



# The Cabin in the Clearing

Far below the Blue Ridge Parkway, 115-year-old Caudill Cabin stands as a legacy to the small, isolated community of Basin Cove.

Written and photographed by Randy Johnson

**Five miles into the hike, the trail deteriorates into a faint, fern-fringed track, then ends in a misty mountain meadow surrounded by cliffs and 6,000 acres of forest.**

The elevation has increased by 1,500 feet. We've waded knee-deep through the same stream exactly 20 times, traveling far away from our current lives — and seemingly a few years back in time — until we've reached a postage stamp meadow that contains Caudill Cabin.

Like thousands of Blue Ridge Parkway motorists, I've peered down from the Wildcat Rocks overlook in Doughton Park to marvel at the tiny cabin that sits so far below. It's the quintessential image of Appalachian isolation.

As I trek into Basin Cove, past the still-standing chimneys of long-gone cabins, past a millstone lying in the creek, I sense the solitude former residents must have felt a century ago. I pause where miles of dense woods yield to a lush little clearing, and I can almost imagine the lives of people who called Caudill Cabin home.

Trudging to the precariously perched log structure, I'm fortunate to be in the company of Lenny and Larry Caudill, of Winston-Salem and Wilkesboro, respectively. Lenny's 14-year-old son Alex — Alexander Harrison Caudill — is also along. Alex, Lenny proudly tells me, "was born on September 6th, 1995, precisely one hundred years and one day after his great-grandfather."

That great-grandfather was the first of 14 children born in the square, 20-by-20-foot cabin sitting in the mist.

The modern Caudills' involvement with the cabin is an inspiring example of how the heritage of our mountains is being preserved, and remains fresh and influential in the lives of North Carolinians.

## Years of exploration

We hike up into the meadow, lean high-tech hiking poles against the 115-year-old building, lift the latch on the door, and step onto the hand-hewn floorboards. When our eyes finally adjust to the light, we sit, open our packs, and have lunch while we settle into the atmosphere of the cabin. Ironically, Larry says his interest in the cabin and his heritage started with that Parkway overlook.

"When I was a child," Larry says, "all the different clans, as we called them, would come together on the Parkway, at the Bluffs Lodge, and have a family reunion. I remember the entire picnic area would be full of cars. There'd be people you'd never seen before and would never see again, but they were family. We'd all peer down at the little cabin. I said to myself, at about 10 years old, 'Someday I'm going to go down there.'"

"Life goes on," he continues. "I eventually [joined] a hiking club out of North Wilkesboro that had an interest in the cabin. We got together with the National Park Service and cut the trail up from Longbottom Road in the 1980s. I've been coming up here two, four, five times a year ever since."

That's more times than I might ford those streams in a year, but for the Caudills, there's much more to Basin Cove than a single cabin.

Their increased involvement has taken them on a journey deep into Caudill genealogy, which includes the earliest settlers and last residents of the now-forested basin under the Blue Ridge Parkway. Lenny maintains a loose-leaf binder of his historical information for visitors. It's on a shelf by the cabin's fireplace where a crack between the logs lets in light.

Both brothers have backed up Lenny's research with years of exploration. On their way in and out of the cove, they often use topographical maps to venture



Brothers Larry (opposite, left) and Lenny Caudill (right), and Lenny's son, Alex (center), take a break on their hike through dense forest and across streams to the cabin that has been in their family for more than a century (top, and bottom right).



Remnants of other cabins line the trail through Basin Cove, including this chimney that may be what's left of the dwelling of Lenny and Larry Caudill's grandfather, Famon Caudill. The brothers hope to identify the former owners of other cabin ruins to give other families a tangible link to their past.

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off-trail, encircling hillsides in search of ruins, tracking their routes with GPS units, and cataloging their discoveries.

Even for the uninitiated hiker, the trek to the cabin reveals the kind of things the brothers seek. A number of trailside stone chimneys still stand amid cabin foundations, and these artifacts elicit breathless comments of discovery from hikers — “I see another chimney over there!” Understandably, many landmarks — old stone walls, once cultivated fields growing up in trees, the stone supports of a sorghum press — are not visible from the trail but are known to Lenny and Larry. Among those is “Perfect Chimney.” Away from the trail, along a small stream to the crest of a rise, towering in the woods, stands a masterpiece of rock masonry so perfect and undisturbed that you might imagine the cabin that once surrounded it had been beamed up to a time-traveling starship.

#### Local landmarks

When the Caudills are on the trail, the hike past the easily seen trailside landmarks is more like a walk through the neighborhood, past “Harrison’s cabin” and others, all identified by name. The first chimney beside the trail on our hike was built by James Harrison Caudill, Lenny and Larry’s great-great-grandfather, young Alex’s namesake, and likely the first Caudill in the Cove.

James, who went by Harrison and lived from 1841 to 1924, moved into the wild watershed of Basin Creek in the mid-1800s. He and his brother, Thomas Matthew Caudill, enlisted and briefly served on the side of the South in the Civil War. In a story now widely known as the plot line of Charles Frazier’s book *Cold Mountain*, many Confederate deserters went home to the divided loyalties of the Southern mountain communities and chose to elude the home guard patrols in remote locations. Both men deserted the Confederacy, and Thomas followed Harrison into the virgin forest and isolation of Basin Cove.

