

During the Great Depression, the federal government purchased unused farmland in North Carolina's Piedmont as part of a New Deal rehabilitation project. Thirty years later, in 1961, President John F. Kennedy proclaimed this land the Uwharrie National Forest, designating

AN AMERICAN WILDERNESS

in the heart of our state. Within the Uwharrie region, which comprises a three-county area, lie mountains — a range older than the Appalachians or the Rockies — and lakes; within the region, too, lies a commitment to conservation, and a dedication to simplicity, resourcefulness, and preserving our heritage.

It's one of the smallest national forests in the country; it's in one of the least populated areas of the state. But the values embodied here — in the land and in the people — stand for something large.

TRAILBLAZING

A little more than 50,000 acres of national forest spread through Montgomery, Randolph, and Davidson counties, and 20 miles of the Uwharrie Trail lead hikers, hunters, and naturalists through the heart of it.

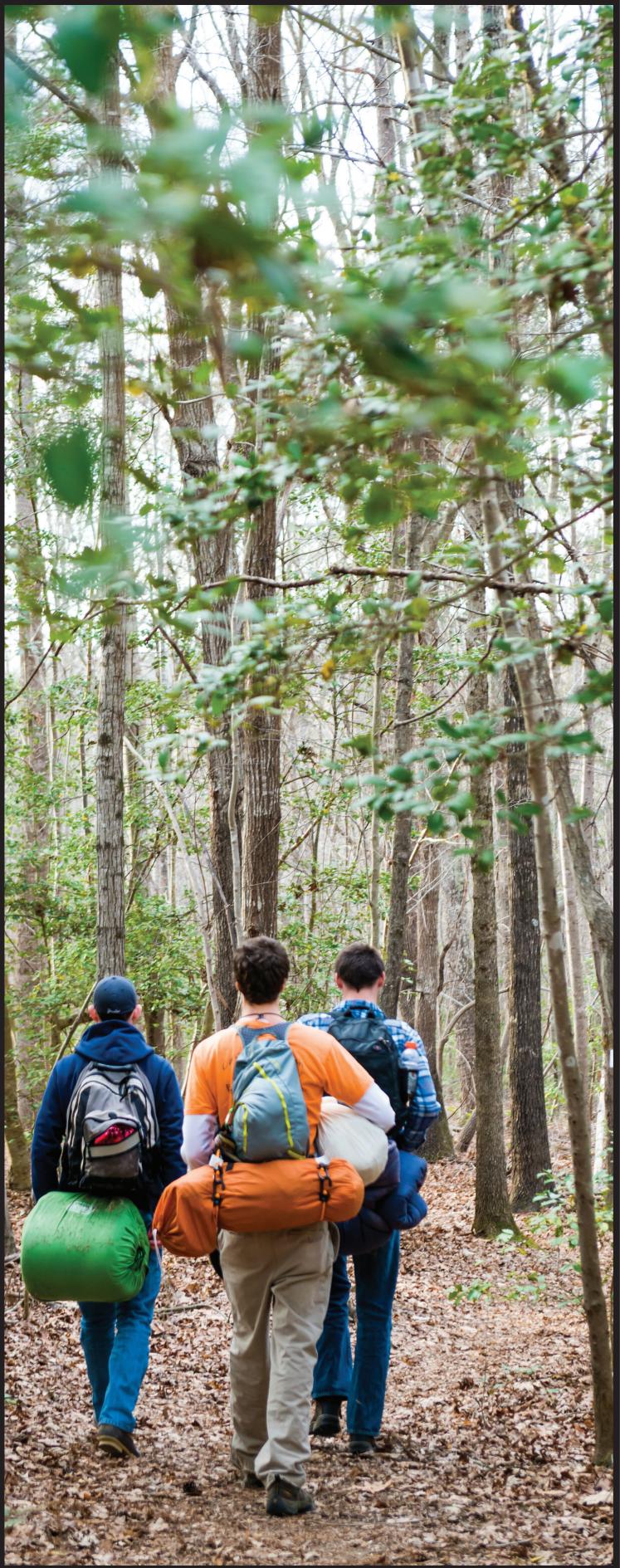


BY SARAH PERRY PHOTOGRAPHY BY EMILY CHAPLIN

NATURAL RICHES

Outdoor adventurers exploring the Uwharries often are motivated by something other than exercise or scenic trails: They want to find gold, to pan in the rivers and streams and spot those elusive little gold flakes. Bikers and hikers watch the ground in front of them for speckles of flint and quartz rock — a sign they may be hitting the jackpot.

