

High Country Back Roads Northern Loop



Track 1:

Look around you as you stand near the Ashe Arts Center in downtown West Jefferson and imagine.

There was a time when this town was open fields, rolling farm country, won from the rich, deep forests of the Southern Appalachians by years of hard physical labor. That time was not so long ago – within the memory of our oldest citizens. Then, in 1915, there was a sound in the distance.

From up near Abingdon, Virginia, came the clink-clink-clink of men driving spikes into railroad track. The “Virginia Creeper”—so named because of its often-slow speed along its way; and this valley, lying in the shadows of Mount Jefferson and Mount Paddy, suddenly exploded into a boom town. West Jefferson was born.

The railroad left town for the last time in 1977, but West Jefferson has continued to grow and prosper. Let’s get to know this place a little better.

Tucked away on a corner of Main Street in West Jefferson near Ashe County Cheese, the Arts Center is **THE** place to start exploring the local arts scene.

The building itself is a fine piece of locally built architecture, a combination of Ashe artisans and materials now rarely affordable in the construction industry. Like several other local structures, the Arts Center was built by the Work Project Administration, a federal program begun by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1935. In the midst of the Depression, the WPA provided desperately needed work for mountain residents. Their efforts – funded by outside money – have created a living reminder of a past generation; so do two other classic WPA structures in the county, the old high school in Lansing and the original Ashe hospital, located on McConnell Street in Jefferson. Inside the Arts Center, which is home to the county Arts Council, there are regular exhibits as well as a gallery shop that allows local artists and craftspeople to display and sell their handmade masterpieces.

As you look around outside the Arts Council building you will see more of the beautiful murals found in downtown West Jefferson. The first mural was beside the Chamber office...”Cut at Devil Stairs” by local artist Stephen Shoemaker. Stephen is known for his ability to capture the likeness of the Virginia Creeper steam locomotive. Two of many murals in West Jefferson are easily viewed from the Arts Council building. “Ashe County through the Years” was painted by local artist Jack Young and is on the wall facing the Arts Council building. It shows the beauty of the county in every season. On the side of the road on the white Ashe County Cheese building you see “Wings and Things” by Earle Klutz Thompson and Raines Thompson. This mural is unique because it was painted by students and local artists. Other buildings you will see as you drive through town have local artists’ work painted on them as well. Keep your eyes open!

Now let's take a look up Main Street.

Decades ago, mountain farmers had a problem. Their dairy cattle produced fine milk, but there was no way to get it fresh to market.

In response to this challenge, cooperative cheese plants sprang up in the area. The last surviving plant, now privately owned, is **Ashe County Cheese**.

Ashe County Cheese is open to visitors year-round who often come in to watch through a viewing room to see just how the cheese is made. Around 50,000 pounds of cheese is made a week at the small plant in downtown West Jefferson. The hours are from 8:30 to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday, but you'll need to call ahead to check which days the viewing room is open.

Ashe County Cheese has a gift shop area that has been expanded twice in recent years for the pleasure of the guests and visitors. More than 50 varieties of cheese are available along with small gifts, souvenirs, snack items and more in the gift shop. Cheese curds, a local favorite, are available in the gift shop as well.

You may have already enjoyed cheese made here without knowing it. Most of the cheese made in Ashe County is shipped to the southeast part of the country and is often relabeled by the distributor.

Track 2:

Located in the heart of downtown West Jefferson, the **old Phoenix Chair Factory** built beautiful furniture for decades, first under their founders, the Barr Family, and then as a part of Thomasville Furniture.

Thomasville closed the plant in 2001, but the empty factory has since had a major rebirth as Jefferson Station.

Where chairs were once assembled, there are now condos and lofts as well as a rapidly growing retail shopping area. The walls of Jefferson Station are hung with many works by local artists. Outside, there is a marvelous bronze sculpture of children playing in a tree as well as murals by local artists Stephen Shoemaker and Bessie Clay.

West Jefferson's downtown area features more than a dozen galleries, craft shop, and restaurants. The town hosts several murals that create a "walking tour." The murals are the works of local artists and others in North Carolina that depicts the area's history and unique character.

On one corner of Jefferson Avenue and Main Street you see **McNeil's Department Store**, which is the oldest continually owned family business in Ashe County, having been founded in 1885. On the other corner is the old hotel which was built in 1917. It housed many a traveler who came through

West Jefferson on the Virginia Creeper which stopped nearby. The old railroad grade is still visible on the far side of the hotel. **The old depot**, now privately owned, was moved from its original location nearby. Before the train stopped coming into West Jefferson it hauled coal into the area for residents who had big pot-bellied stoves as their only source of heat in the winter. A local resident remembers the engineer of the train throwing candy out to her as a child playing along the tracks and that the coal pile was “a mile high!” It was a simpler day and time.

Near the depot on what locals call the “back street” is a shelter that is home to the county’s **Farmer’s Market**. If you happen to be here on a Saturday morning between May and October, you will find plenty of locally grown vegetables, fruits, flowers and plants offered here.

Ashe County is proud of its library, which has one of the highest usage rates of any such facility in North Carolina.

