

The Winter Woods Are Full of Surprises

By Rett Davis

Trees hide the past. However, during the winter months you can get a glimpse of how our forefathers and mothers lived. For most, it was a hard life without refrigeration, running water, electricity and bathrooms. My mother did not get electricity on the farm until she was 15 years old. She was overjoyed with the ability to bathe by electric lights.

I look forward to my winter work of appraising and estimating timber for sale and remarking property lines. It is also a time of discovery. Structures that were hidden from view during the summer are now visible. For the most part, it is safe to explore them. Snakes are asleep and you can see where to step. Danger is often present from rotten boards, hidden wells and broken glass.

The presence of the ground cover periwinkle and daffodils in the woods is an indicator of human activity. They do not occur naturally in the woods. They are planted by human hands. They are found around springs, wells and graves. Be on the lookout for nearby house foundations, chimneys and barns too. Last winter I came within a few feet of stepping into an open well in the middle of nowhere. It was hand dug and lined with bricks. The wooden cover was long gone. The thought of what might be down there was unsettling if I had fallen in.

Old barns and houses are fun to explore. Sometimes old appliances, farm equipment and rusted cars are left behind. One abandoned home place had a copy of the publication *Red and White* dated October 1909. It was in a pile of trash and was being used as nesting material for some animal. This was a publication of the North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts. Today it is known as N.C. State University. The articles inside and advertisements are priceless. In the same nest was a torn cancelled check from a bank in Hemp, N.C. The town of Hemp was later renamed Robbins.

Recently I discovered the site of Piedmont Springs in Stokes County. The spring is still working, and the rock walls are still in place. Piedmont Springs was a popular vacation spot at the beginning of the 20th century. Within a hundred yards of the spring was the location of the old Piedmont Springs hotel. It is long gone, but the steps remain to the front porch. Its past and former grandeur are now covered in kudzu.

My work has led me to discover remnants of a once vibrant turpentine industry from colonization days into the early 20th century. These towering longleaf pines reached heights of 120 feet. I was so awed by their size that I had my picture taken with them. The woods were dark due to their big canopies despite its being a sunny day. Those longleaf pines are as close as we will get to the redwoods and sequoias growing on the West coast. The owner protected them from being harvested, and they are still there today.

Wildlife of all kinds enjoy the woods. This includes the two-footed species. They build camp sites and party sites. You do not have to be an archeologist to determine the activities that took place there. The song 'Love Shack' accurately describes several permanent structures I have discovered deep in the woods. I can't resist taking a peak inside but only if abandoned. They are very sparse inside. The stories around them have been shared with me, but I cannot share them with you.

The foresters I work with have close to 100 years of accumulated knowledge, experiences and stories. They have taught me how to read aerial maps, find property lines and corners, and to identify trees by only their bark in the winter. They can spot remnants of former fields, old saw mill sites, liquor stills, abandoned roads and fords used to cross creeks. Recently we discovered a beautiful rock-lined spring. It provided water for mules and horses after a hard day of plowing in what was once a field. We also know where circus elephants bathed and rested while traveling on the old road to Fayetteville through Alamance County.

If you decide to explore old houses and barns this winter, keep this experience in mind. A farmer friend of mine was having an old log tobacco barn torn down to save the timbers when he heard a scream from a worker. One of the big timbers he grabbed moved. That timber was actually an 11 foot 10 inch python snake. It was hibernating under the old barn. It had to be pulled out with a logging chain.

The woods are full of relics of our past, mysteries, family secrets and surprises. It hides a big part of North Carolina history that is slowly rusting and rotting away and will soon to be forgotten. I look forward to new discoveries and sharing those stories with you.