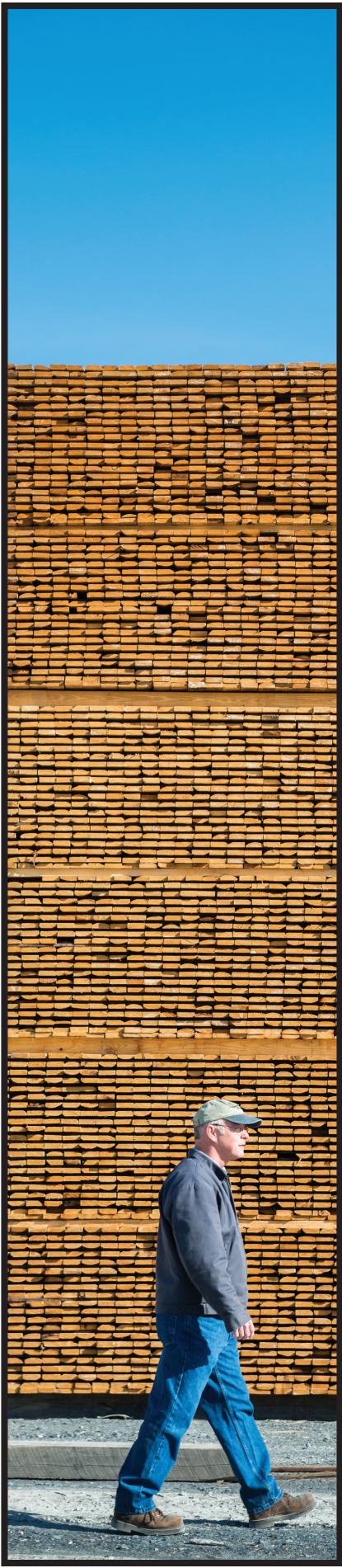
There's even a trail called Gold Mine Trail, about a mile from N.C. Highway 109. The history of gold in the area dates back to the early 1800s, when people from across the country began flocking to the Uwharries after John Reed found gold on his farm in Cabarrus County, several miles west. Before the Civil War, 15 mines operated in the region. Today, prospectors still search for the mineral, hoping to find their fortune in the rich forest.



REVERENCE

One of the towns in the Uwharries is Troy, the seat of Montgomery County. There's a courthouse here, of course, and a 100-year-old, nationally known rug company called Capel. But one of the best-known centerpieces of the area is the late 1800s-era Shiloh Methodist Church. Although it hasn't housed an active congregation since 1928, preachers step in to deliver God's word during certain times of the year. Members of the Shiloh Church Preservation make sure the building stays pristine, and they keep the decorations here simple, particularly during the church's annual Christmas tea, a much-anticipated community event that takes place on the first Saturday in December. And in the spring, Confederate Memorial Day encourages visitors to pay respect to fallen Civil War soldiers, some of whom are buried in the Shiloh Cemetery on the grounds.





RESOURCEFULNESS

Uwharrie residents make a living from what the earth provides. Every week, Terry Brown (opposite) helps run 2.5 million board feet of pine through Troy Lumber Company, which has been operating under that name since 1946; before that, it was the Troy Cross Arms Company, a major regional supplier of telephone and electric poles that first opened in 1908.

Game hunters sent Andy's Taxidermy, a specialty business in Montgomery County, 200 deer to mount in 2012 — a feat that required help from students like Justin Spivey, who is enrolled in the taxidermy program at Montgomery Community College, a program of study that only three other community colleges in North Carolina can lay claim to. Recreational hunting has been a tradition in the Uwharries for generations; the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission estimates there are about 50 whitetail deer per square mile. In the spring, hunters seek out wild turkeys, and small-game hunters find plenty of rabbits and squirrels.

FAMILY & COMMUNITY

Travel through the Uwharries and you'll soon find yourself on N.C.

Highway 109, one of the three state highways that cuts through the region. On Highway 109, you'll

also find Eldorado Outpost, a community hub for hunters, hikers, backpackers, and anyone in search

of a cheeseburger or a Bigfoot story. Nearly everyone who drives this road eventually stops at this shop and restaurant.

Eldorado got its start in 1995 when Marion Owen (opposite, in blue) opened the business with her husband, Rufus, after he retired from the U.S. Forest Service. Rufus died

in 2009 — by this time, Marion's daughter, Melinda Cagle, and grandson, Chris Cagle, had stepped in to help run the business.

Over the years, the Cagles have aided young campers kayaking in rainstorms, hunters in need of provisions, and couples on horseback.

The Uwharrie region is known to be rugged terrain, and the forest calls for a rugged outfitter. But stop in on a Thursday morning, and you'll hear something softer:

That's when the women from Marion's Bible study group gather and sing hymns. Their voices cause customers to pause from their breakfast, listening as the strains of "Amazing Grace" fill the room while Old Glory stretches out overhead.





STRENGTH

At the foot of the ancient forest of the Uwharrie Mountains, Lake Tillery fills in the landscape. The James B. Garrison Bridge carries travelers between Stanly and Montgomery counties, giving everyone who crosses over it a spectacular view, as it's done for more than 85 years.

The Garrison Bridge was a replacement for an earlier structure, the Swift Island Bridge. When Carolina Power and Light began construction on a dam and created Lake Tillery in 1926, the water flooded the original bridge. But no one, it seemed, could destroy it. The Army loaded it with weight. The Air Force bombed it. Artillery squads sprayed it with bullets. Eventually, a cadre laced the base of the structure with 2,000 pounds of dynamite. The bridge fell, and a new one — this one — went up. Crews erected the current structure in 1927, but it, too, may see its end soon — the state is widening U.S. Highway 24/27 and plans to demolish the Garrison Bridge. Until that happens, though, motorists can take in the vast forest and blue-green lake, a view that's been in place for a long while.