The **Ashe County Public Library** is a center of information and learning in the county. It is more than the 56,000 volumes in the collection represent. The library hosts children’s story hours, adult book studies, and special events. The library has a bank of computers for public use and DSL service for patrons who provide their own laptop. Of special note is the film collection- a diversified array of vintage, contemporary and foreign film as well as documentaries. In addition, the library is the home of the Heritage Room, one of the most complete genealogy and historical collections in the area. Visitors from 45 states and nine foreign countries have used the Heritage Room in search of their family roots.

How popular is the library? More than 225,000 visits by patrons are reported annually. Not bad for a county of 25,000 people!

*Now let’s head north on Highway 194. Just over half a mile from the center of West Jefferson, you’ll pass over **Radio Hill**.*

Track 3:

As you head north from West Jefferson, you’ll go over Radio Hill. If this small rise had a name before WSKS signed on the air in 1959, no one seems to remember it.

For years the only local radio station that covered Ashe County, WSKS remains a popular favorite – you will find many dials set for **AM 580**.

When you listen you will catch the local flavor...from the Happy Time Show and the obituary report in the mornings...listened to widely in the county, to Hymn Time, the Pet Patrol for lost animals, the birthday reports and the Trading Post, good bluegrass music and the lack of much, if any, “bad news” reporting!

Old-time and bluegrass music can be found in a variety of venues in Ashe County. WSKS’s live bluegrass radio show is held at the Ashe Civic Center on selected Saturday mornings from April through September.

*A mile past the summit of Radio Hill, you will be in **Smethport**.*

As you head down the “backside” of Radio Hill toward Smethport, you will see Skyline Membership Corporation on the right. Skyline was the first to bring telephone service to the ‘lost provinces’ in the early 1950s. Throughout its more than half-century of existence, Skyline has held fast to its mission as a local, member-owned cooperative. Skyline is a cooperative form of business, meaning it exists primarily to provide service to its members and legal owners.

Skyline is one of two cooperative utilities in Ashe County. Blue Ridge Electric is the other.

Life in the days before the late 1930's was dark and filled with manual labor from dawn to dusk for rural folks. While electricity had come to many towns and cities, it remained elusive in more distant areas because existing utilities found it unprofitable to bring it to rural areas.

How people formed their cooperatives and brought electricity and telephone service to rural areas is one of the nation's greatest examples of economic democracy.

Both cooperatives have corporate commitments to economic development and community support. Their employees are very involved in community activities and work to make them better through their personal involvement and charitable-sponsored activities.

Like many communities in Ashe County, Smethport was a vibrant area for much of the 20th century. A small country store, a couple of churches, and later a service station allowed the community’s residents to get most everything they needed within a couple of miles of their homes. For residents of Smethport and the communities even further from West Jefferson, a trip to town meant a family event. Moms and dads, sons and daughters would all converge on West Jefferson on Saturday to window shop and pick up those special items that couldn’t be found in their own communities. They might even grab a sandwich in town, a true luxury for a generation that had never heard of “fast food.”

Smethport was also a center for agriculture in the community. The bean market sat at the foot of radio hill and was the center of the farm economy every summer. Folks from all around the county could bring bushels of beans, cabbage, tomatoes, and other crops to the market to sell. For young kids, the taste of a burger from the bean market at the end of a long day was a memory that would last forever.

Leaving Smethport one crosses Buffalo Creek, one of the first areas settled in Ashe County.

*Now travel north on Hwy 194 2.6 miles to **Stikes Hollar***

To your left you will find what has been and remains a typical mountain holler. Members of the Stikes family have owned this property for generations and continue to call it home. Their home-place is a reflection of the simple, yet not always easy, mountain lifestyle.

*Less than a half mile on your left is a portion of the old railroad bed known as **Devils Stairs!!***

Dynamite blasting during construction of the Creeper Trail railway line in the early 1900's resulted in an unusual "stair-road" on NC 88 at Buffalo Creek. The four nearly perfect steps, each about 12 feet high, are the focal point of many local legends.

With fog and mist rising from the creek, shrouding the overgrown brush, and the rock wall rising ominously from the creek bed, the tales of the Devils Stairs can trap a curious visitor into believing the tales that have been created over the years. Here are a few of those legends:

(Use a Different voice): They say that two violent deaths occurred here around 1915, giving the place its name. One was the gruesome death of an older black railroad worker who was killed in a dynamite blast during the construction of the railway. Another involved the murder of a baby thrown in a creek by her mother.

Local residents claim that you can hear the old man singing religious songs along the railroad bed or hear that baby crying on a rock in the creek.

Other spooky legends surround the stairs. One of the stories (as told by native, Henry Dollar) goes something like this: "My grandfather, W. T. Dollar, he was a drummer - a horseback drummer- you know, selling snuff and chewing tobacco. And the first thing, he always rode up by White Top and when he was heading home, he would always have to ride by the Devils Stairs. Usually dark would catch him, and one night he came by the stairs at sundown and something got on the horse behind him, you know, and his horse started fretting and he couldn't control it. His horse got out of control with him about where the Oak Grove Baptist Church is now.

When he got by the church, the horse just came to a complete stop and when it did, something got off the horse!

When he got home, there were white marks on the horse. They looked like chalk marks or something in the shape of somebody's legs. He wiped to see if it was sweat from where his horse was frettin'. It wasn't. It was white marks where somebody had gotten on behind the saddle.