Later, their brother Ruffin Caudill, who fought for the Union during the war, joined them.

Harrison is famous for having married two sisters (at different times) and fathering 22 children — 11 boys, 11 girls — between the two women.

There is some uncertainty to this earliest family history, but Lenny and Larry have found the ruins of Harrison’s impressive two-chimney, possibly two-story cabin, and they think they’ve identified what’s left of the other brothers’ cabins as well. The Caudill family cemetery, however, still eludes discovery. “We’ll find it,” Lenny Caudill says. “I promise.” The brothers’ ongoing efforts to explore the cove give the ring of truth to that promise.

The Caudill Cabin got its start with Harrison’s son, Alford “Martin” Caudill, Lenny and Larry’s great-grandfather, who owned about 80 acres at the headwaters of Basin Creek. He married Frances “Jannie” Blevins in 1894 and presumably built the cabin that year as a home for his future family — of 14 kids. Linnie Famon Caudill was the first of those children born in their cabin on September 5, 1895. One hundred years and one day before Alex.

The isolated community of subsistence farmers — about 75 or so people, many of them Caudills — made their livings on small fields cut out of the forests and also clear-cut timber for cash. There was a grist mill, a small store, post office, church, and schoolhouse.

On January 16, 1916, Linnie married 15-year-old Alice Adams. Like many others in the cove, Linnie spent time away in nearby Virginia working on a logging railroad. While he was gone that summer, two back-to-back hurricanes slammed the North Carolina mountains. According to a 1917 report by Southern Railway Company, the storm “expended its full force on the watersheds in western North Carolina, where the rain from the first storm had already saturated the soil and filled the stream’s bank full.”

The awesome flood washed away homes and denuded mountainsides so severely the forest still

looked demolished 30 years later in a National Park Service photo. Alice, her mother, and Linnie's brother all died when Linnie's cabin washed away. Linnie learned of their deaths when he stopped at a store on his way home from work.

Linnie was a precise record keeper; a handwritten ledger always visible in the top left pocket of his bib overalls. On January 10, 1916, he recorded paying \$3 for a marriage license, then 12 cents for the ceremony on January 16, and 10 cents for a milk pitcher on March 10. After the storm, he found the milk pitcher (today it's displayed in the Old Wilkes Jail historical museum). In July 1916, Linnie recorded buying Alice's tombstone from Georgia.

The floods' high water quickly and decisively depopulated the cove. Today, Caudill Cabin is the only intact structure still standing under the cliffs of the upper cove, on the knob that surely directed floodwaters around it.

### Preserving their heritage

Sitting in the same cabin now, Larry leans against the open door while a thunderstorm soaks the tiny meadow outside. "Not many families have something tangible like this that connects so many generations," he says. "I've talked to uncles and aunts about the cabin for years, but it's entirely different to come here and really experience it. I've brought my children up many times. Someday I hope my grandchildren will bring their children here, too."

On cue, Alex comes in as the rain increases, takes off his boots and taps them against the doorway to dislodge the mud. It strikes me that the young man's great-grandfather had no doubt done exactly the same thing many, many times during his own 14th year — in 1909.

As the 75th anniversary of the Blue Ridge Parkway arrives in 2010, the Caudills are intensely aware of the National Park Service's role in their family's story. "To have a place where your heritage is preserved is just a rare opportunity," says Lenny Caudill. "We consider ourselves blessed and we're particularly grateful to the National Park Service for what they've done. The cabin was restored in 2001, and a couple of times over the years before that. Last time they replaced the entire roof structure and uprighted the chimney and just made it worthy again. We owe them a real debt of gratitude. They've done us a huge favor in preserving our heritage for us."

After lunch, with the rain ending, we head back down the swollen creek. I feel lucky to be on this trail, never imagining I'd find myself hooked up in a hike with the cabin builders' family, including Larry,

the man who'd literally helped build the trail to the cabin as a path into his own past.

Lenny points out one large waterfall that may have no name to hikers, but to the Caudills it's "Spa Rock." A sluice of cold water funnels into a whirlpool basin that might make a perfect chilly soaking spot on a warm day.

Near Doughton Park's backcountry campground, we pause beside the foundation ruins of Basin Cove Baptist Church to contemplate the white marble headstone that Linnie Caudill had shipped in for wife Alice. It still stands over her grave where two trails diverge.

As we near the bottom of Basin Cove, with storm clouds again threatening rain, our five-mile hike has doubled to 10, with countless stream crossings making a "squish" out of each step. I knock on a tree for luck that we won't get drenched before we reach the cars.

It's not until the end that I realize, on a damp day of dripping trees, thunder, and mist-draped, rain-swollen streams, the only time it rained was the hour and a half we'd spent eating and talking history in the shelter of Caudill Cabin. 🌧️

*Randy Johnson is the author of Hiking the Blue Ridge Parkway and Hiking North Carolina, both FalconGuides. His new book, Pocket Guide to the Blue Ridge Parkway, is scheduled to be published in 2010.*

## if you're going

### Doughton Park Campground Ranger Kiosk

Blue Ridge Parkway, Milepost 239.0  
Sparta, N.C. 28713  
(336) 372-8877, from May to October

For a link to the website of this local attraction, go to [www.ourstate.com](http://www.ourstate.com), and click on "This Month's Issue."