CONSERVATION

The best time to discover the towering Nifty Rocks in the Uwharrie National Forest is in November, when all the leaves, which might otherwise obscure the view, have fallen from the trees. U.S. Forest Service District Ranger Deborah Walker hikes to the rocks to find peace among the ancient boulders, some of which loom over her, 15 feet tall. Among the rocks, she peers out at wildflowers, foxes, bobcats, and, most recently, bears. It's in this spot where she reflects on the region she describes as "where the sandhills meet the mountains."





ADVENTURE

Shane Hill feels the rush of adrenaline every time he catches a fish during the Bethel Baptist Bass Tournament on Badin Lake. Bass isn't the only kind of fish swimming through these waters — anglers cast for crappie, catfish, bream, and bluegill — but fishermen sometimes have to compete with the bald eagles who are hunting for their dinner.

At night anglers can camp in certain areas, but for a more refined outdoor experience, they sometimes relax in one of the six Uwharrie cabins that were built in the perimeter of the forest; there, they think about how they'll hook the next prize-winning bass.

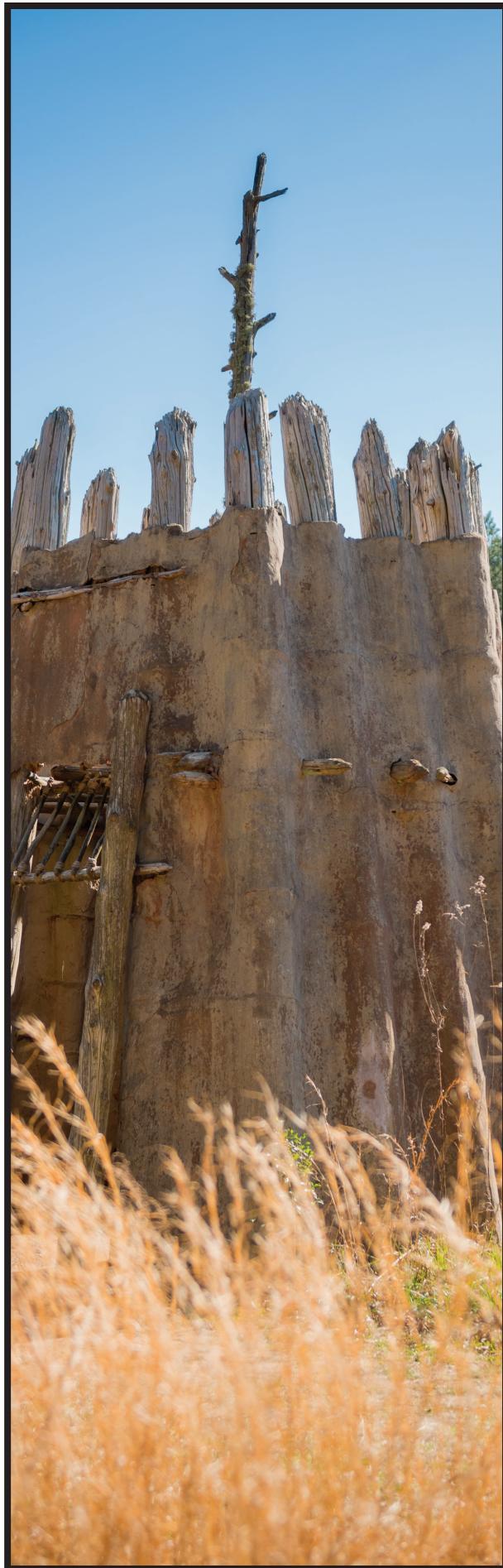
HERITAGE

In 1937 archaeologists began excavating an unusual mound in a field off of N.C. Highway 731 in Mount Gilead. The curious bowl shape, surrounded as it was by flat land, intrigued scientists, who convinced the landowner to donate his property to the state.

The mound is one of the few archaeological sites in the country that has been studied for more than 50 years. To this day, scientists are still unearthing artifacts from the Pee Dee Indians, who moved to the area about 1,000 years ago.

In 1965, the archaeologists finished reconstructing the four-acre Pee Dee village, which they named Town Creek Indian Mound — now a state historic site. When you visit, think about the man who would've peered out from the fire tower, searching for approaching visitors. The man, a lookout, served as a boundary for the women and children, who lived inside the walls of the town. In the summers, the Pee Dee fished in the Little River. They created intricately designed pottery, and, in the fall, celebrated the corn harvest.

Eventually, the tribe moved away — scientists are unsure why — but the mound stands today as a testament to our native heritage.





SPACIOUSNESS

The Uwharrie National Forest is isolated and wild — a perfect spot to make camp, watch the stars blink in the limitless sky, stretch out your arms, and feel free.