Anyway, they say now, that if you drive past there around midnight, you can look in the rearview mirror and you see that man sitting in the back seat. But if you turn around and look at the back seat, he ain't there. Once you get to the church, he disappears."

"Hogwash" some of you skeptics may say. But are you willing to make that jaunt from Devils Stairs down to the church around midnight?

*Continue on 194 north eight-tenths of a mile to **Warrensville**.*

All along this route you will see signs of the Virginia Creeper railroad grade. The roadbed was built using mules and a lot of muscle. The Virginia Creeper was a viable part of the economy in the early 1900s. It wound its way from Abingdon and Whitetop, Virginia to West Jefferson and all the way to Elkland Station in Todd. Some parts of the grade were so steep you probably could have walked it in less time than the train pulled it! You will see more of the history of the train when you visit Todd

and the Elkland Station. The tracks remained in use from West Jefferson to Whitetop, Virginia until 1977.

There are many beautiful country churches along the route. Small churches with adjacent cemeteries can be seen dotting the countryside. The citizens of Ashe County, mainly Protestant, have always been a faith-based community. For most mountain-folk, participation in some form of organized religion is an important part of their lives.

Track 4:

As you travel Ashe County, you will cross – and recross – the North and South Forks of **the New River**.

About 1740, Major Abraham Wood led a surveying party west into the Virginia wilderness. They discovered a previously unknown river that flowed north. They named this the Wood River, but the name was later changed to the New River.

The New River is arguably the oldest river in North America and one of the purest. Geologists estimate the age of the river at 320 million years. It is one of the few rivers in North America that flows to the north.

The New River area still maintains an old-fashioned charm. Mountain roads are narrow and winding, dotted with small farms, churches and country stores. The river itself is tranquil, offering good bass fishing, trout streams, excellent birding and inspiring mountain scenery. But perhaps the best way to absorb and appreciate the river's peacefulness is from the seat of a canoe as it glides across the slow-moving waters. Three areas with access to this waterway make up more than 1,500 acres of New River State Park and provide spots for camping, canoeing, picnicking and fishing.

Its waters are slow and placid. Its banks are fertile and covered with wildflowers. The New River was dedicated as a National Wild and Scenic River in 1976.

In Warrentonville, you will turn right and continue to follow Highway 194 north.3.4 miles to Lansing.

As you follow the New River north from Warrentonville, you will see one of our county's major industries.

United Chemi-Con produces a range of over 8,000 electronics products. It is also home to a foreign trade zone, recognized by the U.S. government. Though it is only a technicality, a part of the plant (and thus Ashe County) is not in the United States. Since it was opened by Sprague Electric Co. in 1953, the plant has provided many jobs to county residents.

So have our other industries, such as Leviton, a manufacturer of switches and other electrical parts; Gates, which makes rubber belts; BREW, an internationally known bike and motorcycle maker and customizer; Tigra, a German-owned firm that makes carbon tips for saw blades; General Assembly

Corporation which makes electronic components, and our latest addition, Smith's Aerospace components, which makes parts for airplanes..

Lansing was once the center of commerce in northern Ashe County. That was in the days when the railroad ran through town, drawing farmers here, eager to ship their crops to distant markets. Much timber also passed through the town, as the old growth forests fell in the 1920s and 1930s. Built during the Depression by WPA labor, the old Lansing School operated until 1994 and remains a beautiful example of local stone masonry.

Today, things are quieter in this town of 150. The business district, through which you are passing, once faced the "Virginia Creeper" railroad. Town hall is on the right as you head north.

Lansing's most famous daughter was musician Ola Belle Reed. She was born Ola Wave Campbell in 1916 in Lansing, North Carolina. The Great Depression brought a great economic burden on the large Campbell family, and they followed many Appalachian mountain people to Northeastern Maryland. In the 30's Ola Belle began performing professionally as a member of the North Carolina Ridge Runners. She played old-time banjo and guitar and sang for the Appalachian area audiences in the Maryland-Delaware and Pennsylvania area. In 1945, Ola Belle was offered more than \$100 per week, quite a good sum in those days, to join country music legend Roy Acuff's band and backup group. Ola Belle declined the offer. Through the years, she wrote many, many songs about her Appalachian past and her commitment to family traditions, religious values, and social justice. In 1978, the University of Maryland awarded her an honorary doctorate of letters for her contributions to the arts and culture of Maryland and the United States. She was also recognized for her historical and musical contributions by The Smithsonian Institute, The Library of Congress and The Country Music Association. In 1987, Ola Belle suffered a stroke and she was bed-ridden until her death on August 16, 2002. She passed away one day before her 86th birthday.

The mountains around Lansing are still full of fine musicians – Ashe County has recently produced two national banjo champions, Steve Lewis and Eric Hardin. And Lansing may soon be known as a center for such mountains traditions. The newly purchased Lansing School, on its way to becoming an Historic Preservation Site, is being considered for several endeavors, one of which is the New River Arts School. Musical heritage that includes musicians of Bluegrass and Old Time traditions and instrument makers are an historic and contemporary asset to Lansing. Several music festivals are held annually and more are being planned – including one honoring Ola Belle Reed.

