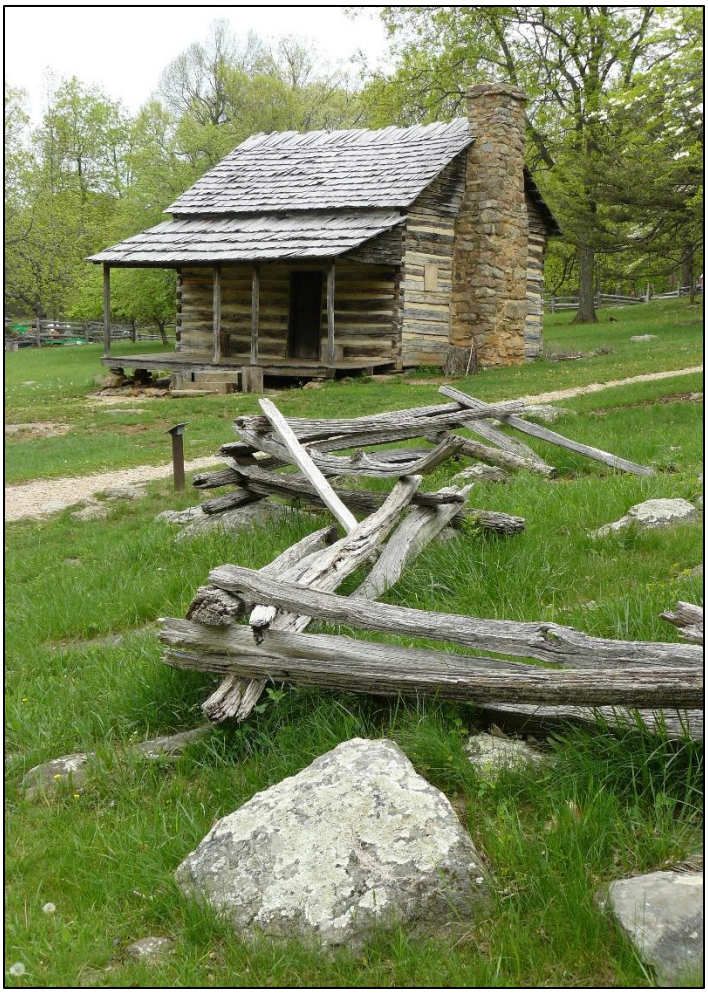
The William Carter Farm

By Lynn Coffey



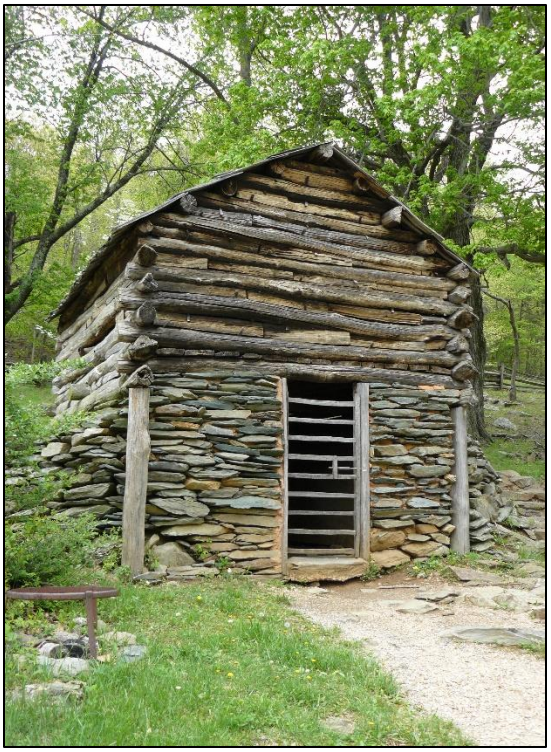
Ramsey cabin at Humpback Rocks Farm

On a crisp autumn morning, a plume of smoke rolls from the rock chimney of a one room log cabin and a rooster crows his lusty greeting to the new day. The aroma of breakfast is in the air as sausage patties and fresh eggs from the henhouse fry in a cast iron skillet over the open fire. A nest of doughy biscuits rise and brown in a well-used Dutch oven and the smell of coffee permeates the cabin as the Carter family begins another day in the mountains.

