

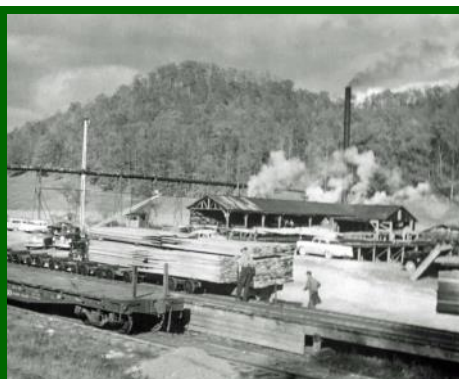
The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

Twentieth Century in Review: History Highlights by Decade, Part Two

1951 to 1960

Although Rabun County lost population in the 1950s, a total of thirty-four persons, it made great advances in manufacturing jobs, healthcare, and transportation. Rabun still remained a rural, far from wealthy county, whose per capita annual income was only \$1,084 at the end of the decade.

Hundreds of new jobs came with Ritter Lumber Company in Mountain City in 1950 and with two textile plants in 1953 and 1956 in Clayton and Rabun Gap. Clayburne Manufacturing, called the “shirt factory” by locals, was the first industry to employ primarily women. James Lees and Sons, a carpet manufacturer, was Ra-



Ritter Lumber Company leased a 15-acre tract for 20 years to build and operate a sawmill. Several tracts of timber in the county were owned by Ritter, and lumber was shipped out by the Tallulah Falls Railroad, which was adjacent to the property in Mountain City.



Mildred Burrell Gibbs, shown in Rabun County Memorial Hospital’s pantry in 1958, shows off home-canned goods contributed by residents for hospital patients.

bun’s largest employer for decades in Rabun Gap. It was later owned by Burlington Industries and Fruit of the Loom.

Transportation improvements included Rabun’s very first traffic light on Clayton’s Main Street in 1950, the paving of the road toward Hiawassee in 1952, and the beginning of the huge construction project on the “new” highway bypass 23-441 in 1956.

Rabun’s first hospital, Rabun County Memorial, opened on S. Main Street in Clayton in 1951, along with a new health department in 1952, and the arrival of several new physicians. Until this hospital opened, the only medical facility in Rabun County was a maternity hospital where doctors, nurses, and midwives delivered babies. Prospective mothers came

from several surrounding counties to this maternity hospital. Two new elementary schools in Mountain City and Clayton were also additions to Rabun’s infrastructure in the 1950s.

One of the biggest events of the decade was the filming of *The Great Locomotive Chase* in the autumn of 1955. Walt Disney himself visited Clayton and his stars included Fess Parker, Jeff Hunter, and Slim Pickens. Many of the actors and crew resided at the Duncan Motel in the heart of Clayton, current location of the parking lot behind the Clayton post office. The movie, a Civil War adventure, brought enormous economic impact because movie extras and set builders were employed, as well as motels’ and restaurants’ increased income. Rabun saw thousands of visitors from surrounding areas on weekends to view the filming. Filming was completed on sets in Los Angeles, and *The Great Locomotive Chase* was released in 1956.



Rabun native Doug Bleckley was discovered by Disney producers working at a restaurant in Clayton. He traveled to Los Angeles to finish filming the movie and was offered a long-term contract, which he declined.

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1961 to 1970

The decade of the 1960s in many respects was a bridge from the 19th century in Rabun County to what the area would become in 2000. The Tallulah Falls Railroad that had arrived in Tallulah Falls in 1882 finally ceased operation in 1961, and the rails were sold for scrap. Pillar of the community Dr. J.C. Dover, who began practicing medicine in 1899, retired from his practice in 1966 in a wholly different universe of health care provision. The decade ended with a dramatic Tallulah Gorge crossing by Karl Wallenda in July of 1970, but the feat had first been accomplished in the 19th century by a performer called Professor Leon in 1886.



A Karl Wallenda publicity shot, c. 1970.

Important new development came with the completion of the four-lane highway that bypassed Clayton to the east in 1965. Savannah Street was extended from Main Street to connect with this new transportation corridor. The Kingwood golf resort in Chechero was begun in 1966 by

developer Larry McClure who also started what would become Rabun's newest town, Sky Valley, in 1970. New courthouse construction also began in



Clayton Mayor W.S. Bearden in the Mountaineer Festival parade in his Ford Model T. Photo 1961

1966, completed a year later.

Watershed social events also occurred in the 1960s in Rabun. Schools were integrated in September of 1965 when eleven African-American children were enrolled. The first of four Vietnam War casualties was suffered in 1966.

In the world of entertainment, Rabun Countians enjoyed their first radio station in 1961 as well as the first Mountaineer Festival. The iconic square dance venue, the Mountain City Playhouse, reached the peak of its appeal in the 1960s as hundreds packed the building every Saturday

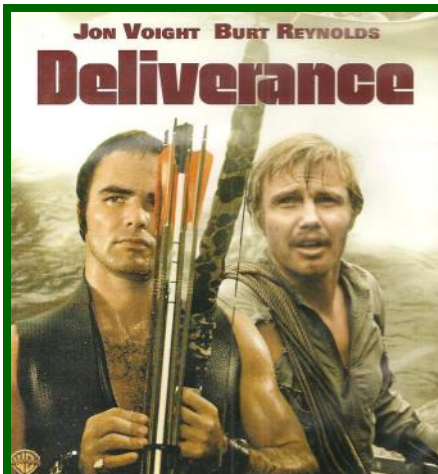
1971 to 1980

night.

