



The River and Time: Pigeon's Toxic Past

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The 660-square-mile Pigeon River basin in western North Carolina and northeastern Tennessee includes a spectacular gorge, high mountains, and lush timber stands.¹

North Carolina's Haywood County, home to 47,000 people, boasts 18 peaks rising 6,000 feet above sea level. It receives 50 inches of rainfall each year that help fill several freshwater tributaries, all but one of which flow into the Pigeon River.

From there, the Pigeon River flows across the state line into Tennessee's Cocke County. By the time it reaches the tiny municipality of Hartford (population 500), the river flows placidly,

continuing through the county seat of Newport (population 7,000), to its junction with the French Broad. Just beyond, the French Broad River runs into artificially created Douglas Lake.

This well-watered, richly forested mountainous region would seem to be ideal for a flourishing tourism industry. In fact, along a 5-mile stretch through Cocke County, Tennessee, the river creates rolling rapids that spawn some of the nation's best whitewater for rafters, kayakers, and canoeists.

Until recently, however, the river's usefulness as a recreational resource has been limited because of the pollution its waters carry.

In the early 20th century, after a brief period as a mountainous retreat for some of the nation's wealthiest families, pulp and paper manufacturing supplanted tourism as the Pigeon River basin's primary industry. In fact, Champion's Fibre Mill was probably the largest pulp mill in the world when it became operational in 1908.

If we include purchases of wood and other locally produced products used in the manufacture of pulp and paper, this industry dominated a region far larger than the area defined by the basin itself. Meanwhile, the damage done by the mills' liquid effluent defined a larger region still, extending about 65 miles from North Carolina into Cocke County, Tennessee.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, cash income was desperately needed by the mountain people of southern Appalachia. Expanding families and shrinking patrimonies ensured a diminishing agricultural base. As a consequence, cash was scarce, education poor, and medical facilities inadequate.

By the early 20th century, mountain people were in desperate need of a stable economic base. Enter the pulp and paper industry.²

Propensity for Pulp

By the turn of the last century, the exploitation of Appalachia's natural resources, especially coal and timber, had been progressing for several decades. Concerns of the region's few conservationists were muted. In fact, state governments either ignored the exploitation or, more likely, encouraged it. Indeed, when the paper industry expanded at a phenom-

enal pace at the turn of the century, and pulp and paper entrepreneurs cast covetous eyes on the great forests of Southern Appalachia, state governments were there to help them exploit the resource.

The behavior of North Carolina's state government typified such cooperation. In 1901, Colonel S.A. Jones of Waynesville secured passage through the state's general assembly of an "act to encourage the building of pulp and paper mills and tanneries in the counties of Haywood and Swain." The act stipulated:

that every corporation, company, or firm who may expend one hundred thousand dollars in establishing a factory to convert wood into wood pulp shall not be subject to any criminal prosecution for the pollution of any watercourses upon which such factory or factories are located, and the measure of damages to the owner or owners of lands over which the water flows from such factory or factories shall be confined to actual damages, to be ascertained as provided by law.

The act goes on to say that, in case of a lawsuit, the company could file a bond and in so doing was relieved of any threat "of restraining order or injunction." In other words, while a lawsuit was under way, operations could continue.³

Such favorable legislation came about because rumors were rife that a paper manufacturer was studying the area as a potential site for a pulp mill. Indeed, common knowledge at the time held that pulp and paper industrialists or their agents were investigating the lay of the land, forests, rivers, railroad facilities, and labor force.

One of the tycoons investigating the area in 1901 was Peter G. Thomson, an Ohio industrialist

who needed a steady source of pulp for his Champion Coated Paper Company in Hamilton, Ohio. By 1905, he was actively purchasing thousands of acres of North Carolina timberland. He also was surveying eastern Tennessee for a suitable location for his proposed mill.

Many still believe that Thomson faced no opposition in locating his pulp mill, but that was not the case. In fact, handed-down stories in Cocke County, Tennessee, relate how he approached some of the county's large landowners for the purchase of land along the French Broad River for his mill. Though environmentalism had yet to be born, these landowners knew of the stench and dirtying of the water that would accompany pulp production, and so, as the story goes, they refused to sell.⁴

What little opposition that surfaced, however, was of minor consequence in the face of the overwhelming support and enthusiasm for the mill. In fact, a bidding war of sorts began, with various localities offering themselves to Thomson. The mill could be located in Cocke County, the *Newport Plain Talk* editorialized in early 1906, "if the people act promptly. The entire county would be greatly benefited."

