said.

Duke Energy spokeswoman Sandra Magee said that Duke is responsible for protecting nearly 57,000 acres.

Leavitt said the public has use of about 40,000 acres, including land that the state bought back as part of the Jocassee Gorges preservation plan. The land was sold for exponentially more than it was bought for, he said.

"The folks in the Pickens and the Oconee communities felt that a commitment was made to the people of the area," Leavitt said. "Today if you go back and you do an accounting of how many of those acres are still available to the public, I think you'll find there's quite a great shortfall."

However, Magee said the company has fulfilled its obligation and more.

"Duke Energy believes that it has more than met all of its commitments with respect to protection of lands in the Keowee-Toxaway area," Magee said.

Magee pointed to the Jocassee Gorges land and improvements that have been made at recreation areas, such as Devil's Fork State Park.

The details of future preservation will depend on further discussion with stakeholders and the results of more than a dozen studies, she said.

"We are in the midst of conducting 14 different studies, so it is too early to discuss what may be included in any discussion or negotiations," Magee said.

In all the talks, the past is inescapable.

Creating lakes

The Whitewater River once converged with the Keowee, Toxaway and Horsepasture rivers, which flowed freely when in the 1960s Duke Power — as it was known then — advanced plans for its Keowee-Toxaway hydroelectric project.

The project was part of Duke's master plan to build the Oconee Nuclear Station.

Leading up to the valley's flooding, Duke made deals with landowners and razed vast stretches of land to clear obstructions.

Debbie Fletcher's family had made a deal to sell all but 22 of the 176 acres they owned, to stay in the valley as long as they could.

The family never sold the lodge, so the building stood even as the waters rose (though





An old photo shows the Attakulla Lodge in its heyday. COURTESY OF DEBBIE FLETCHER/

Sherry Rabon helps the divers offload some of their tanks after the dive to the depths of Lake Jocassee. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

vandals did rip the tin roof away along with other pieces of the lodge).

Fletcher's uncles flew over the lake as it flooded and reported seeing the lodge lift off its foundation, turn upside down in the rising waters and get hung up in trees by Devil's Fork.

As it turned out, the sight was likely that of a building that housed a nearby bowling alley, she says.

For years, Fletcher assumed that the valley her family treasured was nothing more than a graveyard.

And surely, the lodge passed down through her family lineage had been swept away when the flood waters — after two years of backing up behind the dam — fully engulfed the valley in 1973.

The memories Fletcher keeps of the valley and the lodge are ones that bring tears to her eyes even today, where she periodically updates a book she wrote about her childhood in the valley and the lodge, "Whipporwill Farewell: Jocassee Remembered."

The valley inhabits her family's collective soul, she says, and the lodge embodies the memories.

The Attakulla stood three stories high, a wooden beacon of the valley, named after Cherokee Chief Attakullakulla, father of Princess Jocassee, who legend tells drowned herself after learning of the death of her lover.

In 1904, the lodge, owned by the Whitmire family and a stone's throw from the Whitewater River, first opened for business as a bed-and-breakfast.

Fletcher's grandfather bought the lodge in the 1920s and kept it open to the public until the 1960s, when he talked of growing tired of a long career in the railroad business. From then, he opened it only for family and friends.

Fletcher's family would travel from the Midlands to spend summers at the lodge. Her uncles were in the military but would reunite at the Attakulla.

"The only time the entire family really ever got together was when we met up here at Jocassee," she says. "When we lost Jocassee, we just really kind of lost that connection. We lost our gathering place."

Exploring the past

Bill Routh fancies himself as a treasure hunter.

The owner of the Lake Jocassee Dive Shop had already discovered the camp site and had explored the Mount Carmel cemetery, where actual crews exhuming graves in the lead-up to the Jocassee Valley's flooding were filmed and depicted in the 1972 movie "Deliverance."

Routh had a notion that the Attakulla might not have floated away.

A chimney ran through the interior of the three-story lodge, and he believed that could have been enough to anchor the building.

In 2003, Routh called Fletcher at her Columbia home and asked her questions, looking for any insights into how to find the lodge.

In August 2004, after triangulating survey maps and comparing them to known sites in the valley such as the girls camp, the steel bridge that led to it and Mount Carmel Baptist Church, Routh was ready to go looking.

He waited for perfect conditions: 2 a.m., no waves, no boats, no glare.

Routh lowered a camera into the water. Two and a half hours later, he saw the lodge on the monitor.

"One evening out on the lake gave us the actual building," Routh says. "We had been told by numerous people that it had floated off the foundation and wasn't there anymore, so to actually see it there was really cool."

A late friend, Jackie Smith, was the first diver to make contact with the lodge and tied the first "down line" to it.

The Attakulla was once again connected to the waking world.

The lodge

The sun has just barely risen over the mountains on this foggy, late-summer morning.

The water is warm from the summer's heat.

Three hundred feet below, however, the temperature hovers around 40 degrees.

It only takes about five minutes for a diver to drop 300 feet. The ascent, however, must be a gradual one. It takes roughly two hours to rise safely and readjust to the pressure, averting a potentially deadly case of the bends.

Routh circles his pontoon boat around, again studying the monitor like he did when he first discovered the lodge.

In the time since the discovery, Routh determined that the lodge had turned on its side.

This time, Routh and his team of divers are looking for a beer keg.

The keg floats at about 25 feet below the surface, tied to a line attached to the lodge. The line helps divers know which way is up.

The marker is kept at 25 feet because Routh wants to keep the exact coordinates as low-profile as possible.

The line is found and the divers suit up. This is no casual snorkeling trip. Diving at 300 feet is reserved for only the highly trained.

Today's dive is a little shallower — 275 feet because lake levels are down, Routh says — and is an exploration of the lodge's front gable.

Visibility is 30 feet, he says, "a real interesting dive."

The divers disappear into the flawlessly clear water, with a video camera to record the dive in tow.

Actual time spent exploring the lodge is about 15 to 20 minutes.

Signs of the divers' ascent can be seen in the collection of bubbles that rise from the bottom. If you're swimming, you can feel the cold water bursting from the bubbles.

After the long wait — during which Fletcher and friends tie bottled Gatorades to a rope and lower them for divers to drink — one diver emerges with a piece of wood secured to his tank, a souvenir.

Fletcher accompanies the divers on as many trips as she can, and she always brings a supply of fried chicken for when they emerge.

Fletcher's mother would always cook fried chicken for guests at the lodge, and Routh says Fletcher is considered the lodge's hostess each and every time they dive.

On this day, Fletcher has brought her two young granddaughters along.

One enjoys the water. It's warmer than the cool morning would suggest. The other is content to stay on board.

The girls hear the stories, but all they see is water — and tears well up in their grandmother's eyes as her voice cracks and she unhooks the line connecting the boat and the lodge.

They will never know the valley, suspended in the deep.