At mile marker 5.8 on the Blue Ridge Parkway an exhibit known as the William J. Carter farmstead is open to visitors who are curious about what mountain life was like in the late 1800s. Although the buildings are not original, the area where William and his family lived is. The land was purchased by Carter in the late 1800s for $3 an acre, paid for in Confederate money. The land was in close proximity to the Howardsville Turnpike, a major thoroughfare connecting the west side of the mountains to the east. In the 1950s Parkway planners moved period buildings from other areas and arranged them on the property to show what a typical 19th century mountain farm might have looked like.

The self-guided trail at the Carter farm meanders past a cabin, weasel-roof chicken coop, root cellar, a barn with a bear-proof hog pen, spring house, a lye hopper, and a household vegetable garden enclosed within a rustic wooden fence. At the end of the trail, with Humpback Rocks looming in the distance, stands a "kissing gate," which allows people to pass through but not livestock. The name comes from the gate "kissing" (touching) the inside of the enclosure. It forms a barrier rather than needing to be securely latched with each use.

The on-site cabin belonged to Billy and Nannie Ramsey, who built the cabin in 1890 on their farm near milepost 51.4 on the Parkway. The Ramseys lived in the cabin for the next 30 years before it was moved to the Humpback Rocks farm. Log cabins such as this were very common in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Trees were felled on the property and would be squared off with a



A two-story root cellar

broad axe and foot adz, which left their mark in the rough-hewn walls of the cabin. After the logs were cut and hewn, they would be dove-tailed together at the notches in the end to form the walls. Roofs were typically covered with cedar or oak shakes which were hand split on the site. The spaces between the logs were chinked with pieces of wood cut to fit and daubed with mud mixed with horse hair for strength and "stickability". The fireplace served to cook meals and heat the home in winter.

As the family grew, they would often add an addition next to the original cabin and connect the two with a breezeway called "dog-trot". Many times, a separate building that housed a kitchen was not connected to the cabin so in case of fire the main home would be spared.

Most farms kept hogs that ran wild in the forest eating acorns and chestnuts through the autumn months after which they were rounded up and placed in a pen and fed corn before butchering. Bears were prevalent and often made raids on the hog pen so the farmers came up with an ingenious way to keep their future hams safe from marauding bears by adding rails on the outside walls and across the top, securing the pen.

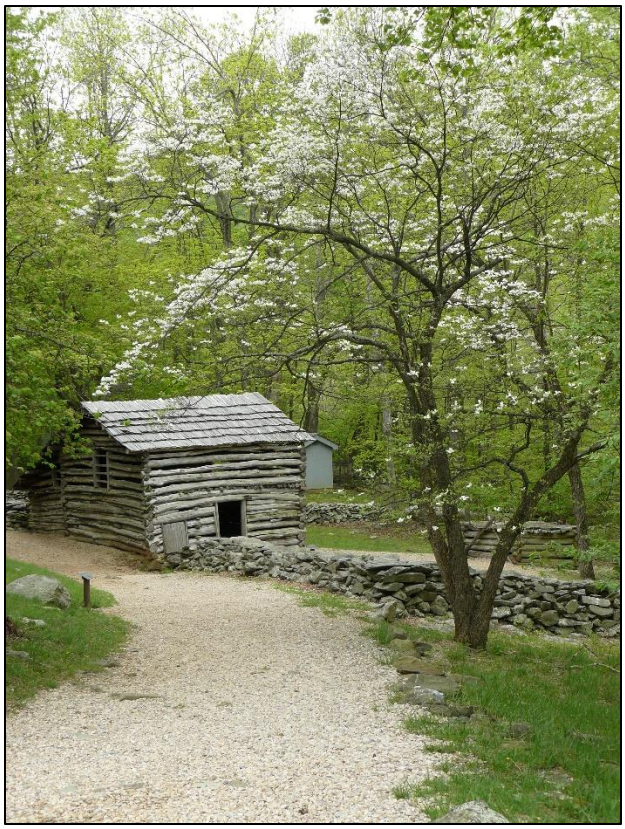
Every homestead was situated near a spring so fresh cold water was available at any time. A springhouse was usually built over top of the spring and served as a refrigerator that kept milk, butter and eggs cool and fresh.