Overall, the 1970s heralded good news along several fronts, including an announcement in 1976 that the Burlington, Clayburne and Empire manufacturing plants accounted for just under one-third of the county's total employment. Additional announcements in 1980 revealed that, for the first time, Rabun's combined real estate and personal property value exceeded

\$100 million, while the county's population exceeded 10,000.

One event which helped to further spur Rabun's economic and population growth was the filming of *Deliverance*, in 1971. The movie not only established the county as a popular film location, it further stimulated tourism, an industry which now included rafters careening down the newly designated Wild and Scenic Chattooga River, and hang gliders riding the air currents



This Warner Bros. advertising poster featured stars Burt Reynolds and Jon Voight.

surrounding Hang Glider Heaven.

As is often the case, such growth was accompanied by growing pains, especially in regard to the expansion or repair of water, sewer, garbage disposal, police and fire protection, and road services. To address the latter issue, between 1970 and 1992 the county paved approximately 50% of all its graveled roads.

Educational advances included completion of the Foxfire Heritage Center in Mountain City (1976-77), and the opening of a new consolidated Rabun County High School (1977), the old school having burned in 1975. The new high school meant that Rabun Gap Nacoochee School entered the 1977-78 year as a totally private

1981 to 1990

The 1980s began and ended with controversies. Following a lengthy court battle, in 1983 the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals made a final ruling that a lighted cross located within Black Rock Mountain State Park must be removed, citing a violation of “excessive government entanglement” with religion.



The lighted cross on Black Rock Mountain, circa 1980.

Another controversy revolved around the question of how to protect mountain land from overdevelopment while respecting the interests of developers, merchants and private land owners. After a number of attempts to pass a Mountain Protection Act, the measure eventually was incorporated into the much broader Georgia Planning Act of 1989, the purpose of which was to facilitate comprehensive statewide planning.

On a less controversial note, Rabun’s business interests continued to

flourish with the opening of two new shopping plazas, Savannah Place and the Covered Bridge Shopping Center. In addition, by 1988 Rabun was home to 329 firms employing 3,919 people. The construction industry also took a step forward when, in 1986, local builders formed an association to protect and promote their interests.

1991 to 2000

Three themes, present in previous decades, continued to define Rabun’s standing at the turn of the new century. Natural beauty and a high quality of life remained the county’s most prominent strengths, a theme that was reinforced in 1991 when *U.S. News and World Report* named Clayton one of eight retirement “hot spots.” The designation came as no surprise, since *Rand McNally’s Retirement Places Rated* already had ranked Clayton/Clarkesville as the second best retirement location in the country, once in 1987 and again in 1989.

Agriculture also remained a prominent economic theme. In 1994, for example, the county’s top two agricultural crops, poultry and vegetables, accounted for a combined sales figure of \$4.1 million.

A third theme involved the dilemma of how to strategically manage Rabun’s future. Some, concerned about threats to the manufacturing sector, called for a more diverse workforce. Others suggested that more attention be given to the county’s growing cultural, economic and generational diversity. One UGA researcher suggested that local leaders focus on Rabun’s reputation as “resort

country” to develop a range of educational programs and tours (by car, jeep, foot, donkey and llama) related to local plant, wildlife, cultural and geological history.

The expenditure of \$25 million between 1997 and 2000 for capital projects rivaled that of the Great Depression. Included in the funding, which came from a mix of local, state and federal sources, were five new recycling centers, along with a new senior center, civic center, and raw water source at Lake Rabun. The funding also supported a new enhanced 911 emergency response system, along with the merger of Rabun Memorial Hospital with Ridgecrest Hospital.

Summary

A few final figures help to highlight Rabun’s progress during the twentieth century: In 1900, the county had no automobiles, no national forest land, no golf courses, and relied mostly upon agriculture for its economic base. In 1999, the county had 17,700 automobiles, 135,448 acres of national forest land, four golf courses, and its economic base included a mix of agriculture, textile manufacturing and tourism. Also, between 1900 and 2000 Rabun’s population more than doubled from 6,285 to 15,050, a growth pattern that no doubt will continue as local leaders build upon the county’s past achievements while taking advantage of future opportunities.



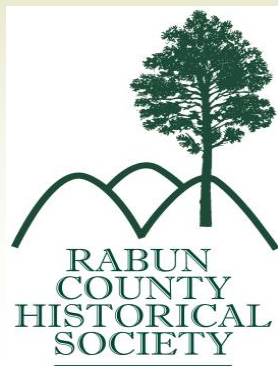


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- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00 and on Wednesdays from 12:30 until 4:30.
- Group tours by appointment



Chastain Store

This building was constructed in 1922 by L.M. Chastain, former Rabun County School Superintendent and businessman. Operated first as a grocery and dry goods store, the building has also served as a barbecue restaurant, post office, and home to a printing business. The building was purchased from the Alley family by Belle and Bob Voyles to be put back into commercial use.
Restored 2000
Rabun County Historical Society 2015

York House Inn

Mollie Gibson acquired this property from her grandfather in 1873. With husband William T. York, they grew the farm to 400 acres. The two-story chestnut log farmhouse dates to 1846. The inn began in 1896 and was expanded in 1907 to 26 rooms. This is one of Georgia's oldest bed and breakfast inns. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it is the oldest continuously operating business in Rabun County.
Rabun County Historical Society 2015

Historical Marker Project:

These are the most recent bronze plaques to be erected by the Society.