*Turn right at the traffic light in Lansing. In a half a mile, you'll pass the **Old Lansing School**.*

This school has a long history, going back to the late 1800's, when an elementary school grew, out of Graybeal's Chapel Methodist Church. With the passage of time, high school subjects were added, and at some point, the school was called The Lansing Academy, then Lansing High School and graduated its first class in 1927.

Basketball games were played on an outdoor court at the site where a gym was later built. All this would suggest that in addition to being a seat of learning, Lansing High School was a hotbed of sports activity. The stone building was erected by the WPA in 1937-38. The WPA had built a wooden gymnasium a little earlier. It burned during Thanksgiving vacation in 1958.

The old WPA building and school property is now under new ownership and hopefully will be a viable part of the community in years to come.

*Continue north on this road 3.1 miles to the **Helton** community.*

As you drove through Warrensville and Lansing, you passed the communities' volunteer fire departments.

The story of the county's fire departments begins in West Jefferson. The town's first hotel, built in 1915, burned to the ground – the townspeople were helpless to save it. A new hotel went up, far sturdier and still standing, – and a bucket brigade formed. Today's fire departments are far removed from those early days. Many have not only the familiar “hook and ladders” and pumpers, but specialized, four-wheel-drive units designed to tackle the roughest mountain terrain.

The firefighters, who must train regularly, are all volunteers, receiving no pay. But when their scanners go off, day or night, they rush to the scene of a fire, showing as much dedication and professionalism as any paid firefighter in the nation. They are among Ashe County's great heroes, risking their lives at a moment's notice for the good of their neighbors and community.

Track 5:

The days are gone when the overwhelming majority of Ashe County residents farmed for a living. That was the case, however, for the first century and a half of our history.

But even though more people today work in education, retail, services, factories and other occupations, farming remains a vital part of the county's life. The traditional field crops have been largely supplanted. The days when the snap bean market was the busiest place in the county are long gone. And tobacco, thanks to the quota buyout, is also fading from the scene.

Today, when you say agriculture, the first thing that comes to mind is Christmas trees. Most of the \$45 million revenue in agriculture in Ashe County is due to the thriving Christmas tree industry that boasts over 9.8 million trees, making Ashe County the largest produce in North Carolina and second in the nation. The Christmas tree and greenery industry in Ashe County contributes almost \$36 million annually to the income of residents here. **Fraser Firs** (also known as the Cadillac of Christmas trees) and white pine are the predominant species grown in this area. The Fraser Fir is prized as a Christmas tree because of its aroma, shape, dark green color, excellent needle retention and strong branches capable of carrying heavy ornaments.

The Fraser fir, our premiere Christmas tree, has an interesting story behind it. For a couple of hundred years, the people of Ashe County looked upon the Fraser fir as a necessary nuisance. Found primarily along the highest ridgelines, the trees had little real use to loggers and woodsmen, except at Christmas time when families might chop down a Fraser and put it in the living room for the holiday season.

All of that changed in the mid to late 1960s when some people began to explore the use of Fraser Fir as a retail Christmas tree. Led by the late Chuck Gardiner and the late Joseph Clayton, local agriculture experts partnered with others western counties to explore the opportunities for growing Fraser Firs in the mountain fields and exporting them as a cash crop.

Little did they know that they were on the vanguards of an agricultural revolution in Ashe County. In a few short years, the county was on its way to being the hub of the Christmas tree industry on the eastern seaboard. Several trees from the region have won national awards and have been featured at the White House.

During the Choose and Cut season beginning mid-November, local Christmas tree farms and nurseries provide opportunities for personal selection of Christmas trees, wreaths, and roping. Many of the farms have hayrides, music, and crafts; a great kick-off to the holiday season. Stop in most participating fields and experience the joy and festive atmosphere....and have some hot chocolate or hot cider, too!!

The tiny community of Helton is believed by many to be the site of the first permanent homes built in Ashe County. William Walling, William McLain, and David Helton, the community's namesake, came through the area in the early 1770 on a hunting trip. Fascinating with the array of game and fish in and around the Helton area, they returned shortly thereafter to build permanent homes. Little is known about what happened to Helton and the others after their settlement of Ashe County. Legend has it that the men were British loyalists—Tories—and that they remained so after the Revolutionary War. If this were true, their land titles would have meant little and it is reasonable to assume that they packed up and moved west to the Kentucky area, either with the legendary Daniel Boone or along one of the trails he blazed.

Today, Helton is a close-knit community, a reflection of the many small areas of Ashe County that hold close to their roots. Nestled in the corner of North Carolina and Virginia, the community boasts its own ambulance service and community center. As you travel through this area, you will see several small rock and clapboard churches, all reminiscent of another area.

The Helton mill was one of the most important establishments in the community during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Farmers would bring their grain to the mill to be ground into meal, a vital service when Lansing, the nearest town, was a couple of hours ride by horseback. The old mill is still with us today, serving as a delightful residence and reminder of simpler times.

Just as David Helton discovered, the area is well known for its variety of game and the excellent fishing. Deer are abundant in the area, as are squirrels, rabbits, fowl, and other game animals. Occasionally, even a few bear still wander down through the area and locals hear the cry of wildcats and coyotes in the distance. Helton Creek is a hidden gem for local fisherman. Native and rainbow trout can be found in the deep, cool pools. The creek is also stocked by the state of North Carolina and the first day of fishing season will find locals and visitors alike wading the cool, pristine waters looking for dinner that evening.

