

## Setting the Stage

Establishing a location for settlement depends on both the availability of resources and the ease of transportation. In the Catoctin Mountains of Maryland, the forest simultaneously provided an exceptional source of raw materials and an obstacle to farming and transport. Since settlers saw wood as an inexhaustible resource, they chose to cut at will so they could grow more crops and move more easily over the hilly terrain. This attitude toward the forest meant that by the beginning of the 20th century many of the areas mountain slopes stood bare. Most surviving trees then died during the next generation, as the Chestnut blight, a fungus originally from Asia, spread over the area.

The New Deal began the long process of reclamation and reforestation. Throughout the country the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built public recreation areas on damaged land like that in the Catoctin Mountains. These areas, called Recreational Demonstration Areas (RDAs), provided organized camps that enabled urban dwellers to escape the city and enjoy the benefits of nature. The section of the Catoctin Mountains near Thurmont, Maryland, was one of the sites selected to be developed into an RDA. Although most of the 46 RDAs established across the country were eventually turned over to their respective states for management, much of the Catoctin RDA was retained by the federal government as part of the National Park System. Today, Camp Misty Mount, one of the camps within the Catoctin RDA (now called Catoctin Mountain Park), is significant for several reasons. Not only is it a prime example of National Park Service rustic architecture, but it also represents a successful WPA project that continues to meet the recreational needs of individuals and organized groups from Baltimore, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. Perhaps most important, Camp Misty Mount has allowed the forest to regrow.

## **Camp Misty Mount: A Place for Regrowth**

The gentle Hunting Creek water gap in Maryland's Catoctin Mountains has long drawn people to it. Although the Susquehannoughs, northern Iroquois, and Algonquins who lived in the area had battled one another for many years, these tribes agreed to preserve this bountiful place as neutral ground. Starting in the 1730s European Americans arrived in increasing numbers, as second-generation Americans and German immigrants pushing out from Philadelphia turned southwest at the Susquehanna River.

Throughout the 18th century, Germans, Swiss, and Scotch-Irish continued to appear. Some trudged on west in search of fertile lands, but many settled the mountainsides. One of the area's largest communities became known as Mechanicstown, a name reflecting its thriving manufacturing and service industries.

Crucial to successful settlement were trees. Originally legions of them covered the mountainsides, but their ranks began to fall as European Americans moved in. Settlers cut them to build simple but sturdy log homes and to clear fields for farming. On creeks water-powered sawmills popped up, producing lumber for more elaborate houses or for distant markets. When an iron furnace was built near Mechanicstown, larger areas were clear-cut for the charcoal needed to feed its voracious appetite. By the beginning of the 20th century, most hills had been stripped of their guardians and bore only scars of erosion. Starting in the 1930s, however, people began to reclaim the land. The story of how the area near Hunting Creek regained its forest is the story of Camp Misty Mount.

# The Changing Uses of the Catoctin Mountain Forest

Farming and timber harvesting and jobs associated with the iron industry were the primary occupations of people living in the Catoctin Mountains during the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. Several sawmills operated in the area, and wood—especially the abundant American Chestnut—was used for fuel, railroad ties, barrel staves, and mine supports. Thousands of additional acres were clear-cut to make charcoal for the Catoctin Iron Furnace. Other residents found work in the range of manufacturing industries that prospered in Mechanicstown, now known as Thurmont.

At the end of the 19th century the area's economy began to decline. In the 1880s many local workers became unemployed when the furnace stopped using charcoal; those who survived this cutback lost their jobs later when the entire operation closed in 1903. Sawmills used up the remaining large timber by 1911; the last barrel stave factory closed in 1926, after the Chestnut blight, a fungus originally from Asia, had killed virtually all of that species. Years of poor farming practices and many fires from logging operations also had damaged the natural resources of the region.

Conditions in the area deteriorated as the 1930s continued. During the early part of the Great Depression, rural Maryland fared better than much of the country. While many urban residents found themselves without work, farms managed to provide an adequate living for their occupants. As a result many city dwellers returned to the country, which for a short time supported them as well. Several years of drought, however, combined with the increased population to overtax the local economy. Limited state aid was insufficient to ease these economic problems, and so in 1933 Maryland applied to participate in federal relief programs. Maryland's struggle coincided with a growing back-to-nature movement. Many influential people, including members of the Roosevelt administration, believed that Americans needed to move back to, or at least spend their leisure time in, a natural environment. A National Park Service study of the time illustrated these ideas:

Man's loss of intimate contact with nature has had debilitating effects on him as a being which can be alleviated only by making it possible for him to escape at frequent intervals from his urban habitat to the open country....He must again learn how to enjoy himself in the out-of-doors by reacquiring the environmental knowledge and skills he has lost during his exile from his natural environment.<sup>1</sup>

President Roosevelt's New Deal contained programs that attempted to meet these goals and at the same time offer relief from the Great Depression. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration, for example, spent \$5 million to acquire submarginal land—that is, agricultural property that did not provide its owners

reasonable incomes—that would create new sites for public recreation. A series of federal agencies subsequently created 46 "Recreational Demonstration Areas" (RDA) across the country; these spots were either waysides along important highways, extensions to national parks, additions to state scenic areas, or camping areas. In addition to providing recreation, RDAs also contributed to efforts to conserve water, soil, and wildlife resources.

The federal and state governments soon identified the Catoctin Mountains of Frederick and Washington Counties, Maryland, as a potential camping area. The guidelines for that type of RDA called for 2,000 to 10,000 acres deemed submarginal, a metropolitan area of at least 300,000 people within a day's round trip (considered at that time to be 50 miles), an abundance of water and building materials, and a generally interesting environment. Around the Catoctins much of the land was submarginal: of the 50 families relying on agricultural production, 8 were making a subsistence living from the land, 26 were cutting timber, and 16 were living on relief. The area was just under 50 miles from Baltimore and Washington, each of which far exceeded 300,000 people.

Though most of the forest was gone, many large, dead trees remained; the area also had ample water. As a result, starting in 1934 the Federal Government sent letters to landowners in the area explaining the program and offering to purchase their land at a fair price. Enough landowners sold their property that the project began the next year.

The Catoctin RDA was scheduled to include four public recreation group camps and two picnic areas. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) hired hundreds of men: the number of workers at a given time averaged 250, but in one case rose as high as 595. In 1939, after the completion of the building program, workers from the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)—another Depression- era relief program—occupied a camp and constructed waterlines, set stone walls, and trimmed trees. Each young man (ages 18- 25) received \$1.00 per day in wages, room, board, and the opportunity for some education. The men enrolled for six months and could reenlist. These federal relief programs ended abruptly with the onset of World War II. As the nation geared up for the coming battles, both industry and the military provided jobs for all who could be recruited.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *A Study of the Park and Recreation Problem of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941),