

Rattlesnake Lodge

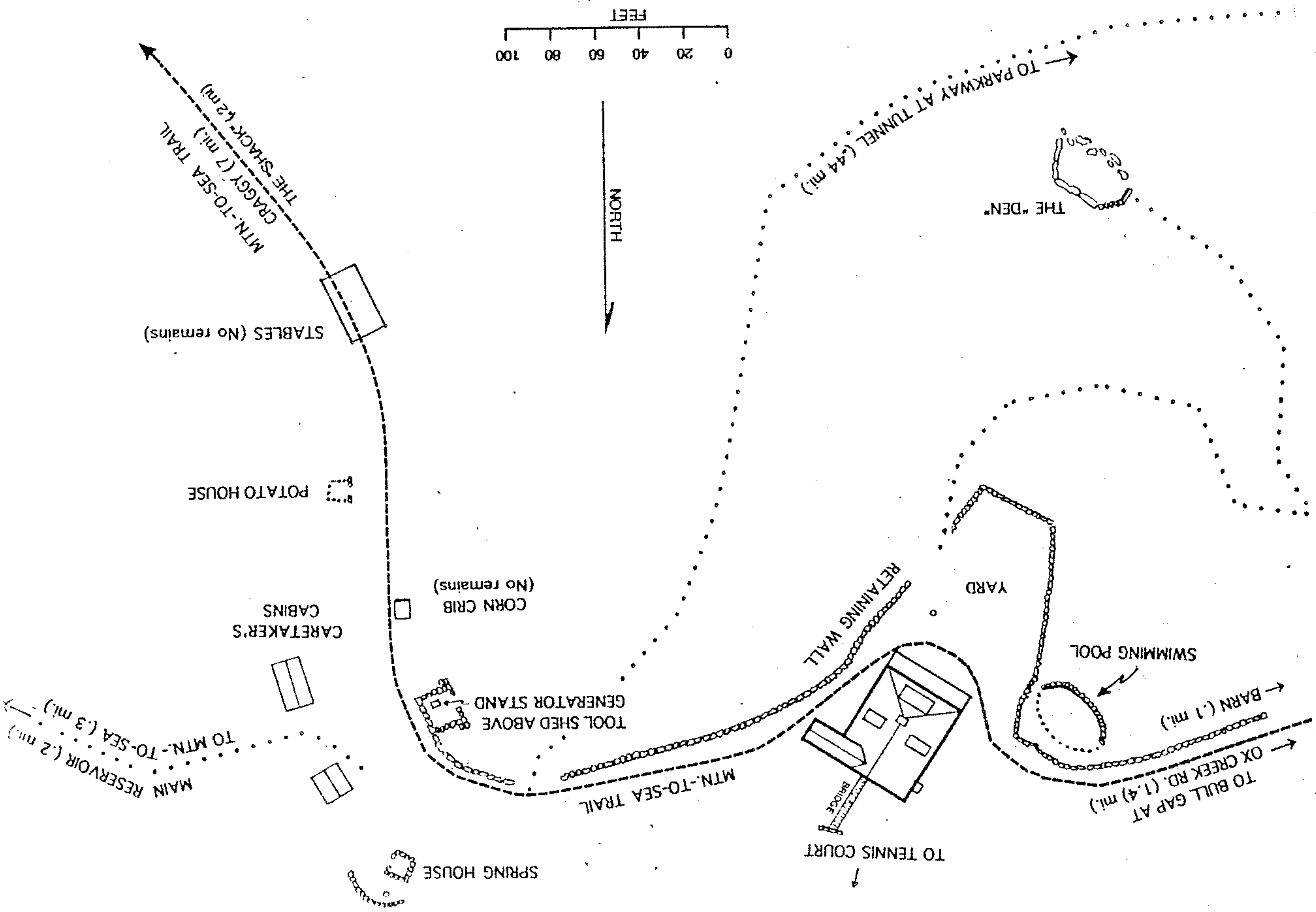
A Brief

History and Guidebook

Chase Ambler

Rattlesnake Lodge

Asheville, N.C.



PREFACE

The Rattlesnake Lodge site is northeast of Asheville, about 8 miles from Oteen on the Blue Ridge Parkway. The map on the inside cover gives complete directions for getting to the remains.

Many people who have frequented the area have inquired about the history of the lodge, which my grandfather built in early 1900. In order to clarify several misconceptions, I felt it important to pass on what I know, and to publish some of the pictures I have acquired from my father, Arthur Chase Ambler, Sr., and from his sister, Barbara Ambler Thorne.

As this is a simple photocopied booklet, the photographs are not the quality one would like, and I trust the reader will understand.

I encourage anyone with any knowledge or pictures about this area to contact me, in case there is a future edition.

Many thanks go to Barbara for all her help in gathering the pictures and the information.

A. Chase Ambler, Jr.
July, 1994

2nd Printing, June, 1995

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Asheville, NC

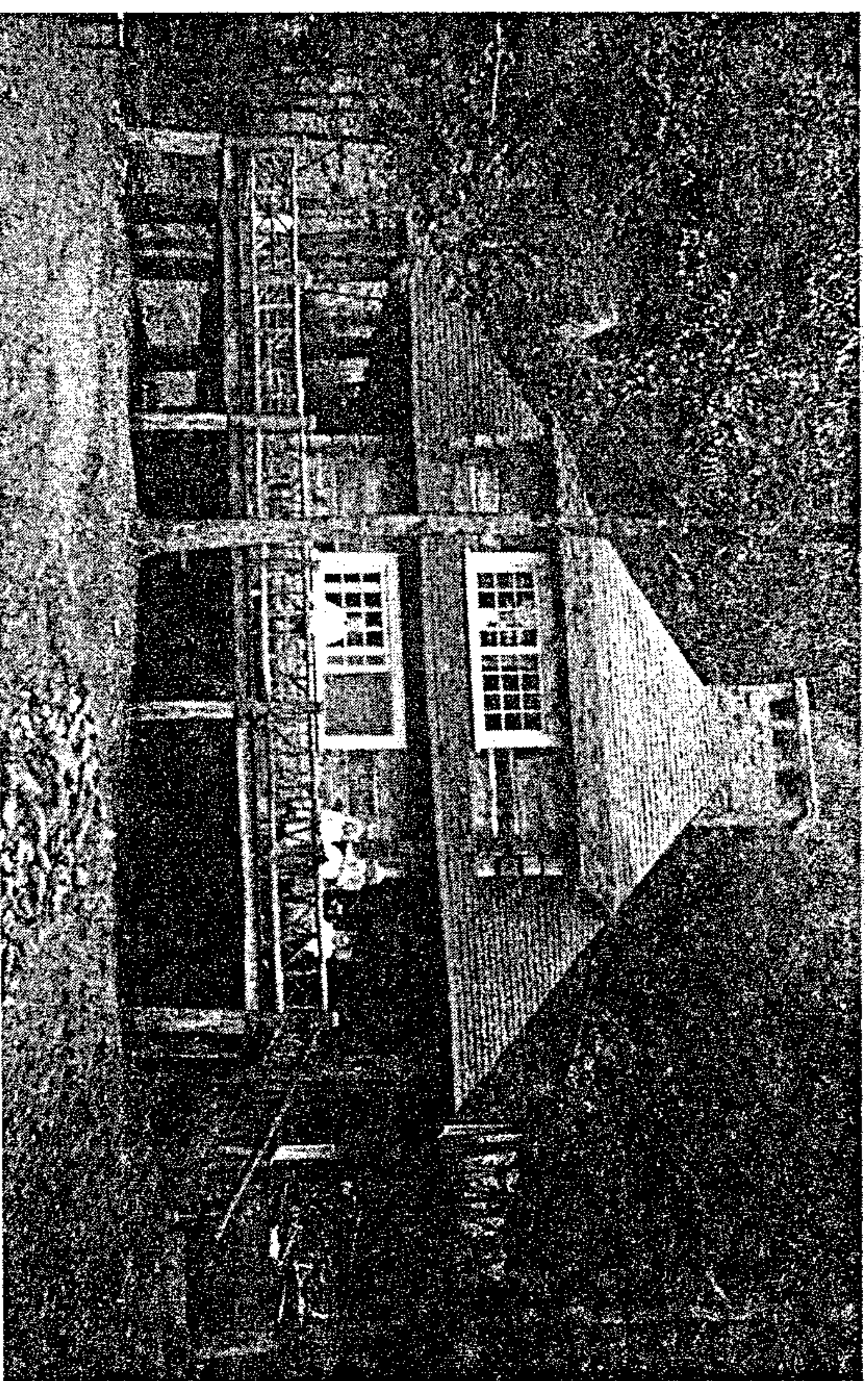
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Rattlesnake Lodge

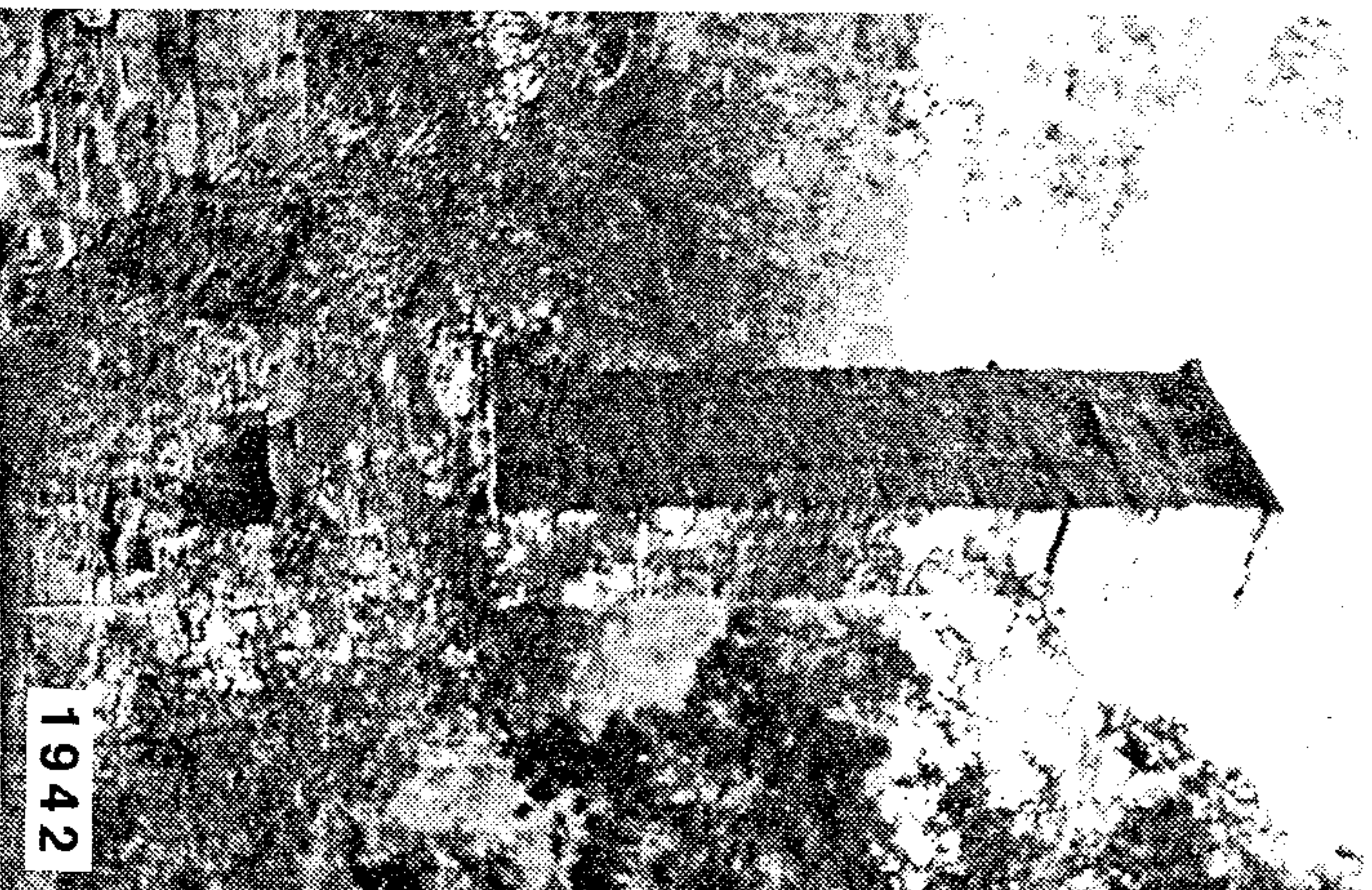


The lodge was built in 1903 and 1904 to be a summer home for Dr. Chase P. Ambler and his family, and it served as this until it was sold in November of 1920. The children and their mother went to the lodge when school was closed for the summer, and returned to Asheville just before school opened in the fall. Dr. Ambler, who had a medical practice in Asheville, would always come up on the weekends and usually on Wednesdays. He also spent many of his vacations there, and frequented the lodge during winter and spring. He especially spent a lot of time there during the first several years, when the out-buildings and the trails were being built.