Track 6:

In Helton, bear right at Sturgills (the old Helton School) and drive 2.9 miles. Turn right onto Silas Creek/Big Helton Creek Road and travel another three-tenths of a mile. The pavement ends and you'll be on a gravel road for 3.8 miles. Take your time, don't drive too quickly and enjoy a look at the real Ashe County. The scenery is beautiful!

Go another 1.2 mi before you see Helton Creek Campground. At another .6 of a mile you will see a low-water bridge and working farm.

In another four-tenths of a mile, cross the next bridge (Jim Duvall Road) and travel three-tenths of a mile to a low water bridge. After two-tenths of a mile, turn left on Big Helton Creek Road. In four-tenths of a mile the dirt road ends. Go seven-tenths of a mile under a bridge (overpass) to the top of the hill. Go 1.1 miles and turn left on Highway 16. Follow Highway 16 to Healing Springs Road. Turn left on Healing Springs Road and go 2.2 miles. Healing Springs School will be on the left and the Healing Spring on the right.

In 1929, various small rural schools were consolidated into Healing Springs High School. The school ultimately became an elementary school until further consolidation closed the doors on this building. It is now privately-owned but has been donated to the New River Dramatists - a playwright's workshop which hosts actors and writers for an eight-week summer critique workshop. Veteran and novice playwrights bring their original works for actors to "cold read" and critique before production. Many works have been produced in theaters throughout the world while others have been made into screenplays for the large and small screen.

The workshop is under the direction of a New York producer/director as well as an international director who attends each summer from Europe. Many well-known performers participate in this workshop annually.

In the late 1800s, health care consisted primarily of elixirs concocted in the kitchen or medicines found in the saddle bag of a traveling doctor. There was, however, another medicinal source found in the area's mountain springs, the most famous of which was Thompson's Bromine and Arsenic Springs, better known as Healing Springs.

On one hot summer day in 1883, a young boy was helping his father in the corn fields when his father asked that he find a spring along the creek branch and "fetch" a drink of water. The boy told his story to a journalist in 1939:

"I went across the road and got in the branch and walked down it, scoping along under the bushes and grape vines until I felt cold water under my feet. I then commenced looking for and soon found the cold water running down the rock. I scratched around until I found a place large enough to get a cup of water for my father. He sent me back for more and said it was the best he had ever drunk.

My hand and arm were very badly sore. The next morning they were almost well. We went back the next day and father worked in the spring with his hands which had sores on them. The following

day they were almost well...Then everybody got to using the water and it has cured a power of folks...Sometimes 300 came here in one day."

Accounts of the healing waters reached Capt. Thompson of Saltville, Virginia. Realizing the commercial potential of the springs, Capt. Thompson purchased the springs and 28 acres for \$5,000 in 1887. He started a nation-wide advertising campaign describing the water as "a medicinal beverage performing miraculous cures - nature's remedy for the alleviation and cure of many of the ills to which the human family is subject. Through its action of purifying the blood, it imparts health to the skin and gives clearness to the complexion - all stomach and bowel diseases yield at once to this delicious spring water - the most remarkable discovery of the 19th century."

Touted as the "Eighth Wonder of the World" (in their own brochure) the owners of the springs named 32 diseases the water cured and challenged physicians to report any of these diseases they fail to cure with this "wonderful water".

Physicians and medical journals endorsed the discovery and soon the water was transported by the cases to the nearest railroad connection in Marion, Virginia, nearly 45 miles away.

A hotel was built on the site of the springs making it a resort. Ultimately, a cluster of cabins replaced the hotel. These cabins now house the playwrights and actors who are a part of the New River Dramatists playwright project.

You are invited to stop by the old springs for a refreshing drink...our answer to Perrier.

Turn right onto Old US 16 at Riverside Store and Post Office.

Track 7:

A truly country experience is a stop in the Riverside General Store. Adjacent is one of the few remaining post offices inside a general store. The Crumpler Post Office is a good place to drop off those post cards of your trip to the mountains....make all your friends back home jealous of your visit.

*Go **1.6 mi** to New Hwy 16, continue straight under New Hwy 16 Bridge... go **about 3 miles** and you'll see Blevins Store on the left, a stopping place if you need to!.....**go another 2.0 miles** to see the old Phoenix Lodge on the left.*

Tobacco has always been an important part of Ashe County's economy and a vital crop to our producers. Many people raised in this state can find a heritage relating to some area of the tobacco industry. Many a young man and woman in the county can trace the source of payment for their college education to the golden leaf that provided much of the income on family farms throughout the 20th century.

Unlike its eastern brethren, the tobacco in Ashe County was almost exclusively of the burley variety. Burley tobacco is a light air-cured version of the crop, primarily used in the production of cigarettes.

The plants are grown in covered beds and then transplanted to field in the spring. For decades, the crop was labor intensive, with the setting process done almost entirely by hand. As the plants matured, they were suckered, removing side shoots that would have taken energy from the growth process. Approximately three months after the planting, burley tobacco is then topped, removing the flowering part of the plant with the object again being to allow all energy to go towards the growth of the tobacco plant.

