

Y-12 and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park – a grand partnership, part 2

Bob Hawthorne, retired U.S. Navy submarine commander and previous Y-12 Facilities Management Organization manager who has been involved in the Help the Smokies project ever since he came to Oak Ridge and continues to be active in that effort today, writes the following history from his perspective. Oh, I should tell you that Bob is an avid hiker, having hiked every one of the 900 miles of trails in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. When he first arrived at Y-12, I gave him a trail map of the Smokies. A few years later, he showed it to me having traced every single trail on that tattered, worn, but still legible map.

Here is Bob's input: "In 1996 the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GRSM) received the good news that their application to the Georgia-Pacific Corporation for a grant of building materials to use in rehabilitating badly deteriorated picnic and front-country camping areas had been approved. Meanwhile, the president of Martin Marietta Energy Systems, Gordon Fee, and the superintendent of the GRSM, Karen Wade, had been exploring ways that volunteers from Oak Ridge could support the Park's needs.

"The GRSM Volunteer Coordinator, Babette Collavo, put the donated materials and the Oak Ridge volunteer workforce together. This was the beginning of the Help the Smokies Project, which has turned out to be the longest and most productive National Park Service (NPS)-Corporate partnership in the history of the Park. Gordon Fee assigned Y-12 employee Bob Presley to be the first project coordinator, a position he excelled in until his retirement in 2003.

"The GRSM has always defined the work that they want done, and the project coordinators and the Park VIP coordinator plan for the workdays — usually one each in the spring and fall. The first project was to rehabilitate the badly deteriorated Metcalf Bottoms picnic area, which, because of its size, took several years to complete.

"Since 1998, the volunteer team has consisted of a core group of about 50 Y-12 and Oak Ridge National Laboratory employees, retirees, spouses and a few teenagers. About 25-35 volunteers participate on any given workday.

"The Park VIP coordinator and three experienced GRSM Maintenance Department employees get the designated work areas prepared, materials delivered to the site and support the volunteers. Familiarity with the project work has developed a very experienced team; project work is efficiently completed and of uniformly high quality. For many years Y-12 provided an annual donation to the park, which covered the cost of construction material for two workdays and a very popular lunch from Bennett's Barbecue in Gatlinburg.

"Bob Hawthorne and Al Roberson supported Bob Presley with project engineering and coordination. Hawthorne took over project management from 2003 until 2008, and Al Roberson assumed the leadership role in 2008 after Hawthorne's retirement. Babette retired from the NPS in 2009, and subsequent VIP coordinators Dana Soehn and Christine Hoyer have continued to support the project.

"The facility improvements over the period from 1996–2013 have included complete rehabilitation of all picnic areas on the Tennessee side of the Park: Cades Cove, Metcalf Bottoms, Chimneys and Cosby; construction of a used 35 FT X 100 FT greenhouse donated by the city of Gatlinburg at the Twin Creeks Resource Center; campsite construction at Cades Cove and Cosby Campgrounds; construction of the visitor pavilion at the entrance to the Cades Cove Loop Rd.; and construction of the first 2 ADA-compliant

campsites in the Park at the Cades Cove Campground. This project earned recognition as the VIP Team of the Year in 2005 for the NPS Southeast Region.

“Park superintendents have visited the job sites over the years to see the work and express their appreciation. The project leaders have always enjoyed individually introducing the volunteer laborers and having them describe what they do in their "day jobs." The diversity of experience among these outstanding citizen-volunteers never failed to impress: PhDs in several disciplines, nuclear engineers, utilities managers, scientists, metallurgists and nuclear submarine maintenance specialists to name just a few.

“Rehabilitation of all the picnic areas on the Tennessee side of the Park, construction of many front-country campsites and other facility renovations have provided infrastructure improvements in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park that would not otherwise have been possible. They are delighting thousands of visitors every year in these heavily used areas, and will continue to be enjoyed for many years to come.”

Thank you, Bob, for an excellent short history of the Help the Smokies project.

The Y-12/ORNL volunteers have truly made a difference! I have asked some of the volunteers who have been with the *Help the Smokies* program most, if not all, of the years of its existence to send me comments from their experiences working on the project. If any of you readers have been involved, I would appreciate getting your comments as well. More follow up articles will include this input from people who have enjoyed the experience. Send your comments by email to: smithdr@y12.doe.gov, or call me at 865-576-7781.