

AN
INFORMAL
HISTORY
of



By Ty Martin



The first permanent residents of the Tryon area were in place in the 1750s, although their number was small and grew very slowly. A post office, which might be said to be the first sign of community, was established near Howard Gap in 1839 to serve "the foothills settlement." By 1877, it had been joined by two stores in the area. The coming of the railroad a few years later marked the real beginning of the town of Tryon, which was incorporated in 1885. Four years later, it was recorded that there were then 24 homes, 3 stores, and the depot comprising the village.

Local legend has it that, in 1893, William Gillette, a 40-year-old actor from Connecticut suffering from depression and ulcers, was taking a train south to Florida for his health when it was delayed for some reason at Tryon. Gillette joined other passengers in detraining and looking around. Quite unexpectedly, Gillette ran into an acquaintance from "up north," Dr. Charles Jenks, who offered to walk with him. According to one version of the tale, they walked up and over the hills, possibly to the area known as "Dark Corners," where Gillette's poor health caught up with him. He sought succor in a nearby house and, in four days, was made well through the use of home remedies.

Gillette had been much taken with what he saw, and soon returned to the area to make a place for himself. Bit by bit, he acquired land (29 tracts by 1917). He first built himself a log cabin, and then set about constructing a larger house with the assistance of his brother-in-law, George Warner, who, over the years, also laid out bridle paths and walking trails capitalizing on the natural features of the area.

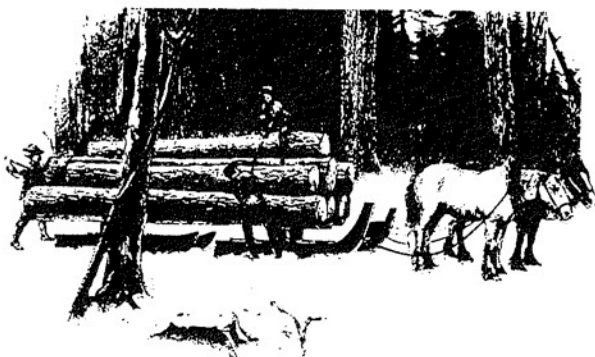
In the early 1890s, New York producer Charles Frohman approached Sir Arthur Conan Doyle about securing the rights to use his by-then-famous detective in a stage drama. Conan Doyle decided to write a play himself, turning out one of five acts which eventually wound up with Frohman. The producer didn't like it, as written, and requested Conan Doyle's permission to have it rewritten – and also to have the respected actor William Gillette in the lead role. The author agreed, and Gillette came to Tryon to do the rewrite, producing a four act story based on several of Conan Doyle's stories, none of which he had ever read before accepting the rewrite assignment. When done, he traveled to England to get Conan Doyle's approval in person, meeting the author dressed in a deerstalker cap, an Ulster cape, and carrying a silver-headed cane. He walked up to Conan Doyle, eyed him through a magnifying glass, and said, "Unquestionably an author." Approval came quickly, with Conan Doyle listed as co-author. Opening in New York in November 1899, Gillette's portrayal was the first of Holmes on stage and was so successful that it became his stock in trade. He played the role until in his 80s, doing so for the last time in an hour-long radio broadcast from station WABC in New York in 1935.

In 1904, again in Tryon, William Gillette wrote a second Sherlock Holmes piece: this time a one-act comedy in which the usually discursive detective is completely silenced by a loquacious female client. When it opened in New York in March 1905, Ethel Barrymore had the female lead. All Gillette did, as Holmes, was pantomime – he spoke not a single word. Critics loved it.

Gillette retired from the stage in 1910, thereafter making several “farewell” tours. The Tryon house was used by himself and the Warners until 1925, when the Warners moved out and the estate, nearly 700 acres, was sold to a group of businessmen incorporated as the Thermal Belt Development Company for development as an exclusive residential section. By this time, Tryon had two banks, electricity, Southern Mercerizing, the Pine Crest Inn, and a road opened to Saluda and Hendersonville. The developers promptly had landscape architect Lawrence V. Sheridan of Indianapolis, Indiana, draw up plans for a “prestigious” residential development based on the natural features emphasized by George Warner’s system of paths and trails. Lots were laid out ranging from one-half to five acres. The first lot sale – “Lot Number Eleven (Estabrook Section of Thermal Hills)” – was to Miss Leila May Fears of Tryon on 7 January 1926, and was near the vineyards that then extended up the slope of Piney Top. Miss Fears’ cost was \$125. Four of the five sides of the lot were denoted as being bridle paths. The registered deed included nine items in covenant that limited the land’s use to a single-family dwelling which cost not less than \$4000. This and the other stipulations were to remain in force twenty-one years from 1 January 1926.

A plot map issued in 1926 shows "Gillette Woods" encompassing an area which began at the first curve in Carolina Drive off South Trade Street (before Redbird Road) and proceeded along Carolina Drive to a point near the original St. Luke's, where the line angled south to the state line, which it followed for about a mile before following an irregular line somewhat to the north of it. After another mile, the line turns abruptly north to intersect Hogback Mountain Road at Sandy Gap. It then turns east along the road about 150 yards before turning north again for about the same distance, and then east to roughly parallel the road. Where Hogback Mountain Road joins Carolina Drive, the boundary of Gillette Woods turns north to parallel the former, remaining about 500 feet to the west of it until it turns east again and rejoins Hogback Mountain Road at a point west of what today is the Thermal View Heights development (itself a covenanted area). The boundary then follows along Hogback Mountain Road and Laurel Avenue to its intersection with Doubleday Road. From there, it turns south to Forest Lane and along it and Braewick Road for some distance before angling "cross country" to rejoin Carolina Drive in the vicinity of the present Gillette Woods marker on Carolina Drive.