In late summer and early fall, burley tobacco was cut with tobacco knives shaped similar to tomahawks. The five to six feet tall plants were spudded onto a tobacco stick with a sharp, metal, cone-shaped spear that fit neatly over the stick. Each stick would hold a half dozen or so plants and would be left in the fields for a few days to allow the leaves to wilt. Then the sticks would be picked up and carried to the open-aired barn where they would be hung to dry for several weeks.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, farmers would take down the tobacco and begin the process of grading the crop. The higher the grade, the more valuable the tobacco. Farmers, their families, and sometimes other workers would grade the tobacco throughout the day and evening, hand-tying the grades and placing them on a tobacco basket for the trip to market. Today, the leaves are baled before heading to market.

For farmers in Ashe, tobacco represented a reasonably stable cash crop. Government price supports set up a quota system, determining how much tobacco each farm could raise each year. These quotas were often passed down through generations, providing the basis for new family farms. Tobacco was all the more valuable because it went to market during winter, a time when farmers most needed the cash flow as almost all other Ashe crops were marketed in the summer.

Many of the old barns that dot the Ashe countryside are tobacco barns. Tobacco production in Ashe County has steadily declined as government price supports have been phased out and newer crops introduced. Still, the golden leaf holds a special place in the history of Ashe County.

Before entering Jefferson, on route 16, you will observe the Phoenix Mountains surrounding you. The north fork of the New River curls around the base of Phoenix Mountain, named after the German ship which brought the Eller family to the "new world" of colonial America. East of the Phoenix is the Little Phoenix which connects to Mount Paddy and the Bluffs with its waterfalls and unique flora and fauna.

At the base of Phoenix is a small lodge which at one time was a thriving guest quarters. During the Great Depression, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt stayed there on her way to an appearance at the pinnacle of White Top mountain in nearby Virginia.

From the mountain came the name for one of the earliest most thriving industries in Ashe County: Phoenix Chair Manufacturing Company. Established in 1935, the company grew as a byproduct of chairs being produced in a small sawmill operation. Beginning operation in a one-room home at the base of the mountain, the company grew to be the largest homegrown industry in Ashe County. Starting with 3 employees, producing 100 chairs a month, Phoenix grew to 280 employees

producing over 700 chairs per hour. The success of the business drew the attention of Thomasville Furniture Company who bought the plant, building a new facility in downtown West Jefferson in the structure which is now the home of Jefferson Station - a condo-retail complex.

*Continue on seven-tenths of a mile and you will see the first entrance to **Ashe Park**. The second entrance is another seven-tenths of a mile.*

Track 8:

Nestled on 65 acres of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Ashe Park is a county-owned recreational facility which was developed in 1973. The park is the home of 4 lighted tennis courts, 3 lighted ball fields, horseshoe pits, soccer fields, volleyball, basketball, and bocchi courts. In addition there are 2 playgrounds 3 covered shelters and a pond complete with paddleboats. A walking trail surrounds the park perimeters. The park is also the location of many annual events to including the long-running Fiddler's Convention held the first Saturday of August. Sponsored by the Jefferson's Rotary Club, the event brings in many bluegrass artists and their fans. Proceeds from the convention support the civic club's scholarship program. Ashe Park is also the home of the Farm Heritage Museum - a tribute to the importance of agriculture to our area. In addition to Ashe Park, the three primary communities of our county maintain green spaces within their own municipalities. Additional county space at Ashe Family Center provides a football field, baseball diamonds and a community fitness center.

*Continue on this road eight-tenths of a mile to a stoplight and turn left, heading into Jefferson's downtown. In two-tenths of a mile, you will see on your left the ... **Old Courthouse in Downtown Jefferson***

Track 9:

As you drive down Main Street in Jefferson, you pass where Ashe County was born **over 200 years ago**.

After years of boundary disputes and attachments to various counties and the state of Franklin (now Tennessee), Ashe County became its own entity in 1799. Seeking a convenient county seat in this 427 square-mile area, the North Carolina Assembly purchased 50 acres of land for what was then an exorbitant price of \$100, creating the town of Jefferson. The first community in the United States to be named after Thomas Jefferson, Jefferson became the county seat in 1803.

As you drive down Main Street you will see a few original homes and offices as well as the County Courthouse. Built in 1904, this Beaux-Arts building was the third courthouse to be constructed in this county. It remained the home of county government for the majority of the 20th century, safeguarding records and deeds while providing for the legal system so fundamental to our liberties.

This courthouse remains a vital link to our past and present and is now being restored by a dedicated group of local citizens. The Veterans Hall of Honor occupies the lobby area of the main entrance, honoring Ashe County natives who served their country in all wars. The second floor is the

courtroom--an atmosphere of quiet dignity. The building will house the county's heritage collection and museum and holds a place on the National Register of Historic Places.

*Continue on Main Street four-tenths of a mile and on the hill to your left, you will see... **Ashe Memorial Hospital***

Track 10:

The hospital was founded in 1936 and moved into its original WPA stone-building in 1939. In the mid 1960s the facility was replaced to meet federal regulations when Medicare began.