The above picture shows the lodge in 1904, before the kitchen and back wing were added. The picture on the cover shows the addition of the chimney and the kitchen. The center page shows the addition of back wing containing the bathroom and bedrooms above. Today, there is still some foundation showing the rock wall supporting the cement floor of the shower room. This remaining corner is almost on the existing trail, and can easily be seen when there are no weeds. The remains of the main chimney and the kitchen chimney can also be seen. (As well as bed springs, if you hunt.)

The lodge had a separate dining room, between the front living room and the kitchen. Meals were eaten there with the whole family together. The cook was Kate Donovan, affectionately known as Diis. (Her sister was the author's "nanny".) Kate had her own room in the lodge during the summers. The kitchen housed the hot water heater, which was heated by a wood stove.

There were three large fireplaces on the main floor: One served the living room, one the dining room and one a bedroom. All three used the same chimney, and the two behind the main living room were at an angle, as can be seen in this photo taken about 1942, when the author visited the site with his father. Shown is the fireplace that was in the corner of the dining room. The rocks in the left foreground are the remains of the kitchen chimney, which was not standing at the time this picture was taken. The living room mantle was a large stone, two feet by about ten feet. Although Dr. Ambler once wrote that there were also two fireplaces on the second floor, there is no other evidence to this, especially when examining this picture.

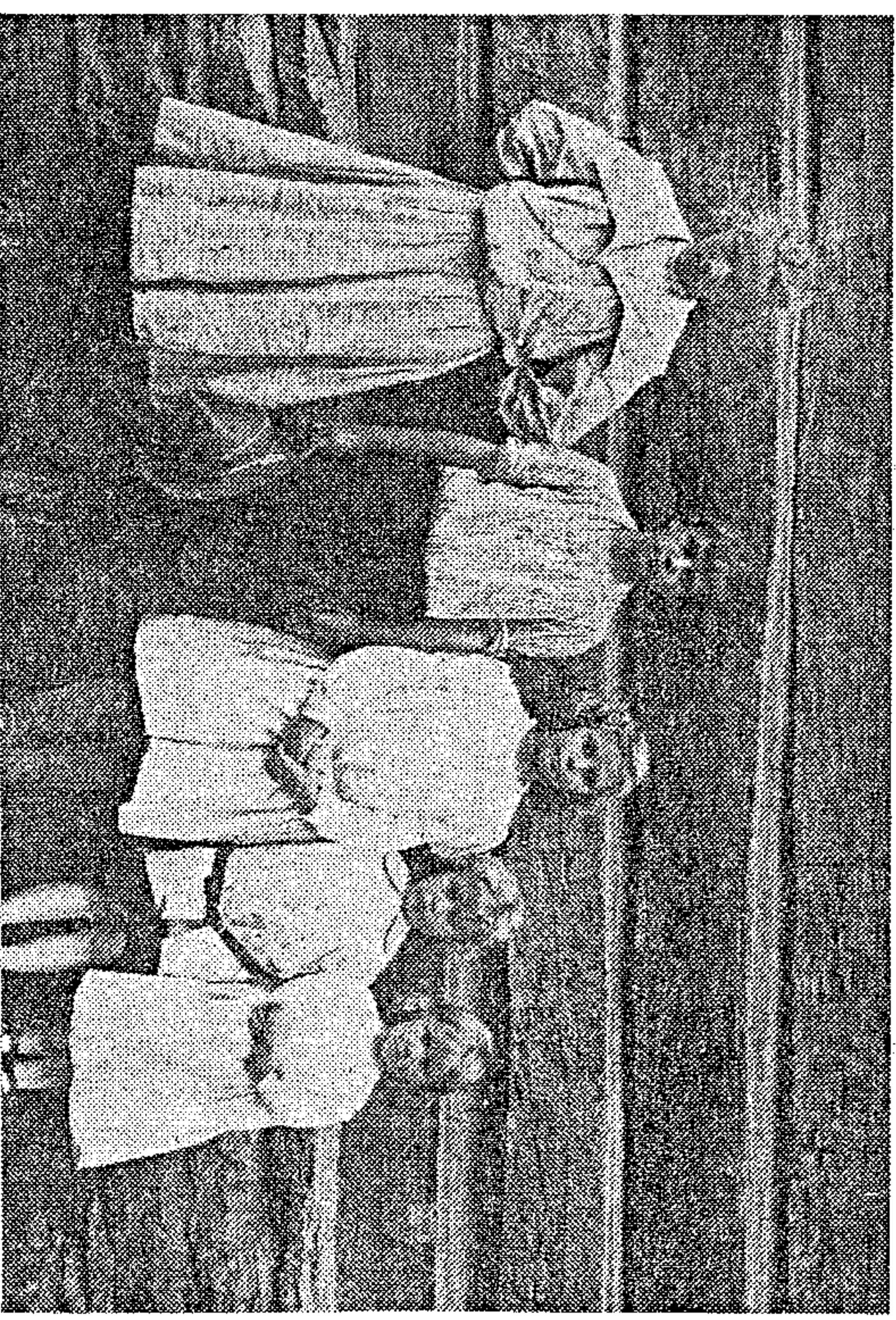


Over the living room in the front of the lodge was a large guest bedroom, which contained bunk beds. Normally, visitors would stay in this room, especially during the summer when the children were at the lodge. The furniture in the lodge, including cupboards, tables, chairs and bedsteads, was built at the lodge from wood taken off the property. Mattresses, springs and cooking utensils were obtained in Asheville.

A footbridge, as shown on the cover, extended from the second floor to the bank, towards the terraced gardens and tennis court. The main "road" through the property went under this bridge, between the lodge and the bank. There were also some outside steps, meeting the bridge at the top of the bank.

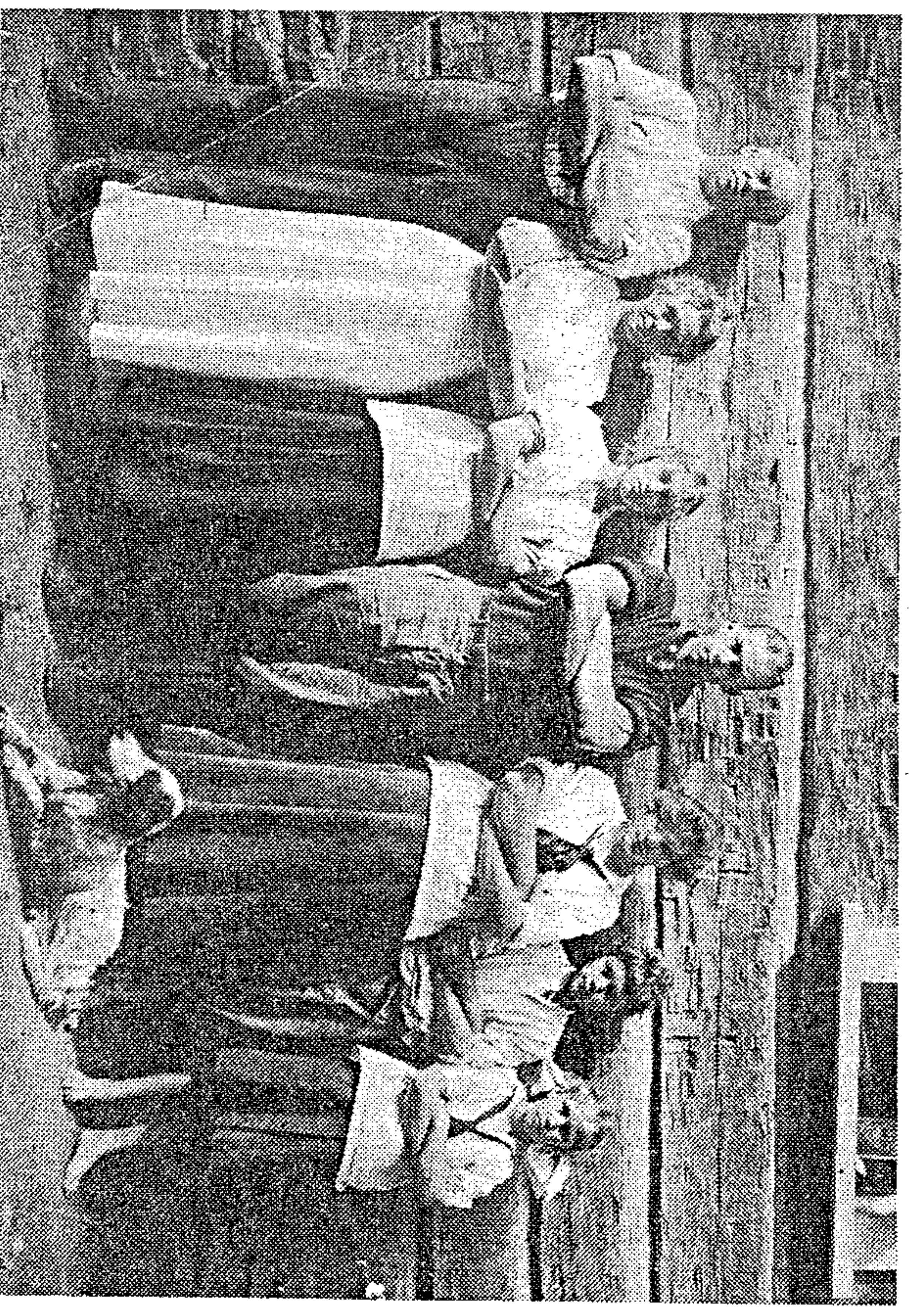
The lodge had a back "porch," which was really part of the house and contained the stairs to the second floor and the bedrooms. The two side porches were covered, and the one towards Bull Gap served as a small "wood shop" for Dr. Ambler's woodworking and carvings. The author still has his tool chest, which was stored on this porch. The front porch was the normal gathering place for family and friends. It was wide and had no roof, yet it was still shielded from the southwest sun by the trees.

All the logs in the lodge, and all other out-buildings, were hand hewn chestnut. The doors in the lodge were chestnut plank. The lodge burned from some unknown cause, believed to be lightning, about 1926.

