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Big South Fork loop visitors hike through history

Exploring old haunts

By [Morgan Simmons](#) ([Contact](#))

ONEIDA, Tenn. - By late morning it had stopped raining, but the clouds and mist remained. The weather was ideal for studying graves.

At the end of a long gravel road was Terry Cemetery, where the families that lived down on No Business Creek are buried. Our 4-mile loop hike would take us in and out of the gorge and past some of the most interesting natural and historical features found in the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area.

But first, a few introductions were in order.

Our guide that day was Howard Duncan, an avid backpacker from Jamestown, Tenn., who has been a National Park Service ranger for the Big South Fork for the last 22 years. At Terry Cemetery, Duncan showed us the headstone of Dewey Slaven, who died on Dec. 16, 1960, and was the last inhabitant to leave the gorge.

Next, we were introduced to Minnie Maudie Roysdon, who passed away in 1946, and for whom Maude's Crack, a well-known geologic feature along the No Business trail, is named.

"To me, No Business Creek, with its mix of natural and cultural features, epitomizes what the Big South Fork is all about," Duncan said.

From the Terry Cemetery trailhead, we hiked the Longfield Branch Trail down into No Business Creek. After wading the creek, we turned left onto the John Muir Trail, which follows an old roadbed used by the families that once farmed up and down this rugged drainage.

No Business Creek wasn't abandoned until the post-World War II era, when the young men returning from service grew dissatisfied with their hardscrabble life on the Cumberland Plateau.

Most families farmed. Old photographs show how the land was cleared all the way to the base of the cliffs, with crops grown along the creek, and cattle and sheep turned out to graze on the hills.

"There were swinging bridges and little grist mills all up and down the creek," Duncan said. "Mail was delivered on horseback, and a woman named Francis Miller had a store at the mouth of the creek."

The gorge was logged, but not heavily. Today, beech and hemlock trees have reclaimed the fields, but you still can see ample evidence of the homesites that were occupied barely 50 years ago.

We hiked past stone retaining walls stacked to keep No Business Creek from washing into the fields. Piles of mossy rock marked old house foundations, and we spotted the remains of several washtubs.

"My hobby used to be finding old homesites," Duncan said. "Just about all of them had washtubs."

Heading upstream, we reached a 2-acre clearing maintained by the National Park Service as a cultural landmark. This was the home of Ransom Boyatt and his son, Jerome, whose deaths in 1933 paint a tale of gunfighting and revenge worthy of a Western movie. (For a detailed account of the story, visit the Big South Fork's Web site at www.nps.gov/biso/historyculture/tragictale.htm.)

The Boyatts had the last homesite on No Business Creek. The barn and blacksmith shop now are gone, and all that remains of the house is a double chimney built of sandstone block that opened up to the kitchen and the living room.

"I like to come to a place like this and visualize what it would have been like, with corn bread in the oven and beans on the stove," Duncan said.

Hiking back downstream along the John Muir Trail, we crossed a box culvert made of stone and built by hand by members of the community. We also crossed Tackett Creek, a tributary to No Business Creek, where Richard Slaven, a Revolutionary War veteran, built the first permanent home down on No Business in the late 1790s.

According to historical records, Slaven's house was essentially a fortified log blockhouse, with rifle slits instead of windows.

A few miles from the junction of No Business Creek and the Big South Fork River, we crossed a footbridge and followed the John Muir Trail up the gorge to Maude's Crack, a split in the caprock barely wide enough to squeeze through. Being in Maude's Crack is not unlike being in a cave. The footing is muddy and slick, and the gradient is nearly vertical. Climbing out, you emerge through a hole to find yourself just a few feet from a glorious overlook, where the bluff walls and mesas of No Business Creek unfold in the distance like a sweet dream.

"Some people feel claustrophobic when the hills close in on you like this," Duncan said. "Others find comfort in it."



photographer: Paul Efirid

The grave of No Business Creek resident Charley Slaven is in the Big South Fork National River & Recreation Area.



photographer: Paul Efirid

Looking for a place to wade on No Business Creek, Ranger Howard Duncan leads a hike in the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area. “For me, No Business Creek, with its mix of natural and cultural features, epitomizes what the Big South Fork is all about,” he says.



photographer: Paul Efirid

National Park Service Ranger Howard Duncan looks back before entering a natural crevice called Maude's Crack at the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area. According to Duncan, the feature was named for Minnie Maudie Roysdon, a resident who used the fissure in the rimrock to access a rock shelter when her house burned down.

BIG SOUTH FORK BY THE NUMBERS

- Size: 120,000 acres.
- Distance: 70 miles from Knoxville.
- Trails: Over 200 miles of multi-use trails open to horseback riding, hiking, and mountain biking, and approximately 175 miles designated for foot travel. In addition, the park offers a select number of loop trails that are for mountain biking only.
- When established: Congress authorized the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area in 1974. The enabling legislation places a higher level of protection on the river gorges than the surrounding adjacent areas. Hunting is permitted, as well as off-road vehicle riding in designated areas.
- River miles: The park protects 75 miles of the Big South Fork River, as well as 300 miles of secondary streams
- Visitors: The Big South attracts about 700,000 visitors a year.

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