It is a full-service hospital serving the communities of Jefferson and West Jefferson and the surrounding areas with 24 hour-a-day medical care. It has 14 active staff and 60 physicians with privileges and others like the Sanger Clinic and Boone Urology have courtesy privileges.

Ashe Memorial is a rural hospital that has a remarkably sophisticated level of care for a county population of about 25,000. The hospital has been a Primary Healthcare hospital for over 60 years.

The hospital also has a commitment to the wellness of the community. "Mountain Hearts," part of the hospital facility, is an in-depth Wellness and Cardiac Rehabilitation Center, which includes a therapeutic swimming pool. Mountain Hearts Center for Prevention and Wellness continues to be the most comprehensive wellness center in the High Country.

Immediately after seeing the hospital you will reach a stoplight. Turn right at the light on US 221 and go 2.2 miles. You will see signs Mt. Jefferson and The Civic Center on your left. If you turn left you can visit Mt Jefferson State Natural Area.

Track 11:

Mount Jefferson rises abruptly to more than 1,600 feet above the surrounding landscape, serving as a landmark for area motorists. An investment of little more than an hour's time offers a high return as the beauty and diversity of the park are best seen while hiking along its trails.

Spectacular views of the surrounding countryside and a closer look at the park's vegetation are just a small part of the rewards reaped from a walk in this mountain forest.

Though the mountain is magnificent from a distance, Mount Jefferson is best appreciated up close. On a clear day, you can see for miles from its peak. A great part of Ashe County spreads out below; fields, farms, forests and mountains mingle in kaleidoscopic patterns. On the horizon, the Blue Ridge Mountains form a striking backdrop.

Yet what looms in the distance is no more spectacular than what is right before your eyes, for the forests of Mount Jefferson are a botanical paradise. The interesting and unusual plant life of the park rendered it worthy of designation as a national natural landmark.

Mount Jefferson and its nearby peaks are remnants of a once lofty, mountainous region that existed throughout much of the western part of the state. Weathering and erosive action of streams throughout millions of years wore away the softer, less resistant rocks. More resistant rocks were slower to erode. These rocks comprise the peaks standing above their surrounding plateau.

Though there is no evidence of permanent Native American settlements in the Ashe County area, game was plentiful and both the Cherokees and the Shawnees claimed it as a hunting ground. The first settlers in the area were from Virginia. Few North Carolinians, other than adventurous individuals like Daniel Boone, had ventured westward beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Before the revolution, Mount Jefferson was known as Panther Mountain, perhaps because of a legend that tells of a panther that attacked and killed a child there. The mountain's official name was chosen in honor of Thomas Jefferson and his father, Peter, who owned land in the area. The elder Jefferson surveyed the nearby North Carolina-Virginia border in 1749. Around the time of the Civil War, legend holds that the caves beneath Mount Jefferson's ledges served as hideouts for escaped slaves traveling to freedom on the Underground Railroad.

It wasn't until the 1930s that people took an interest in creating widespread access to the mountain. Mount Jefferson State Park had its beginnings when the Works Progress Administration constructed a road of little more than two miles to the summit of Mount Jefferson. In 1939, local officials wanted to have the road improved, but the state could not provide funds for a private road. Thus, two prominent local citizens donated 26 acres of land for a public park and thereby attained the road improvements.

In 1941, efforts to have the local park accepted as a state park failed, and in 1952 the area became a state forest wayside park. Continued efforts to attain state park status were unsuccessful as standards adopted in 1955 required that a state park contain a minimum of 400 acres. Undaunted by continuous obstacles, local citizens obtained a 300-acre donation and succeeded in raising funds to buy an additional 164 acres for the park. As a result of their determination, Mount Jefferson became a state park in October 1956.

*If you visited Mt. Jefferson, return to U.S. 221 and turn left (heading south). Go 1.2 miles to a stoplight and turn right. Take the first left hand turn (less than a tenth of a mile) onto Beaver Creek School Road. In half a mile, you will come to **St. Mary's Episcopal Church**. Here you will see the Frescoes.*

Track 12:

The Churches of the Frescoes in Ashe County provide some beautiful works of art created by Artist Ben Long who painted several frescoes in two churches in Ashe that draw thousands to see them each year. Visitors can visit the frescoes at either of two locations at St. Mary's Episcopal in West Jefferson and at Holy Trinity Church in Glendale Springs.

After being introduced to Father Fulton Hodge by a fellow artist, Ben Long offered to paint a fresco as a gift to the church. Father Hodge responded, "We'll take it," followed by, "What is a fresco?"

Fresco is the art of painting on wet plaster. The powdered pigments are mixed with water and applied to fresh lime plaster so that the pigment is absorbed into the plaster. The painting actually becomes part of the wall. It is a technique that has been practiced for centuries and reached its peak with the great masters of the Italian Renaissance.

Ben Long is known internationally for his religious frescos in Ashe County and Charlotte as well as in Europe. In Charlotte he has also completed frescoes in the Bank of America Corporate Center, the St Peter's Catholic Church, the Charlotte/Mecklenburg Law Enforcement Center and the Monumental Dome of Trans America Square.

Long painted three frescoes at St. Mary's in West Jefferson beginning in 1974 with "Mary Great With Child"; in 1975 he painted "John the Baptist" and in 1977, he painted "The Mystery of Faith". He painted the fresco of "The Last Supper" at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in 1988 as that church building was being restored. It is located behind the altar at Holy Trinity in Glendale Springs.