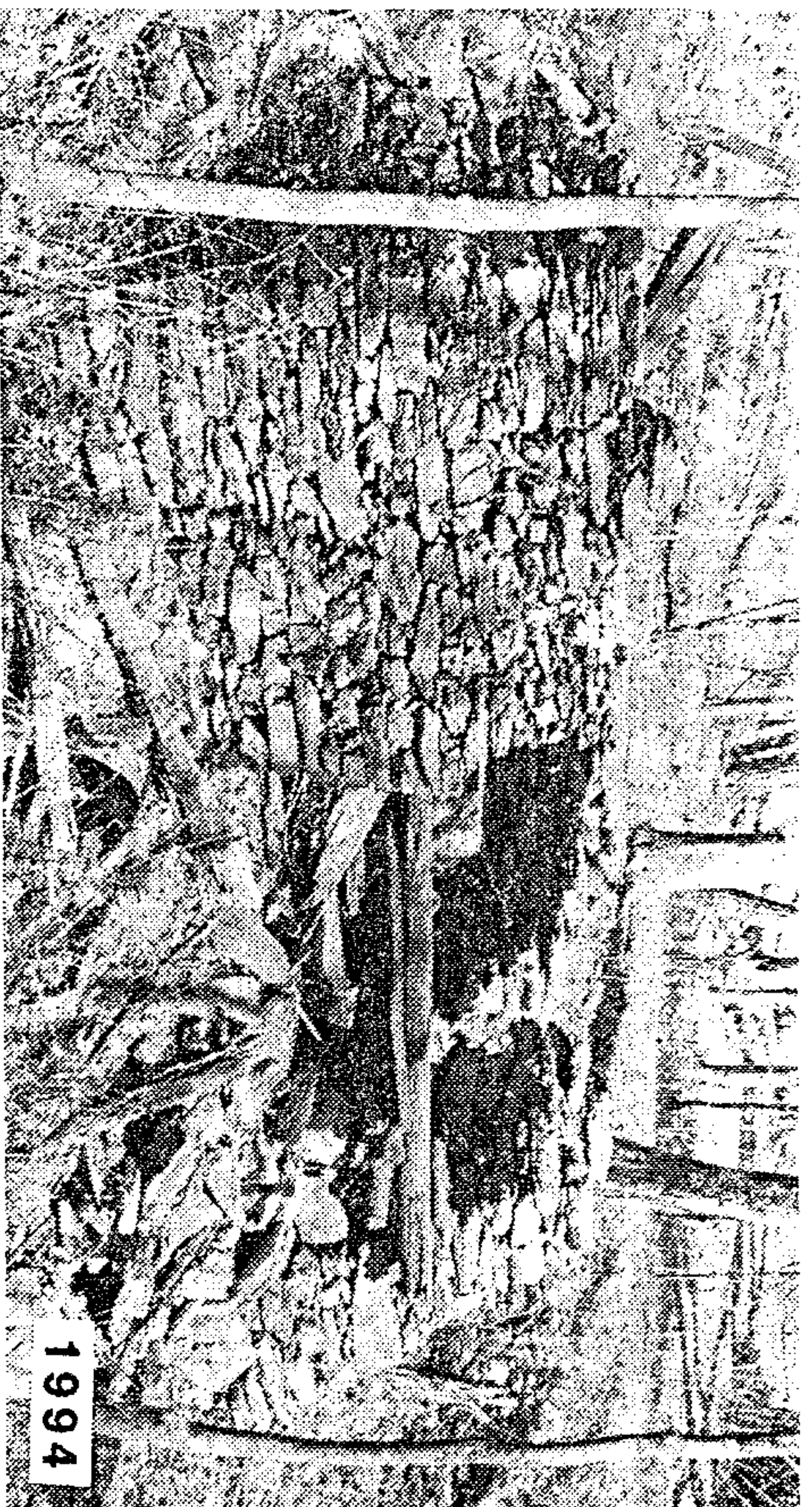


1906

The Ambler family, 1906 and 1913. Below, Dr. Chase P. Ambler, 1865-1932, Harriet Vernon Ambler, 1866-1918, Mary Vernon 1893-1923, Arthur Chase 1895-1968, Dorothy 1899-1974, John Vernon 1901-1993, and Barbara Pow 1903-. Family pictures were taken every year for 17 years, at the same place on the east side of the lodge. Arthur and John also became physicians, in Asheville and Denver, respectively.



1913



TOOL SHED - This 1994 photo shows the lower remains of the hand hewn log tool shed in front of the spring house. The shed was at ground level with the existing path. Electricity for the lodge came from a water-driven generator, which was located in the bottom of this shed. The cement pedestal for the generator can still be seen, with several bolts showing where the generator was mounted. A pipe from the reservoir still protrudes towards this stand.

TIME BOOK

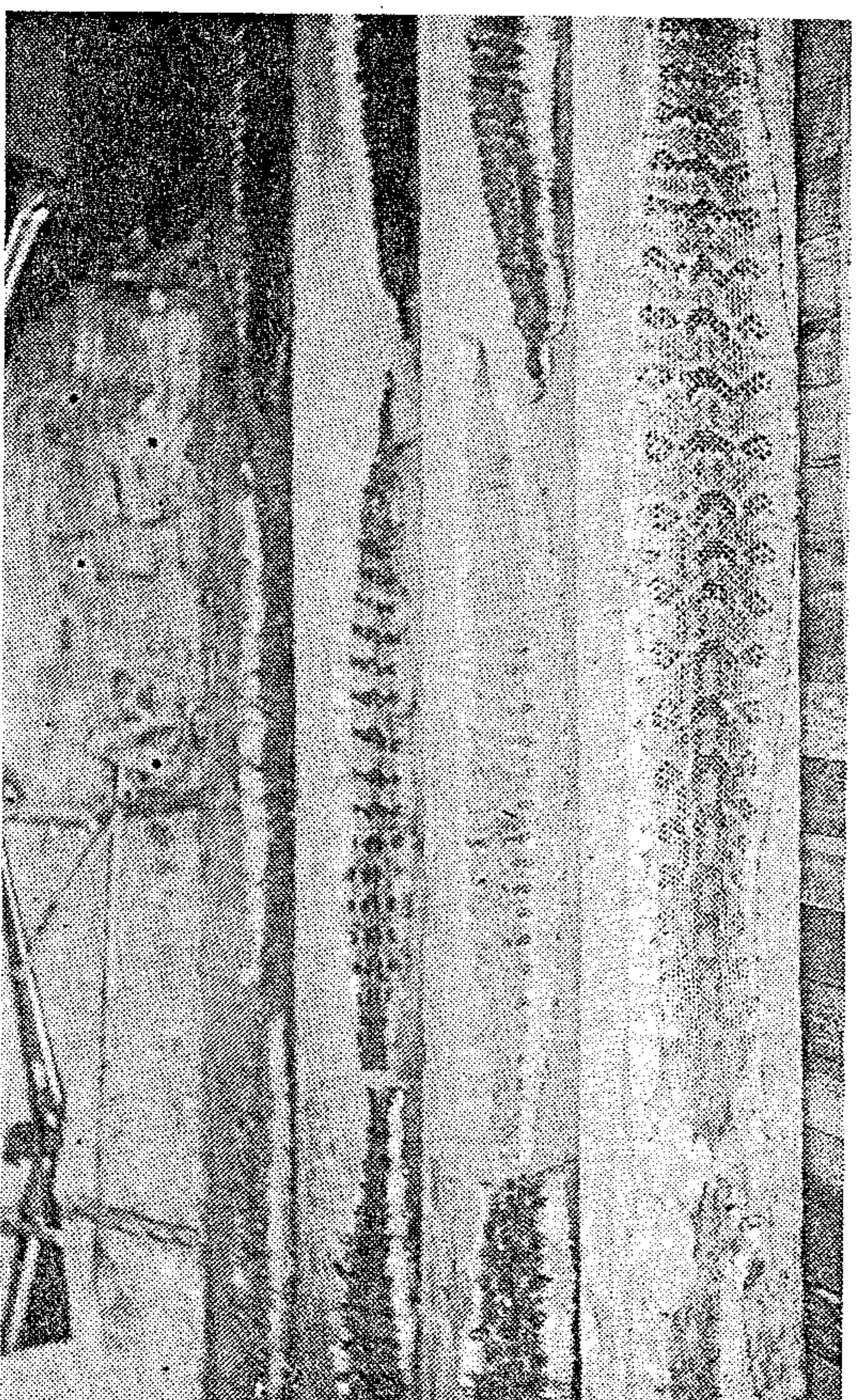
1909

Week Ending, Feb. 12 1910

DATE	NAME	NO. OF DAYS	RATE PER DAY	AMOUNT
Jan 1st	Don't know	7	40	280
Jan Monday at 107 hrs		8	35	280
Saw Thursday at 15 hrs		9	30	270
		10	25	250
		11	20	220
		12	15	180
		13	10	140
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Handwritten notes in the left margin: "G. R. Swan over 23 hrs", "Dennis Ballard", "Don't know", "Saw Monday at 107 hrs", "Saw Thursday at 15 hrs", "Mr. D. Ballard", "Mr. D. Ballard".

Dr. Ambler's "Time Book" covering the years 1909 to 1911 was saved. The going wage in the early part of the century was 10 cents per hour, difficult to relate to, unless you realize that a cow cost \$10, or two weeks of labor. Many names in the book are relatives of people still living near Ox Creek and over the gap in Shope Creek and Bull Creek. Dennis Ballard, D.C. Clark, Will Rice, Coil and Merit Fox, Dave and Lonnie Mundy, and G.W. Shope are a few of the names frequently in the book.

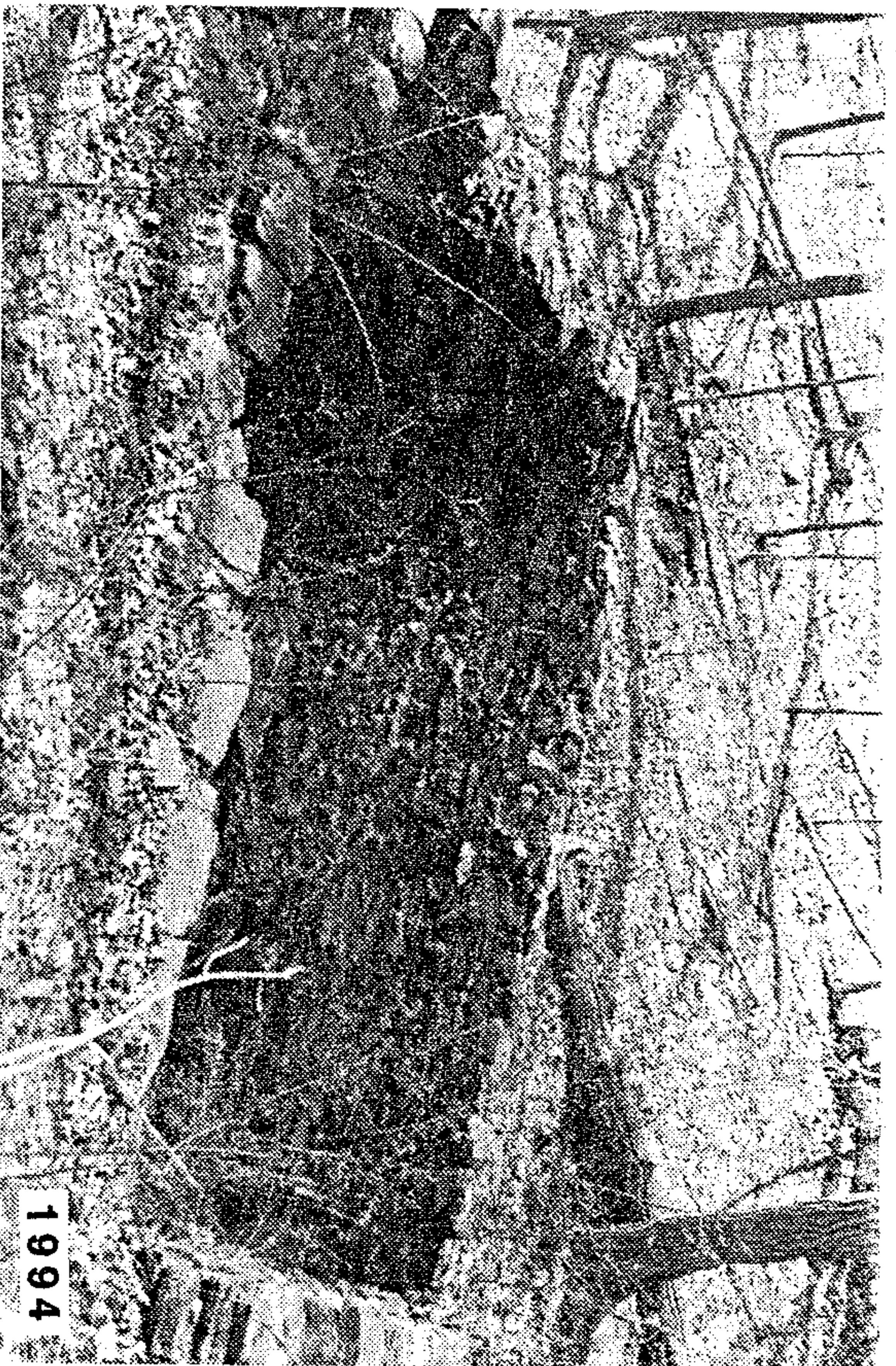


SNAKE SKIN CEILING During the first three years, it has been written that 41 rattlesnakes were killed on the property. It was understood throughout the area that Dr. Ambler would pay \$5 for any rattler brought to him. As \$5 in those days was about equivalent to week's wages, many rattlers undoubtedly came from very far away! The ceiling shown above was in the living room.