The newspaper, in fact, urged the county's Board of Trade to pursue the mill "with all haste and energy possible."⁵

Carolina Wins Out

At it turned out, Cocke County did not get the mill; that honor went to Canton, North Carolina, 60 miles upstream. In fact, all Cocke County received after the plant became operational in 1908 was the colored, foamy, smelly efflu-

ent carried off by the Pigeon River.

Thomson had settled on Canton because land was abundant and available, as were the pure waters of the Pigeon River. Beyond that, he had already purchased thousands of acres of timber, which were ready to be cut. The Southern Railroad reinforced Thomson's choice of Canton by agreeing to haul wood and fiber and construct necessary trackage at a reasonable cost.

In the 1900 U.S. Census, Canton boasted a population of 230 residents. By 1910, two years after the mill became operational, the city's population had grown to 1,393.⁶

Though Thomson had won the North Carolina legislature's blessing, he was not finished safeguarding his business. The legislation merely protected his company from injunctions that could halt production; thus Champion Fibre was still vulnerable to lawsuits.

To protect himself from legal action, Thomson sent his agents downriver as far as the mouth of Jonathan Creek knocking on doors of nearby residents and obtaining their signatures on a document "releasing Mr. Thomson and his heirs...from damages on account of the pollution of the waters of the Pigeon."

Prosperity was on the way to Haywood and adjoining counties. In fact, the rumble of prosperity reached as far west as Cocke County, Tennessee. Lumber camps on Champion land employed scores of laborers. Independent farmers cut their stands of timber to Champion's specifications, and the company paid them cash for their wood. Employees at the huge mill received steady

paychecks, and the pay was good.

Economically and socially as well, the coming of the Champion mill was a boon for the region. Only the environment suffered, and in the climate of opinion of 1908, the people of Haywood County and North Carolina accepted the stench and the pollution as a suitable trade-off. They were delighted and proud to have the new industry in their domain.

The Pigeon River System is an interstate waterway, originating high in the mountains of North Carolina and flowing across the state line into the Volunteer state.

Before the Walters' project, which dammed the Pigeon and created Waterville Lake in the late 1920s, the polluted Pigeon River flowed unrestricted into Tennessee and through the heart of Newport. For decades, pollution was so bad that Cocke countians dubbed the Pigeon the "Black River."

In addition to its offensive color, the stench, especially on hot summer days, was almost intolerable, and the foam was sometimes two to three feet thick. Few industrialists wanted to establish factories along such a stream, and tourists took one whiff and packed their suitcases.

Guided by their disgust over the condition of the Pigeon, Tennesseans voiced their protest. Time and again, state representatives, usually from Cocke County and Newport, introduced bills in the general assembly imploring the attorney general to bring suit against Champion for damages.

In 1909, just a year after the plant opened, the attorney general promised to bring suit against Champion but failed to do so because of lack of funds. Tennessee's colorful Governor Ben

W. Hooper, who had been born in a cabin overlooking the Pigeon River, promised to push litigation during his term of office (1910-1914). Despite his pledge, anti-pollution legislation never materialized.

In the pages of the *Newport Plain Talk* of April 18, 1912, the sinking of the Titanic took second place to a Champion announcement that the company was making massive changes to cut the pollution even though the company insisted the effluent was harmless in spite of the stench, the color, and the foam. Regardless of Champion's claims, the pollution continued.⁷

The company litany continued for decades: The pollution was nontoxic and harmless; the company was doing everything to limit it; and when new technology was developed, Champion would use these advances to cut the pollution.

Not until 1983, 74 years after its initial attempt, did Tennessee mount a strong legal case against Champion. North Carolina, which continues to reap the financial benefits from the pulp mill, sided with Champion and has continued to do so.

Pigeon River Today

Today, more than 80 years after the mill opened, the waters of the Pigeon flow substantially cleaner, though still not clean enough. The water's brown hue, measured in color units near the Tennessee line, differs greatly from day to day and would differ from hour to hour if measurements were taken that often.

In the past, measurements commonly read as high as 200, but today they are registering consis-

tently below the 50-unit color limit required by Tennessee law. The water does not smell as bad as it did in the past, nor is it topped with as much foam.

How does it happen that today the Pigeon River flows cleaner despite decades of Champion's denial and recalcitrance? Did the states of North Carolina and/or Tennessee bring this about? Did a popular uprising of environmentalists force Champion's hand? Was the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) instrumental in forcing the cleaning of the Pigeon River?