People from many denominations took turns feeding the artists and something of a competition began with each meal working to be better than the previous one. People from the community also became models for both the students' works and as the disciples in Long's "The Last Supper."

"The Departure of Christ" by Jeffrey Mims was painted during 1983-84 and is located in the Christ the King Chapel at Holy Trinity. Mims was a student of Long and was commissioned to paint the fresco as a memorial to Buffy Leland, a young girl in the church's congregation who died at the age of 10 after being struck by a truck near St. Mary's Church in West Jefferson.

A Festival of the Frescoes is held at Holy Trinity Church in Glendale Springs in October. The festival features crafts, food and entertainment.

Leaving the church, turn right on NC 194, going south. In 1.5 miles you will see the entrance to Mountain Aire Golf Course.

You can turn right off Beaver Creek School Road to see one of Ashe County's two golf courses. Nestled in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Mountain Aire is an established, public course offering 18 holes of well-maintained fairways, complimented by the natural, rugged beauty of the Appalachians. In addition to offering a challenging round of mountain golf, Mountain Aire also "plays" the backdrop for a beautiful golf community. Jefferson Landing, a beautiful private, championship golf course and gated community on the New River includes a club house, tennis courts and pool in a picturesque setting just off Highway 16. Both courses are just 30 minutes from Boone. If you have time during your visit, call for a tee time.

Track 13:

Continue on Highway 194 south 7.1 miles. This is a state-designated Scenic Highway. Some curves are quite sharp, so be warned. The highway travels through beautiful farmland with many long-range vistas. At the end, you will reach a crossroads. Turn left on Railroad Grade Road (there are signs pointing to Todd) and go four-tenths of a mile into the center of the community.

Todd's history began where Elk Creek flows into the South Fork of the New River. This was, of course, the logical site for trade with Native Americans and the first English, Scots, and Scots-Irish settlers following the Revolutionary War. In the early 19th Century the Elk Creek Crossroads included the South Fork Baptist Church and a Post Office. In 1890, when the Post Office was built, the town's name was changed to Todd, in honor of Captain Joseph W. Todd.

The railway transformed the town into a boom town as the timber that clothed the surrounding mountains yielded lumber, tanbark, pulpwood and extract wood to be processed and shipped up to Virginia and beyond.

The men building the railroad worked long hours blasting the Norfolk and Western's "Virginia Creeper" right of way out of the side of the mountains. The Todd section went to the Elkland Station in 1915. When the train left Elkland heading back North, the train had to be manually turned around. It would take four or five men to push the turntable.

In April 1933 the train made its last trip from Brownwood to Todd. People gathered to watch...and listenas the train blew a long blast on the whistle. The tracks were taken up some years after that and became Railroad Grade Road. After the track was removed, local traffic began to use the old railroad grade. Today the road is paved and remains about its original width. Cars meeting each other need to pull over to let the other one pass.

On the railroad grade at Todd, there are three original buildings standing. The Elkland Depot still stands at the end of the line. The depot has been remodeled and is home to an outfitters company that serves the New River. The other building is in Brownwood, North Carolina and has seen many different uses since it was a stop along the Virginia Creeper Railroad. The other building is part of the depot at West Jefferson.

The Todd General Store is a building drenched in history. Built in 1914 in anticipation of the Virginia Creeper; the store has been a central gathering place for the community ever since. Overlooking the South Fork of the New River, and on Railroad Grade Road, it is home to one of the most scenic bike routes in North Carolina. The Todd General Store is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Kirk Carrison of Preservation North Carolina names the Todd General Store as one of only five or six authentic general stores remaining in North Carolina. The Todd General Store remains "the gathering place" for local residents where stories of days past are still swapped, relationships are built, and community spirit nourished.

A community jam session of Old Time Mountain Music has been a welcome addition to the store on Friday nights since summer 2000. Every Friday night six to twenty uncompensated musicians gather at the store to share their love of music, entertaining 40 to 50 country & bluegrass music lovers. The store literally vibrates with the sound of guitars, hammered dulcimers, fiddles, and other acoustical instruments. Every session is unique with new musicians joining in each week.. Todd is home to National Bluegrass Banjo and Guitar Flat Pick Champion, Steve Lewis. Six-time Grammy award

winner, Doc Watson has been found “pickin’ and singin’” with the crowd. Ashe County is also the home of the 19-year old 2004 national champion banjo picker Eric Hardin of Warrensville.

Todd has the highest concentration of historic buildings in the county. Seventeen buildings, including the General Store and the Cook House, which historically served as the residence of the store’s owners, were named to the National Register of Historical Places in January 2000. These buildings comprise the Todd Historic District. Landscaping, placement of Historic plaques, and other community projects are being undertaken to promote this honorable designation.

This is the end of the northern loop of the High Country Back Roads Tour. We thank you for joining us on this tour of a small part of Ashe County. There is much more to see and do here, so we invite you to stay as long as you want and enjoy this land **we call home**.

If you plan on following the southern loop of the tour, return to Highway 194 and go south 11 miles to Boone.

www.HighCountryBackRoads.com