On many occasions, a sled was used to haul supplies from Bull Gap. The sled, shown here with Barbara, was also constantly used as a working sled around the lodge site, hauling stones for building, or fruits and vegetables from the fields and orchards.

The trail/road from Bull Gap to the lodge was built to be four feet wide, not suitable for the horse and carriages of that day. This was done on purpose, in order to maintain as much privacy as possible, and to permit the place to have a feeling of remoteness. Since there was a good public road over Bull Gap, a carriage house was built at the gap, beside the road. Today, only the rock remains can be seen. (The bricks and metal there appear to be "recent" trash.) This carriage house stored the carriages from Asheville, and then the family or visitors walked to the lodge, or transferred to horses or to a specially-built, narrow axle carriage. The brave rode the sled.

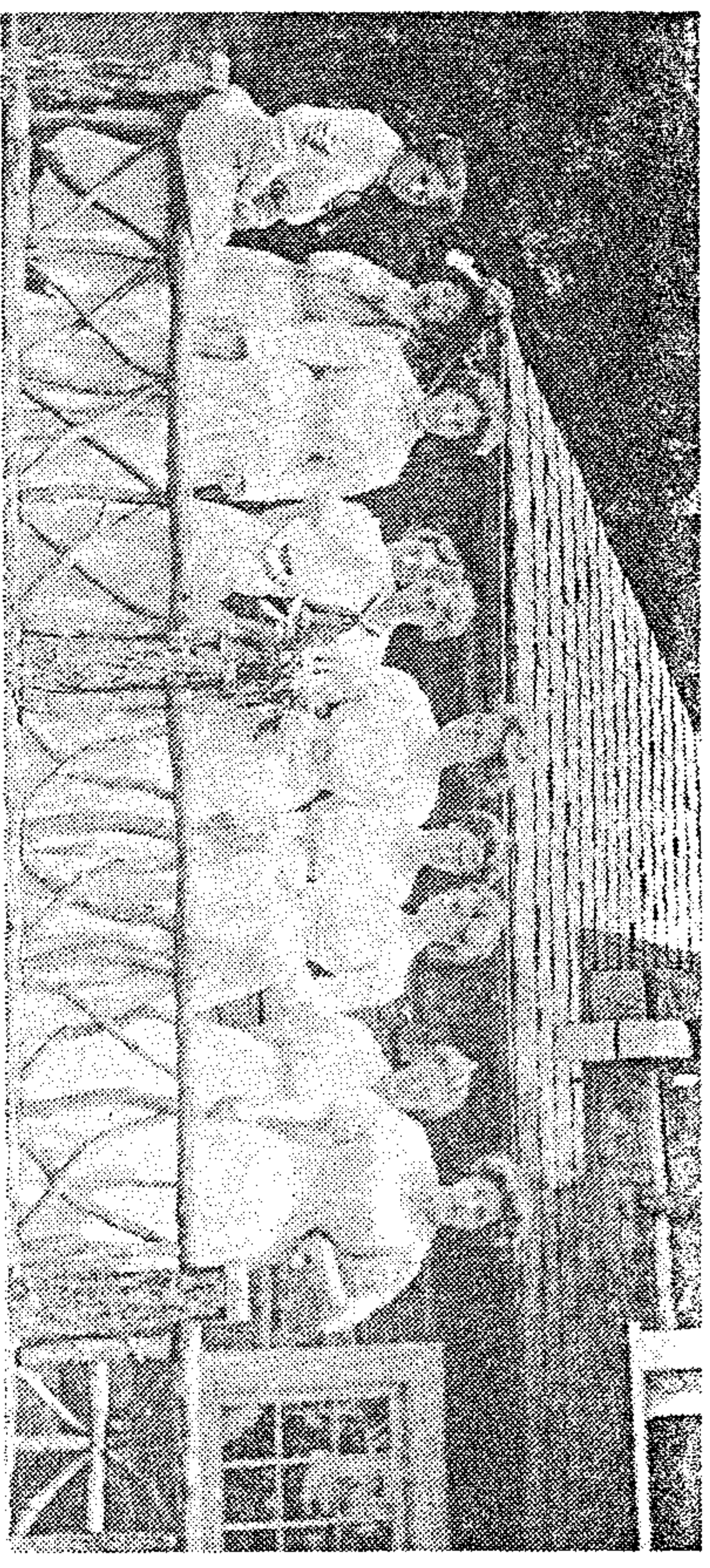




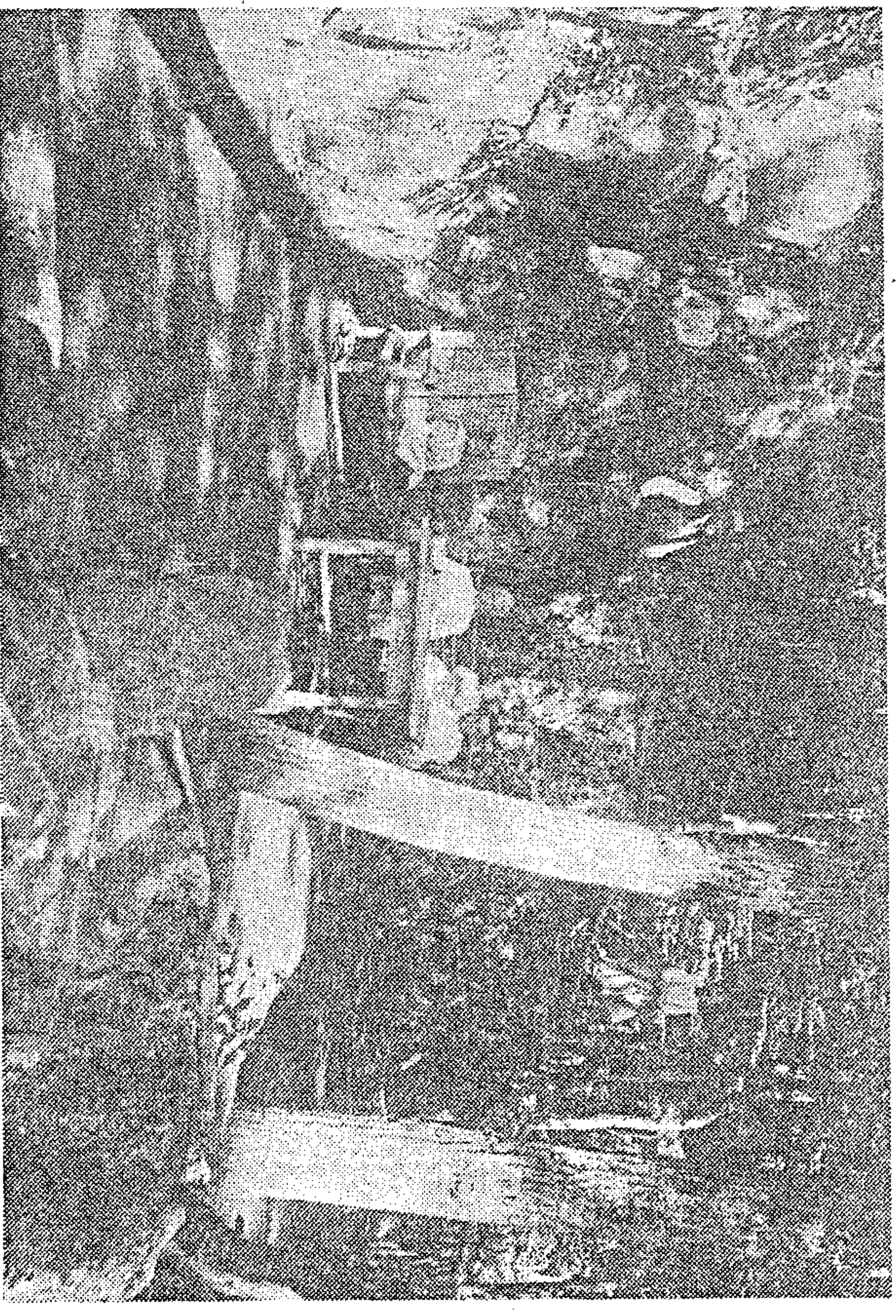
RESERVOIR. The main reservoir (worth a trip!) is .2 miles up a side trail which starts behind the remains of the caretaker's cabins. The above photograph was taken in 1994. The reservoir, obviously roofed over for protection from the local wildlife, received water from two sources. One was from a spring at the site, which can be seen just above the reservoir, through a built-up, coverless manhole.

A trail leads south from the reservoir on up the mountain to the other source, a spring on the Mountain-to-Sea trail. The whole side trail from the generator at the lodge to the reservoir and the spring on the Mountain-to-Sea is on top of the ditch dug for the water pipe. A piece of terra cotta pipe can still be seen in the middle of the trail, just beyond a rocky area shortly before reaching the upper spring.

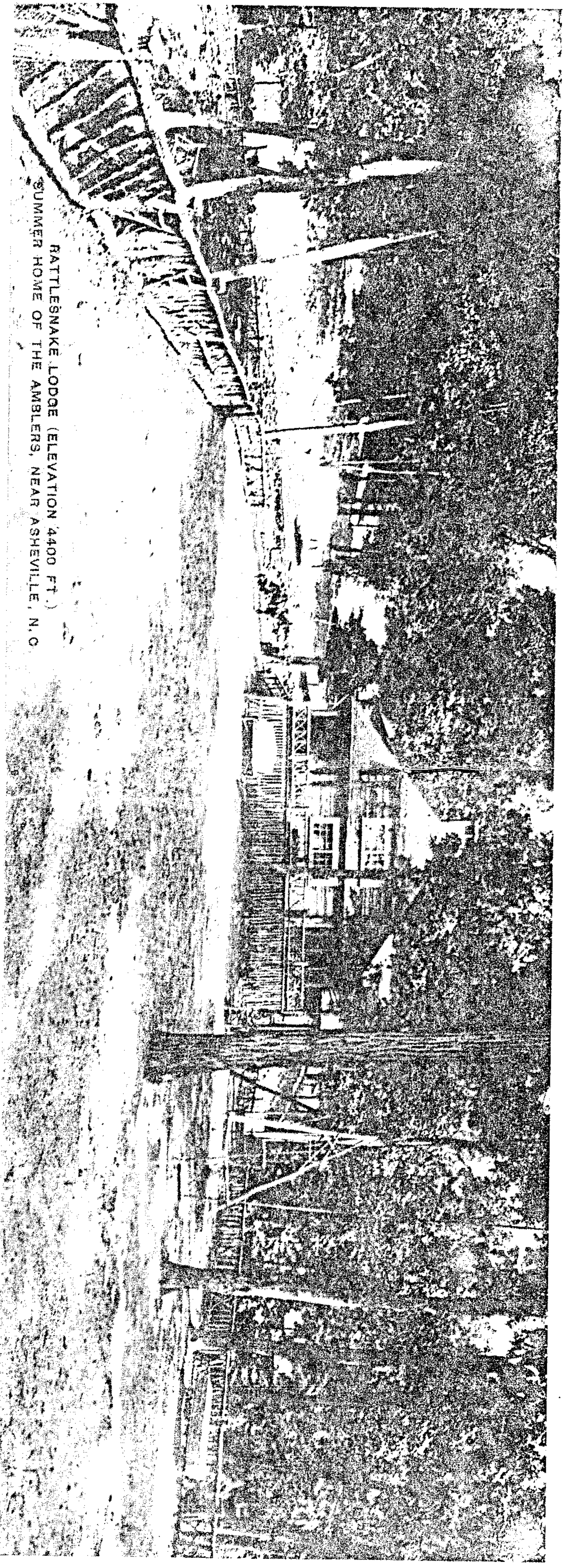
Another reservoir, and probably the only other one, was just a small hole in the ground, below the tennis court. It can still be located today. The reservoir fed an outside washing area, shown here with kids washing their hair. The overflow from this went underground to the swimming hole. There is supposed to be a total of seven springs on the property.