No. In fact, none of these factors turned the tide. Champion was motivated more by an interest in modernizing and boosting its plant's efficiency than by cleaning up after itself. Some observers predicted that the company's modernization program would cost the region 300 to 500 jobs. However, as of February 1996, Champion had announced less than 65 layoffs.⁸

Indeed, a cleaner Pigeon River is little more than a fortuitous byproduct of Champion's yen to update its plant.

It is a fact that improved technology aimed at efficiency and economy in the pulp and paper industry usually results in less pollution. This is especially true at Champion's new oxygen-delignification process, which reduces but does not eliminate chlorine-derived effluent.

Scientific investigations have a place in the story because the effluent, long described by the company as harmless, has been proven extremely toxic. Moreover, most of the cutting-edge scientific research on pulp and paper mill toxins continues to be negative. This is especially true

of the breakdown of chlorine, a chemical used heavily in paper bleaching.

Throughout this process, environmentalists—locally the Pigeon River Action Group, the Dead Pigeon River Council, the Foundation for Global Sustainability, and the Izaak Walton League—have maintained a drumbeat of protest, some since the mid-1980s. Yet, there is no proof that this sustained opposition motivated Champion's corporation officials to launch the plant's modernization scheme.

When Tennessee began litigation against Champion in 1983, the situation had changed drastically since the first demand to sue in 1909. One difference was the stable of rules and regulations to which the mill must adhere. When North Carolina ignored its own regulations by issuing variances, and when there was finally a federal EPA to back up Tennessee's assertions, Champion's situation changed.

Champion Today

Champion officials are facing a new era in which environmentalism will not go away, in which an increasing population needs more potable water, and in which scientific discoveries link more and more carcinogens to chlorine and its derivatives.

The situation has so changed that the corporation finally is facing reality—that is, it's finally seeing the light. Instead of being dragged kicking and screaming into the 21st century, Champion may be taking the lead in ending pulp and paper company pollution.

An indication of this change occurred in June 1994 when Champion announced that a new

bleaching technology would be used at the Canton mill. According to the company's news release, the new system, at a cost of up to \$30 million, should further clean the Pigeon River.⁹

What of the people of the Pigeon River basin? Tourism is clearly taking a more important place in the region's psyche, and certainly in its economy. Tourist shops now line the main street of Waynesville. Folkmoot, an international dance festival, is held every summer in Haywood County. There is an annual vintage car meet, balloon rallies at Maggie Valley, and plans for the Smoky Mountain Railroad to enter Waynesville.

Whitewater rafting, always a potential tourist attraction, has come into its own for two reasons. First, Carolina Power and Light Company, the local utility, now periodically releases water from Waterville Dam for the use of whitewater runners; second, the Pigeon is now sufficiently clean to support a profitable rafting industry.

As a result, a dozen rafting companies have set up shop, and more than 30,000 rafters and kayakers enjoy the thrills of the Pigeon each summer. Champion is playing a role in the region's tourist boom by sponsoring an annual whitewater competition.

Yet, with barely half the personnel it employed during the 1980s, Champion will watch its influence on the economy, society, and politics of the region decline as tourism rises. In fact, its application for a new North Carolina water-release permit in 1996 has been met with the usual complaints: The Pigeon remains polluted, smelly, and discolored.

No one doubts that the permit

will be granted, but all signs are that Champion will continue its efforts to clean the river. Meanwhile, the future of Haywood and Coker counties looks bright.

The climate of opinion concerning uses of the Pigeon River has changed, and a new era is beginning for the people of the Pigeon River basin—one in which economic development and environmental protection will proceed hand in hand.



NOTES

1. For a fuller discussion of the issues raised in this essay, see Richard Bartlett, *Troubled Waters: Champion International and the Pigeon River Controversy* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995).

2. Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982).

3. State of North Carolina, *Sessions Laws, 1901*, pp. 917-918.

4. Interview with Charles Moore, formerly executive officer of Coker County, September 14, 1989.

5. *Plain Talk* (Newport, TN), circa 1906.

6. *The Log* (House Organ of Canton Mill), December 16, 1926.

7. Ben W. Hooper (Edward Robert Boyce, ed.), *The Unwanted Boy: The Autobiography of Governor Ben W. Hooper* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1963), pp. 6-16.

8. *Enterprise Mountaineer* (Waynesville, North Carolina), February 23, 1996.

9. Champion news release, June 14, 1994; *Mountaineer*, June 15, 1994; Newport *Plain Talk*, editorial, June 27, 1994.