

The French Broad by Wilma Dykeman

Glimpsing the Past of a Tough and Fragile People

To the Cherokee, the river was personified as Long Man, The River, an integral part of Indian life. It was all at once tied to their religion, their livelihood, and their recreation. They called the French Broad, Agiqua, and he was fed by his Chattering Children, the brooks and streams. Specific parts of the river had their own names to reflect his differing moods and natures.



Moonshine was part of the way of life of many mountain folks. By the 1930s, moonshiners transported their illegal liquor by automobiles, from the foothills of Appalachia into large cities. When government agents started chasing these bootleggers NASCAR racing was born.



Early travelers to the mountains portrayed the picturesque beauty of the French Broad River (1871).



Mountaineers were independent and self-reliant. Crafts were born from creating necessities and adding personal expression. Later they became a way for subsistence farmers to raise cash.



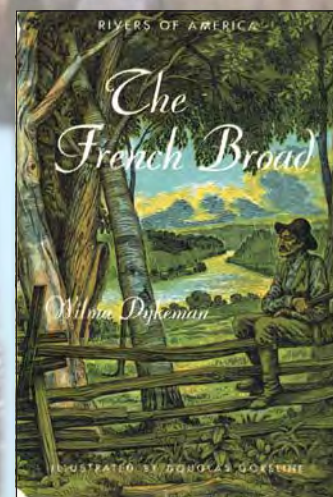
Wilma and her husband, James Stokely, once drove cross-country with the Rivers of America collection of books to learn about the great rivers in our country. When they returned, James said to Wilma, "Why don't you write a book about the French Broad River?" She contacted the publishers of the Rivers of America series, and was almost rejected because they thought the name was a joke, and they were not aware of the importance of the river. When Wilma sent in her manuscript, it included a chapter on pollution. The response from the editor was that pollution was a dead topic and she should remove the chapter. Wilma was not about to do that, instead titling it "Who killed the French Broad?" in order to make it sound like a murder mystery!



"The Moonshiners home." Life near the river was isolated and full of difficult terrain.



"The French Broad is a river and a watershed and a way of life where day-before-yesterday and day-after-tomorrow exist in odd and fascinating harmony." Wilma Dykeman (1920-2006) lived close to the French Broad River her entire life. She spent a good portion of her career fighting to preserve and protect this river, even when it was not a very popular thing to do.



The French Broad is a collection of stories depicting historical events including the Civil War, the death of explorer Elisha Mitchell, Jesse James Bailey, sheriff of two counties, the birth of the Tennessee Valley Authority, and much more. Wilma realized things are constantly changing. Because of this, it was important to her that people understand their history so they know where they came from and can use that knowledge to see where they are going. In her words, "This is one glimpse into the past, and one glance at the present. Perhaps it provides some perspective for the future." Published in 1955, the book is still in print and is recommended reading for a whole new generation of mountain residents.



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