The Amblers entertained many guests, and the guest register, which is still in existence, dates from 1908 to 1920. It shows most of the visitors being at the lodge during the summer, but it is also apparent that Dr. & Mrs. Ambler came to the lodge many times during the other months. The above photo of Mrs. Ambler's bridge club is interesting, as one wonders how they traveled to the lodge!



THE DEN - This area below the lodge site can be easily reached by leaving the yard to the south (left, facing away from the mountain), over a large, flat boulder. Although in the various writings it was sometimes referred to as the "schoolroom," it was more than likely a quiet place to which the adults could retreat.



RATTLESNAKE LODGE (ELEVATION 4,400 FT.)
SUMMER HOME OF THE AMBLERS, NEAR ASHEVILLE, N.C.

The picture above is from a folded post card. It shows the addition made to the lodge to the east, as well as the "lawn," with the retaining walls in place. All rock walls were dry constructed, except for the pool. Fences were built at the top of all retaining walls and steep banks for the protection of the children. Areas near the lodge were kept cleared of brush in order to be certain that any snakes could be easily seen. The triangular form to the right, between the two trees, is a swing for the kids. The elevation is erroneously stated as 4,400 ft. on the card. In other sources it appears as 4,200 and other figures. The actual altitude is close to 3,700 feet. (Some of the articles written while the lodge was in existence tended to exaggerate. "The hillsides were so steep that once a cow fell out of the pasture and broke its neck.")

CARETAKER'S CABINS - These cabins were next to the spring house and were made with hand hewn logs. The caretaker and his family lived on the property year around, and cared for the livestock during the winter. The larger three room cabin was built first and then the smaller one added when his family grew. Only the chimney stones remain today.

POTATO HOUSE - This small storage "house" was located about 50 yards south of the spring house. The rock entrance to the "bank house," as it's normally called, can still be seen, although it is somewhat fallen down. Shelves were on each side for storing vegetables, fruits and other goods. Two corn cribs were opposite the potato house at the edge of the retaining wall.

HORSE BARN - Nothing remains of the stables which housed the horses, except the long rock retaining wall for the area where it once stood. The log structure was just beyond the potato house and was located at the edge of the wide trail, with access from the bank side. A pipe for water to the area can still be seen above the trail on the bank. This pipe probably came from a small spring just east of the stable, where today a fairly strong stream crosses the Mountain-to-Sea trail. A pig lot used to be located "in" this stream.

THE SHACK - About .2 miles south, up the Mountain-to-Sea trail, is the location of what was referred to as "The Shack." Only the remains of the fallen rock chimney can be seen. A simple board cabin with bunk beds and a fireplace, it was built for the lodge construction workers. Later it became a guest cabin, available gratis to anyone hiking or riding through on the way to Craggy and Mt. Mitchell. A good trail leads from here down the mountain to the Parkway at the Tanbark tunnel. This trail could complete a pleasant round trip hike from the tunnel, without repeating any trails.

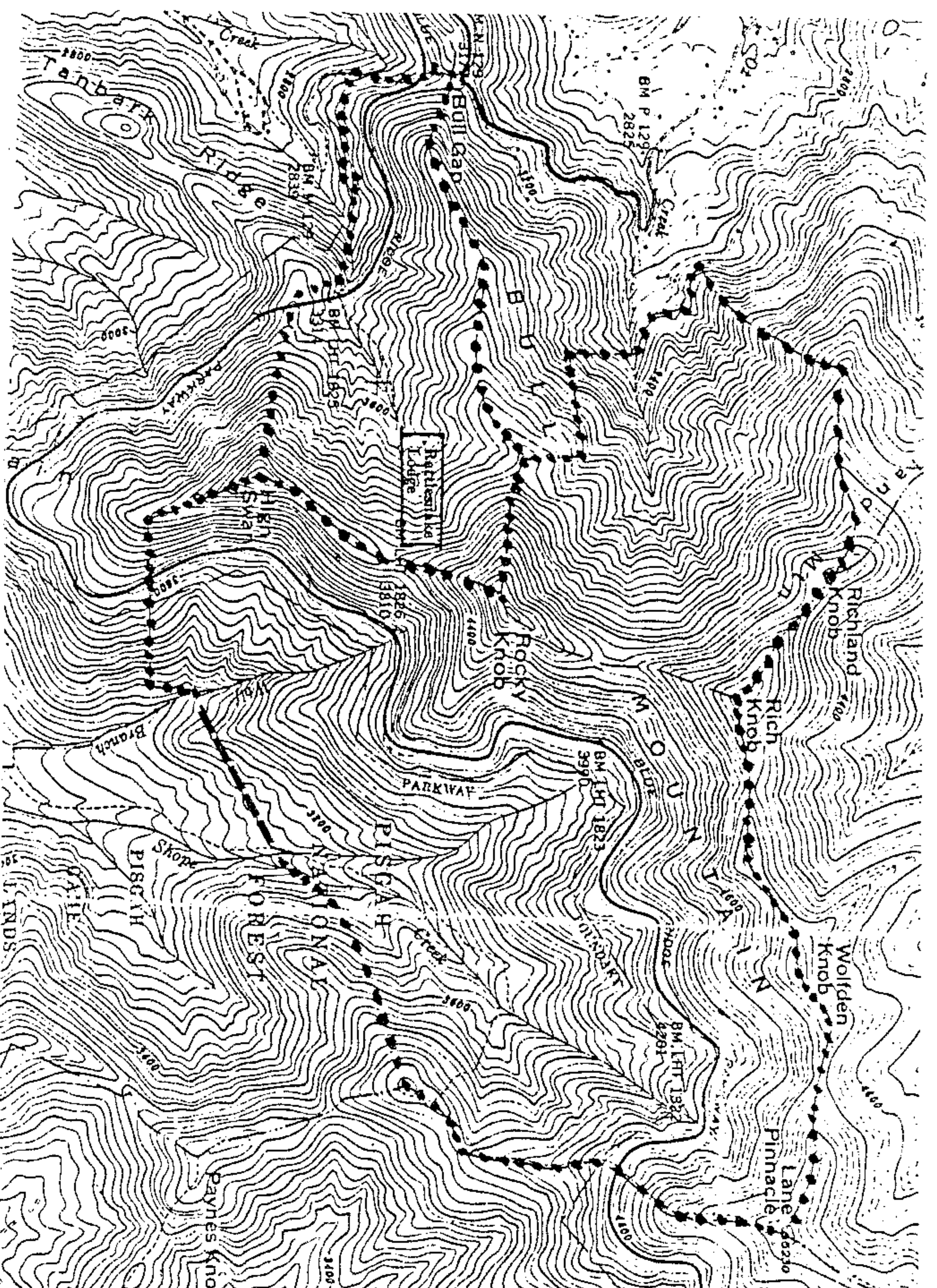
COW BARN - About .1 miles north of the lodge on the Mountain-to-Sea Trail is what remains of the cow barn. Much of the rock foundation is still in existence. The cows entered from the side below the trail. Above the cow stalls, and level with the existing trail, was a loft for hay storage. Much of the barbed-wire fencing for the pastures can still be seen beside the trail down to Bull Gap.



SPRING HOUSE – This recent photograph shows the remains of the spring house, with the fallen tree. The tree is wonderful place for kids to climb and adults to sit, and it adds to the charm of the whole area. The spring in the rear supplied running water through the bottom of the once fully enclosed house to keep it cool for the milk and other goods stored there.



SWIMMING POOL – This picture was taken before the retaining wall was completed around the yard. The decorative fencing was made with mountain laurel and rhododendron. The pool was only a few of feet deep, for safety, and being fed by a mountain spring, was quite cold. The water was furnished by an underground aqueduct from a bank behind the pool, towards the tennis court. A fenced-in vegetable garden can be seen in the top right of the picture.



LAND – The first parcel of land, 293 acres, was bought in October of 1902, and additional acreage soon brought the total to 318, shown above, directly around the lodge site. This original acreage extended from Bull Gap up the ridge to Rocky Knob (once called High Knob), and over Sasfras Gap to High Swan (once called Ray Knob) and down Tanbark Ridge. This natural “amphitheater,” easily seen from the Tanbark Ridge overlook on the BRP, was chosen because of the shielding on three sides. During the next years Dr. Ambler purchased more land surrounding this property. The Shope Creek area consisting of 1,000 acres, including the ridges of Lanes Pinnacle, Wolfden Knob, Rich and Rocky Knob were obtained, and he also bought 300 additional acres down into the Ox Creek area. The government bought this additional surrounding land of 1,300 acres in 1916 for \$10 per acre, and it became part of Pisgah National Forest, and later, part of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

The original land of 318 acres was sold in 1920 and was resold several times after that. The Blue Ridge Parkway obtained a right-of-way in the 1930s, and in 1976, what was left of the original tract was sold to the Parkway (out-bidding the author about 300%!). This purchase was extremely beneficial for the public, as now the property is protected from developers. The Parkway not only owns this amphitheater, it fortunately owns other property outside of their “normal” right-of-way, beyond the lodge area all the way to Potato Field Gap. The Mountain-to-Sea trail on this old Ambler property is a delightful hike, as it is far removed from the Parkway itself, and little traffic noise reaches the hiker. The Carolina Mountain Club maintains the Mountain-to-Sea trail, with the cooperation of the Parkway.

