



BOATING, FISHING & SCENERY AT FONTANA LAKE

The Rest is History. Every year on the first Sunday in July, Etta Welch boards a pontoon boat at the west end of Fontana Lake in Swain County, North Carolina. She and her family take the short trip across the scenic mountain lake and disembark at the mouth of Hazel Creek. "This is where I grew up," she smiles. "Of course, it's all gone but the cemeteries now."

Hazel Creek and Proctor were lumber towns in the early 20th Century. Etta's father worked with the crews of men and horses who "snaked" the logs to the railroad tracks for shipment all over the Southeast. But in the early '40s, the war effort demanded increased electrical power and the 480-foot Fontana Dam was constructed, creating an 11,700-acre reservoir and cutting off the tiny communities. The residents were forced to leave and their once-booming towns became part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It was a sad chain of events for families like Etta's, but the resulting Fontana Lake was undeniably a spectacular addition to the already breathtaking mountain landscape.

A Working Town Turned Resort. "In 1944, 5,000 men and their families lived in this community," says Craig Litz, marketing director at Fontana Village Resort. "They were building Fontana Dam, the highest in the Eastern United States. That town has become our resort." History buffs can learn about the massive construction project at the Fontana Dam Visitor Center and many cross the lake to visit Proctor, where remains of the lumber town are still visible. But most visitors come for more typical lake activities. "Boating, skiing, sightseeing and fishing are big draws," says Litz. "Fontana is unique in that the shores are protected from development. When you're out there, it's pretty much water, sky and tree-covered mountains."

A Complete Smoky Mountain Playground. With 87% of Swain County located within National Park and Forest lands, it is an unrivaled outdoor playground. Fontana Lake is renowned for its fishing, with record-threatening largemouth bass, walleye and steelheads. The rushing streams are home to rainbow, brown and brook trout. Nearby, the Nantahala River churns up the most exciting whitewater kayaking and rafting in the Southeast. And for dry land diversions, visitors take to the hills for mountain biking, trail riding and hiking through the pristine wilderness. If you're into outdoor fun, you'll love this place.

Preserving the Natural Wonders. Surrounded by natural beauty, it's no surprise that Swain County residents are concerned with protecting the environment. "Here at Fontana Village Resort we organize lakeshore clean-ups and 'walk-about' along trails and roadways," says Litz. "It's actually great fun. Even our guests participate."

For some Swain County natives, preservation has more to do with childhood memories. "Those yearly visits to my folks' graves were so special to me," says Etta Welch, who at 90 is no longer able to climb the paths to the cemetery. "It's just good to know they'll always be there," she muses. "Born and raised here in these mountains, I have a lot of good memories."

For more information on touring the Smokies, contact the Swain County Chamber of Commerce, 210 Main Street, P.O. Box 509, Bryson City, NC 28713; chamber@greatsmokies.com; or 800-867-9246.