Fresh cold water flowing through the springhouse

An ash hopper was used to make lye which was mixed with fat from the fall butchering to make soap that the family used to wash themselves as well as their clothes. Ashes from the fireplace were dumped into the hopper and water was poured over them. The resulting product was lye, that was collected from the bottom drain and used when needed.

A homemade wooden ash hopper

The barn was an essential part of a homestead, housing equipment, feed, and providing shelter for the livestock. You can readily see how the expression "cold as a barn" originated.



The livestock barn at Humpback farm

Rails split from durable and long-lasting chestnut wood was used for fencing along with the abundance of rocks found throughout the mountains. These fences marked boundaries and kept farm animals in while keeping predators out.

Fruit trees, such as apples, pears, plums, and peaches, provided a welcome addition to the family diet. Various varieties of each species were used in different ways. Some apples dried well, others were extremely juicy for making drinks, while others were long keeping and stored well over long periods of time. The fruit from these trees provided additional income to the mountain farmers. Just a small number of apple trees could yield enough fruit to make a saleable amount of cider. Left to ferment, the cider, stored in kegs or barrels, was easier to transport to the market than fresh fruit.

Every homestead had a root cellar, dug into a hillside where fresh and canned fruits and vegetables could be stored on shelves and in wooden bins until needed. Cured meat such as smoked hams and bacon were hung from the rafters.

Gardens provided fresh vegetables to the family and the crops were protected from unwanted pests and wildlife by enclosing its perimeters with wooden fencing. Scarecrows were erected in or

Fenced household vegetable garden

around the garden, in the hopes of deterring deer and bear from eating the plants. Lime was used to keep worms and other insects at bay. A typical mountain crop in 1890 might have included corn, beans, okra, potatoes, tomatoes, squash and pumpkins. An herb garden was handy for flavoring meals that otherwise might have tasted bland.

A flock of chickens kept the family in eggs and meat but it was a test of endurance to keep them safe from predators. All cracks in the henhouse were chinked with small pieces of wood and a stout door with wooden pegs was a deterrent to most varmints looking for an easy meal. In years past, volunteers and Park Service employees provided an interpretive program for the many visitors to the pioneer farm, recreating what life in 1890 might have looked like.

A bear proof hog pen

During the 2007 season, I had the privilege of being one of the women representing that era, dressing in period clothing and doing daily chores around the farm. Every morning I started a fire in the fireplace and demonstrated the art of cooking over an open fire, fed and watered the chickens and gathered the eggs, cultivated the vegetable and herb gardens and answered any questions visitors might ask about a typical mountain farm of that time period. I remember a man who didn't believe I could regulate the fire close to the temperature of a conventional oven and bake a batch of apple dumplings just by raking hot embers under a Dutch oven and on top of the lid. I told him to come back in an hour and see for himself. In 60 minutes, he was back with a smug look on his face, expecting the dumplings to be burned to a crisp. Imagine his shock when the pot lid was lifted and he was confronted by the fragrant aroma of baked apples, bubbling with syrup and browned to perfection!

Today, people may walk the self-guided trail through the William Carter farmstead, which was originally a land grant tract given by the Commonwealth of Virginia to induce pioneers to settle the Blue Ridge Mountains and establish the border of the western frontier. Looking at the primitive way of life these hearty people lived without any modern conveniences; one has to respect the hardships they endured just to have a piece of land to call their own.

Some information about the Carter farm courtesy of the United States Park Service