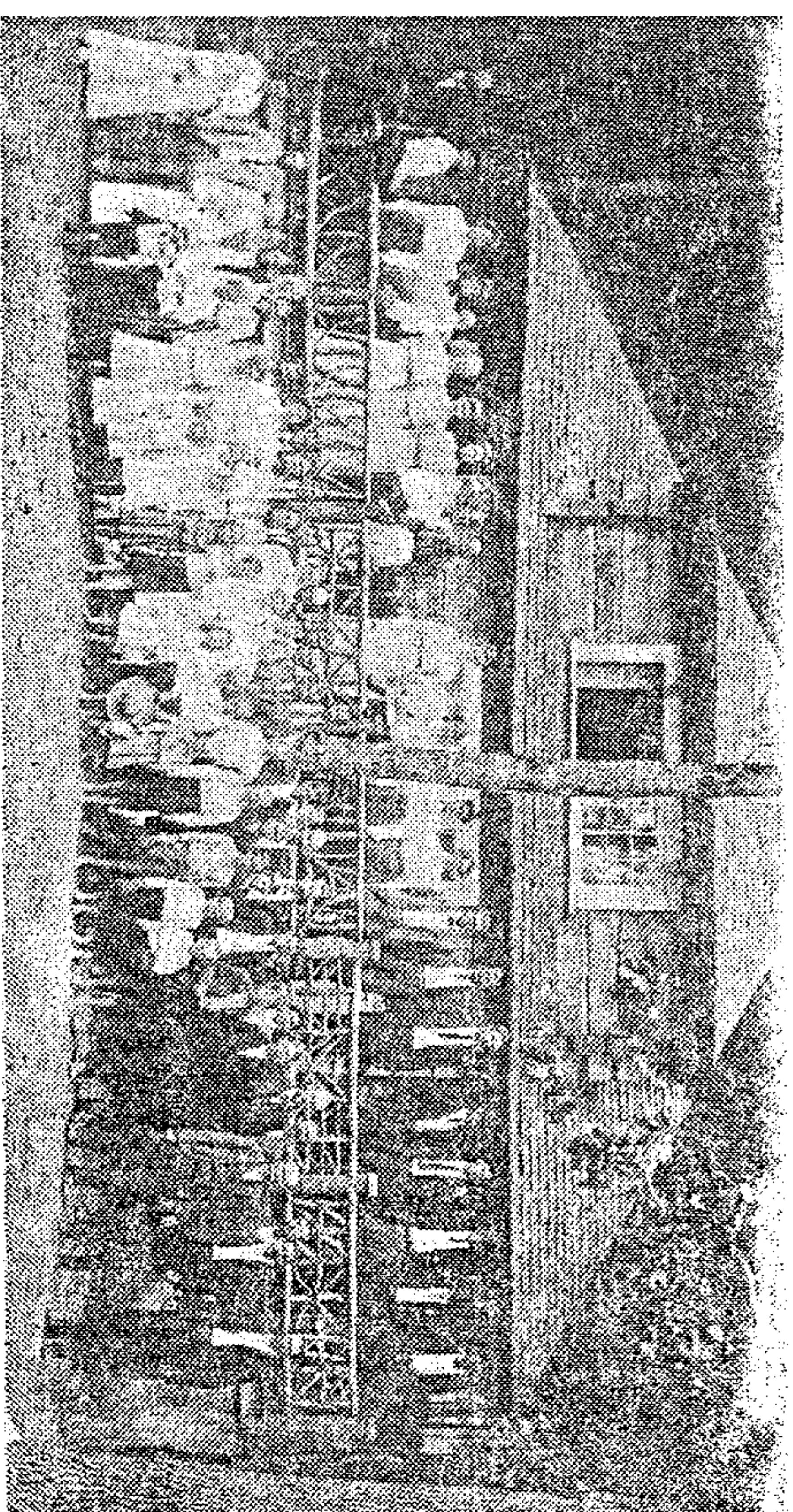


BULL GAP TO MITCHELL TRAIL – The comment written on the back of the above photograph taken by Dr. Ambler simply states “Craggy Trail cut through Rhododendron thicket.” There are many articles and other indications that document the fact he supervised building the trail from Bull Gap to Mt. Mitchell about 1908 and 1909. At the time the trail was built, he owned the land from Bull Gap to Lanes Pinnacle.

In a report to the Good Roads Association in April of 1912, Dr. Ambler writes, “...we have raised \$550 to apply to the survey of the crest of the Blue Ridge highway; we have constructed a horseback trail to Mt. Mitchell, our directors have in body inspected this trail...”

The Sept. 12, 1911 *Asheville Citizen* describes this trip of the Directors. Twelve members spent the night at the lodge and then went by horseback to Mt. Mitchell on the newly constructed trail. The article states: “The route follows the survey of the proposed ‘Crest of the Blue Ridge Highway’ very closely with two exceptions, the first of which is between Bull’s Gap at the head of Reems Creek and Potato Patch Gap, a distance of nine miles. ...The trail is part of the Ambler road which has been built several years.”

In February 1910, J.R. Vernon, Mrs. Ambler’s father, wrote in the *Salem Ohio News*, “...Diverging from this ranch there are 45 miles of trails, the longest of which is to Mt. Mitchell. Dr. Ambler personally conducted the making of these trails.” Some of this horse trail beyond Rich Knob to Craggy was on Bee Tree Lumber Co. land and later the Woodfin watershed. Because of this, some sections were moved and made part of the Mountain-to-Sea trail. It is now a more interesting foot trail for hikers, by staying mostly along the ridges. This relocation was done by Arch Nichols, a leader in the Carolina Mountain Club for many years. Some of Dr. Ambler’s original graded trail can still be seen around the ridges of Wolfden and Lanes Pinnacle.



The above photograph was not labeled, so one is left in doubt as to what group this is. It is probably of the Asheville Board of Trade, or the Good Roads Association, with their wives and families. Dr. Ambler was a leader in both groups for many years. Other pictures show large groups meeting at the lodge, but none this large. The dress of the visitors again makes an interesting picture.

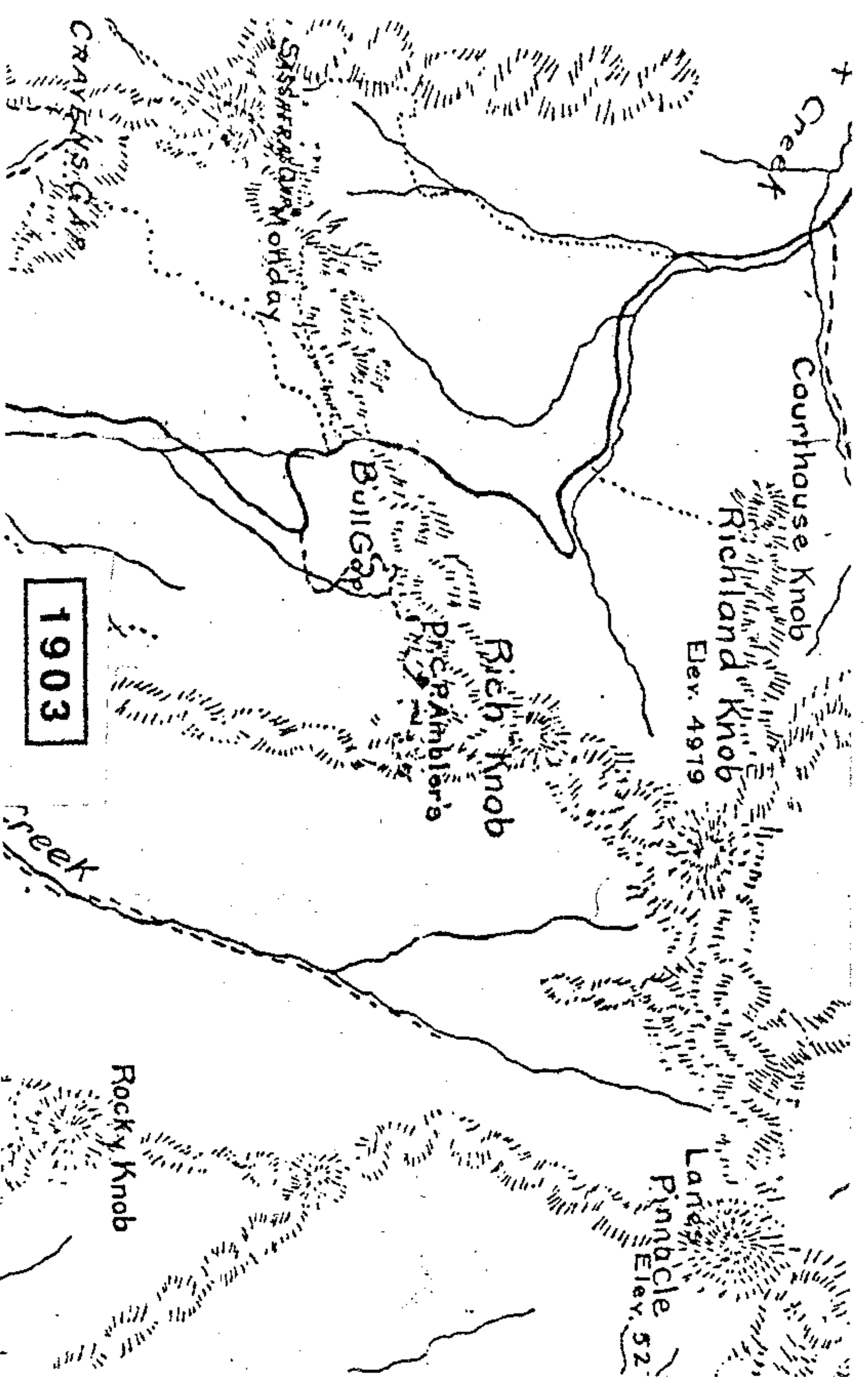
BULL GAP – The last bull buffalo in North Carolina was shot by Joseph Rice in 1799 along a creek now called Bull Creek. The creek, Bull Gap and Bull Mountain supposedly got their names from this event. “Bull Mountain,” by some maps, is an all-inclusive term, and extends from the gap through Lanes Pinnacle.

Ray Rice, great-great grandson of Joseph Rice, is shown here standing in Bull Gap. Ray is holding the rifle that made the historic shot. Behind him are the remains of the carriage house used by the Amblers for storing the carriages from Asheville.



1994

The markers on the Parkway that say “Bull Gap, Elev. 3107 feet,” are misplaced, being where the Ox Creek road turns off, not actually at Bull Gap, lower in elevation and about a half mile farther down the Parkway. The gap’s elevation is 3,177, according to current maps.



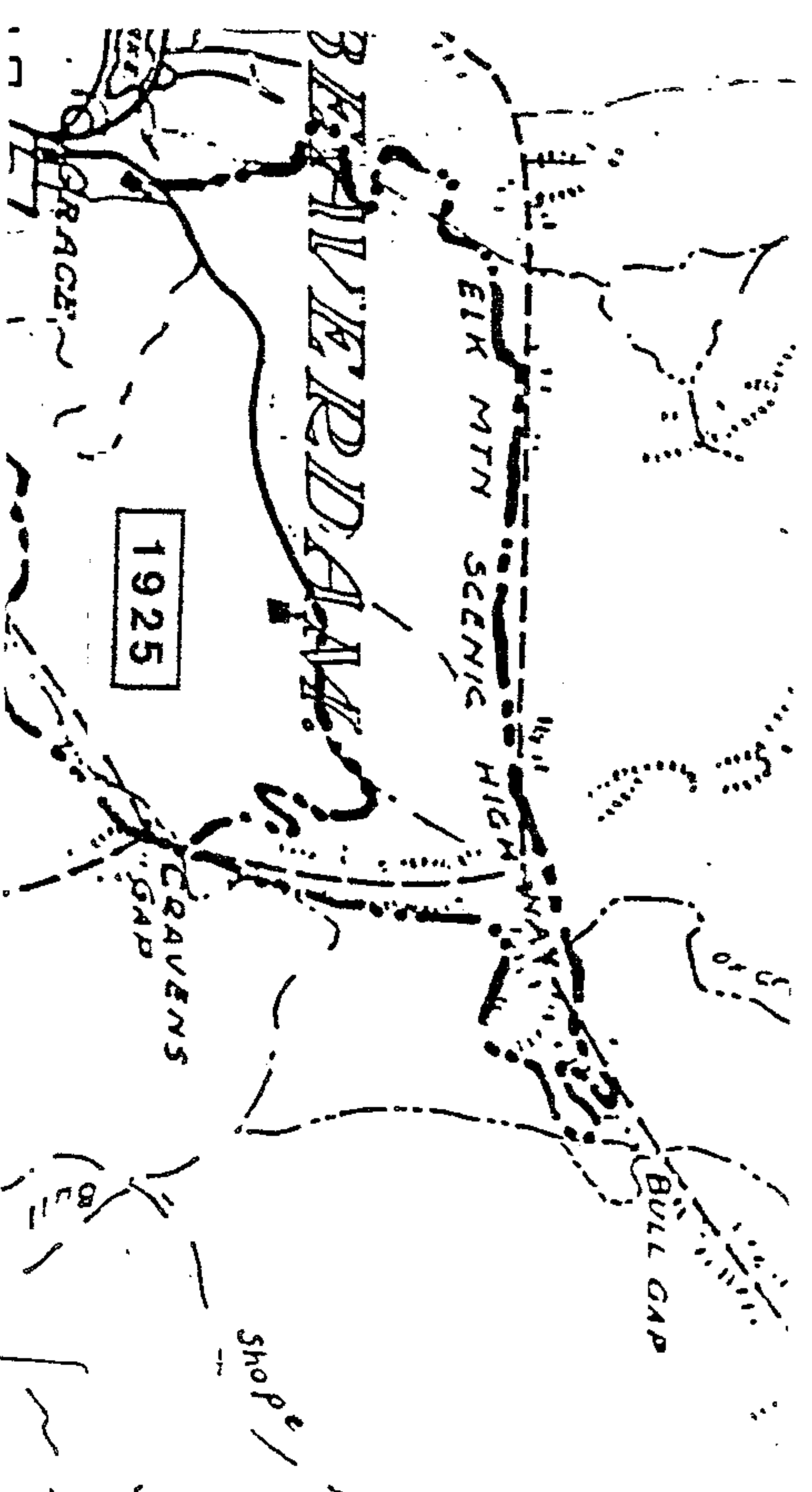
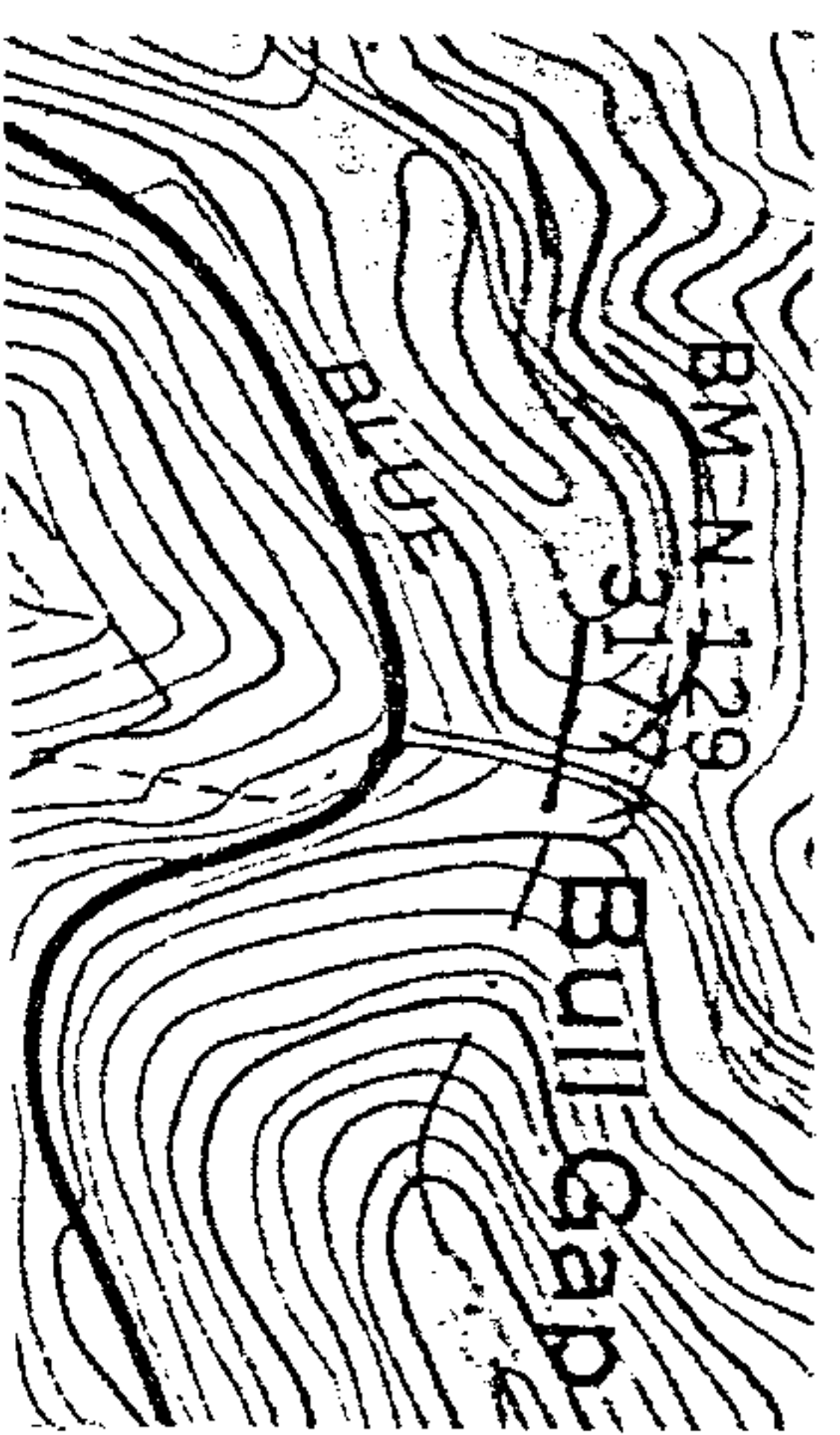
Early maps in the Pack Library show a road from Riceville and Bull Creek through Bull Gap and into the Ox Creek and Reems Creek valleys. The gap was first used by buffalo, then Indians, and finally settlers. It was a major route between the Swannanoa and Reems Creek valleys in the 1800s and early 1900s. Perhaps closing this route when the Parkway was built was a mistake.

As with all the early maps, there are inaccuracies other than altitudes, as shown here: Rich Knob, Richland and Courthouse are all slightly out of place. The Rocky Knob shown is now what is called Rock Knob. Cravens Gap became Craven Gap. The early maps all say "Lanes Pinnacle," which is the name the author first learned. How it became Lane Pinnacle is a mystery. (One wonders if we will have a new name in the Smokies: "Charles Bunion.")

Notice there is only a horse trail from Cravens Gap to Bull Gap. Of interest is that "Dr. C.P. Ambler's" was put on this hand drawn map. The map shows a trail from the Bull Creek Road up to the lodge site. Since it crosses the top of the stream, this may be one of today's existing trails up from the tunnel.

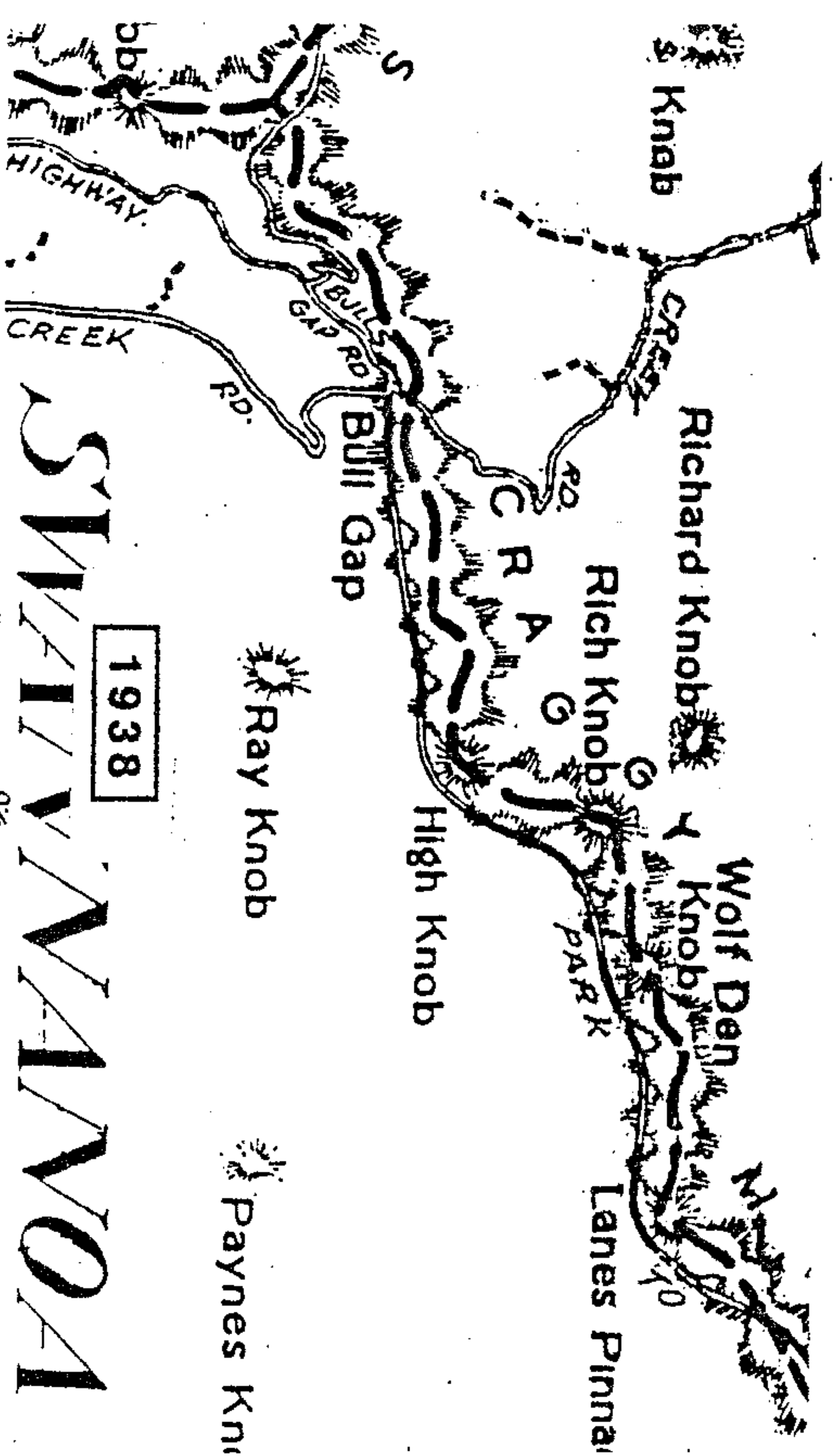
At the same time he was building the lodge, Dr. Ambler built his trail/road from the road at Bull Gap, since that was the least steep access, and there was already a fine road at the gap.

Unfortunately, our "current" topo, revised 1978, but not field checked, also has errors. The Ox Creek road should be solid, and the road shown through the gap has been gone about 60 years!



The 1925 map above shows the road through Beaverdam and to Cravens Gap. This was the most common route to the lodge. It is still confusing how the road from Cravens met the gap road.

The below 1938 map is a bit clearer. However, "Richard" should be "Richland." High Knob is now called Rocky Knob for some reason. Ray is now High Swan. An interesting road on this map is someone's idea of where the Parkway may have gone: An impossible grade to High Knob! "Bulls Gap Road" is mentioned in the history books. It was this road from Cravens Gap and from Sunset Mountain that was a common way to get to Bull Gap until the Parkway was built. The author remembers having to park at the gap, as the parkway, although somewhat blasted and graded, was not yet open to the Tanbark tunnel. We would walk to the lodge area from the gap.



The story of Rattlesnake Lodge is more than that of land and buildings and ruins. The editorial in the *Asheville Citizen* upon the death of Dr. Ambler will give the reader a better understanding of the man behind the lodge.

Ask a Friend Dr. Chase P. Ambler

For more than forty years the life of Dr. Chase P. Ambler was bound up with that of Asheville and of Western North Carolina. He came here as a young medical graduate, established himself as a physician and specialist, built for himself a brilliant and constantly growing reputation in his profession, won the confidence and affection of the community and asserted a leadership the fruits of which have been of untold value already, with still richer promise for the immediate future and for all the years to come.

Dr. Ambler was the father in Western North Carolina of the movement which at length eventuated in the establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Some one, it is possible, may have talked about a national park in this region before Dr. Ambler. The first plans that took form and which were bodied into action originated with him. He had gone with his friend Judge Day of Ohio, on a fishing trip into the Sapphire country and on this trip the idea which he was to push from that time on took hold upon his imagination.

At his urging a parks and forestry committee was formed by the Asheville Board of Trade, and this committee, of which he was chairman, called a convention, held in this city in November, 1899, the Appalachian National Park Association being then organized. Dr. Ambler was secretary-treasurer and moving spirit of that association from that time until its voluntary merger into the American Forestry Association more than a quarter of a century later; and the Appalachian National Park Association did the work that resulted in the passage of the Weeks bill of 1911, creating the Pisgah Forest Reservation; it laid the foundations of and built up the support for the conservation movement in this section.

It can be maintained with all confidence that but for the Appalachian National Park Association the beauty of the verdure of the mountains of Western North Carolina would long ago have been ravaged, there would have been no Pisgah Forest Reservation, there would have been no Smoky Mountains National Park. And but for Dr. Ambler the Appalachian National Park Association would never have come into being when it did, in time to save much of the priceless heritage of the past centuries; it would never have been the intelligent, purpose-

ful, unflinching, persistent, persuasive, convincing and effective organization that it proved itself to be.

The debt which this community owes to Dr. Ambler is immense, incalculable. And not this community alone but the entire region and the nation, our own generation and posterity.

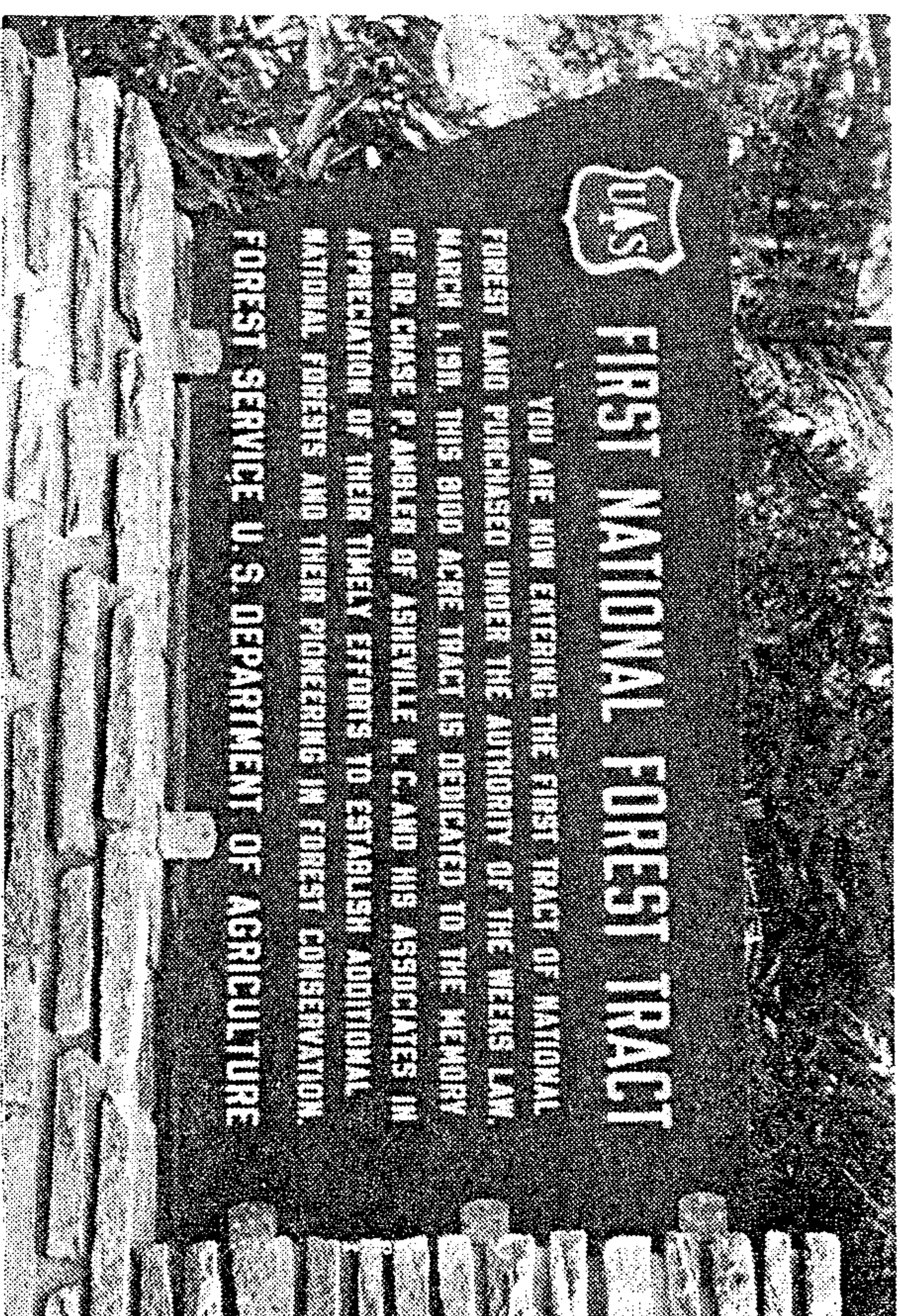
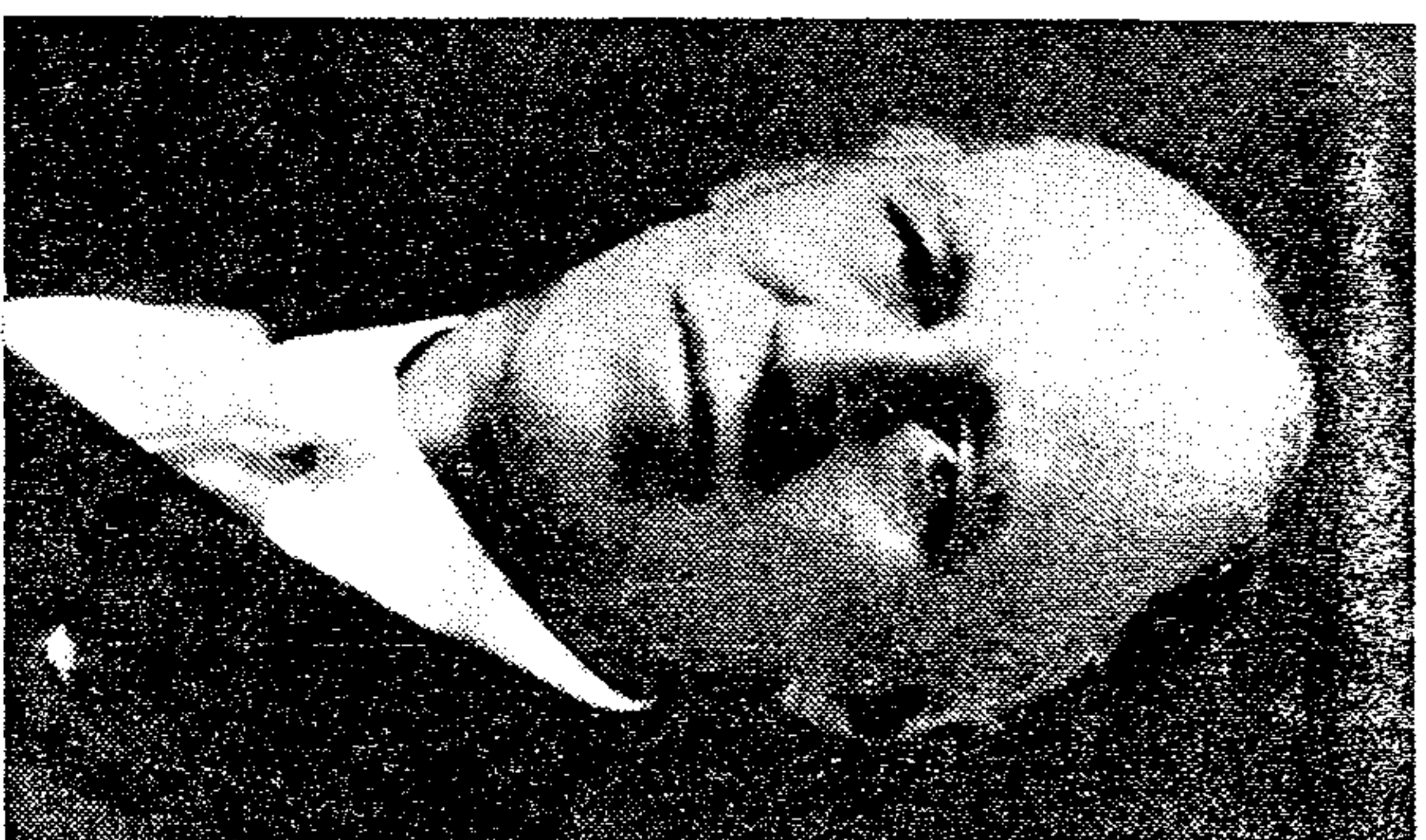
Dr. Ambler's long and useful and arduous efforts for forestry conservation, for the protection of wild life, for the creation of a national park in Western North Carolina became the major contribution of his life but they were incidental to a busy practice and a busy life. He found time for hunting and fishing and as one of the organizers of the Audubon Society in Asheville helped to secure legislation providing thirty years ago for hunting and fishing licenses in North Carolina and the appointment of game wardens. He found time for Masonry and was continuously active in Masonic work for thirty-seven years. He found time for various other civic endeavors and it was during his presidency and under his driving leadership that the Buncombe County Medical Society, as long ago as 1903, succeeded, after a fight that had lasted for several years, in securing the passage of an ordinance providing for meat and milk inspection. He was a member of the Board of Trade for years. He did not neglect the various associations of his own profession and his work and writings in the field of pulmonary diseases were widely known and highly regarded. He was outstanding as a medical specialist. If he had done nothing else his professional record was so shining as to make him long remembered.

We have dwelt in this article, now that he has passed on, upon the part that he had in the leadership of some of the most permanently constructive activities in this part of the country. But if we have emphasized this phase of his career it can be said also that he was one of the most distinguished physicians of his time. He had much to do with spreading the fame of Asheville as a resort for health-seekers. His knowledge and skill and reputation added to the repute in which Asheville came to be held in this regard and the entire community was the gainer through the successes which he achieved professionally.

It is not given to many men to enjoy so satisfying a career. Nor has Asheville numbered among the sons of her adoption many from whose life and efforts she has benefited so generously and in so many different ways.

A 1953 *Citizen-Times* article about naming a peak in the Smokies, states: "... (The Appalachian National Park Association) was perfected and the forward movement was underway. The result was the achievement of vast benefits for this mountain region. Today we have national forests, a national park, the Blue Ridge Parkway, all related directly or indirectly to that meeting here in 1899, for it aided immeasurably in the creation of public sentiment that, through the years, brought these proposals to realization. Dr. Ambler, through his years of devotion to the cause of conservation, rendered outstanding service. His memory deserves to be honored and it is entirely fitting that the mountain in the Great Smokies bear his name." (Mt. Ambler is a 6,100-ft peak 2.5 miles NE of Newfound Gap.)

In 1961, Dr. Ambler was again recognized when a monument, shown below, was dedicated to his memory. The very first purchase of national forest land in the United States under the Weeks Law was this 8,100 acre tract in Curtis Creek, north of Old Fort and south of Big Laurel Gap. It became the nucleus of the Pisgah National Forest.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

FIRST NATIONAL FOREST TRACT

YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE FIRST TRACT OF NATIONAL FOREST LAND PURCHASED UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF THE WEEKS LAW. MARCH 1, 1911. THIS 8100 ACRE TRACT IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF DR. CHASE P. AMBLER OF ASHEVILLE, N. C. AND HIS ASSOCIATES IN APPRECIATION OF THEIR TIMELY EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH ADDITIONAL NATIONAL FORESTS AND THEIR PIONEERING IN FOREST CONSERVATION.

FOREST SERVICE U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Dr. Ambler was Chairman of the committee that formed the southern chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club in 1920. It was the forerunner of, and was replaced by, the Carolina Mountain Club in 1923. Dr. Ambler was one of the six incorporators of the CMC at that time.

One cannot help feeling that somewhere above there is a man smiling about the use of "his" Rattlesnake Lodge land, and "his" trails. He fulfilled a wonderful dream when he sold the 1,300 acres to the government. Little did he know that after his death the remaining lodge land would become government property. Nor could he know that the trails he built in order for people to enjoy the mountains would become part of the Mountain-to-Sea trail, and they would be maintained by the Carolina Mountain Club.

Although the buildings are now gone, the beauty of the place and the mountains can still be enjoyed. It is hoped that it will continue to be protected by all who visit.