William Gillette's house, on what is today Lot T15-D5, was reopened in 1926 as the Thousand Pines Inn and remained in operation until 1976. It subsequently was purchased and, after refurbishment, again occupied as a private residence.



The crash of 1929 killed both Tryon banks and very nearly brought the entire development project to an end. However, Waverly M. Hester, an original partner in the enterprise, went north to see the aged William Gillette, apparently at his Hartford, Connecticut, home, and enlisted the actor's financial support to tide the business over. (Gillette died in 1937.) Revitalized, sales resumed, and by 1941, when the developer reorganized as Gillette Woods, Inc., about fifty residences were in place.

World War II brought development of Gillette Woods to a halt when the Government "froze" all building materials for the war effort. In order to meet corporate financial commitments, merchantable timber on the yet-undeveloped land (west of the Thousand Pines Section) was felled and sold beginning in June 1942.

With nearly fifteen years of development behind them, late in 1940, the developers drew up a revised and expanded set of covenants which went into effect on 1 January 1941. In it appeared requirements on setbacks and easements, and a scale of minimum costs and square footage for houses depending in which section of the Woods they were located. Significantly, these new covenants provided for a "Neighborhood Committee" for

each section to have a voice in its development, each lot having one vote. The covenants were declared in force until 1 January 1969, at which time they would be automatically extended for successive ten-year periods, unless changed in part or entirely by a majority vote of the then owners of residences. On 28 November 1945, the neighborhood committees, under the temporary leadership of Jerry D. Drew, Henry M. Huxley, Daniel P. Mitchell, Dr. Charles G. Sewall, Montgomery Whaling, and George W. Whitehead, met "at the Parish House" and coalesced as the Gillette Woods Association "...to protect and promote the interests of owners of property in the tract known as Gillette Woods..." based upon the 1940 covenants. The organization's new articles of association went into effect on 14 February 1946. Mr. Whitehead became the Association's first President and Mr. Drew the first Secretary-Treasurer. Annual meetings of the membership were called, officers and committees elected or appointed, and dues were \$10.00 annually for "Active Members" (entitled to vote and hold office) and \$5.00 for "Associate Members" (vote only). A nine-member Executive Committee, including President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer, conducted Association business. Annual meetings were set for the third week of each January. The area's developer,

Gillette Woods, Incorporated, was

included as a dues-paying Association member, with one vote.

Because of an ice storm, the first annual meeting was delayed until 14 February 1946, when it was held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell.



The early years of the Association were occupied with the sorts of problems typical of a new organization and a new community: construction of water mains and preparing an owners' map of the area (1947); lobbying for the paving and marking of roads and extension of the existing signage, lighting, and fire hydrant system (1950); reduction of Association dues to \$1.00 (1951); funding a "Roadside Committee" for the regular collection of trash along Association roads (1954); working to improve the appearance of the area around the water treatment plant through the planting of "native shrubs" (1960-1); and looking into the matter of zoning (1961).

By January 1962, development of the Woods had proceeded from the originally named Glenwalden, Overlook, and Thousand Pines Sections to include the Mountain Park, Piney Ridge, and Upper Crest (sometimes called "Upper Crust") Sections. These later sections were being opened up by The Mountain Land Improvement Company, as a subsidiary of Gillette Woods, Inc., under the leadership of Mr. Hester. This company had extensive holdings atop Melrose Mountain. Not only had many homes been built within the original boundaries, some had gone up in areas adjacent to them and had voluntarily acceded to the Gillette Woods covenants. As a result, a map issued in that month by the developers showed additional areas on both sides of Hogback Mountain Road up to what is now the entrance to the Melmont development as being part of Gillette Woods. (This map was formally established as the legal depiction of Gillette Woods by an affidavit filed with the Polk County Registrar of Deeds in 1985, superseding the original 1926 map.)

In 1963, by which time Hogback Mountain Road had been paved to its present extent, a 20,000-gallon reservoir fed by springs and a well was erected above the upper end of the Upper Crest Section by the developer to provide water to new residences going up in that section and to another in the Mountain Park Section below. Cost was estimated at \$35,000, which was charged off to sales. The developer also paid the Town of Tryon to extend its water lines up Hogback Mountain Road to cover the lower section of that thoroughfare.

Beginning in 1963, a major concern of the Association was the planning then beginning for the possible zoning of Tryon and Polk County. Mr. Gary Cooper, Assistant Planning Director of the Western North Carolina Regional Planning Commission in Asheville, briefed the membership on what was involved at the May 1964 annual meeting. President Joseph D. Kerby assured the attendees that the Association would be actively represented at every step in the process. A zoning ordinance finally became law in 1967 with Gillette Woods largely zoned in accordance with the covenants.



The summer of 1965 saw a four-month campaign by the Association in local newspapers and on local radio to reduce the amount of trash left along roadsides in the town in general and in Gillette Woods in particular. Sadly, the final item admits little success and closes with a plaintive "If we said 'Please' would it help?"

Mr. Louis H. Ingwersen presented a three-color map of Gillette Woods at a November 1966 "annual get-together" at Oak Hall. It depicted the roads within the Association's area and provided numbered residence locations with an accompanying list identifying the current residents. Those present decided to have it reproduced and made available at The Book Shelf to anyone interested for \$1.00 (and to Association members for \$.50). This same "get-together" also voted to have "specially designed" road markers prepared delimiting Gillette Woods. Mr. Ingwersen was involved in this project, too. The Town of Tryon provided some monetary support for this project as it obviated the need for it to provide signage. All were installed by the spring of 1967.

By early 1971, the summit of Melrose Mountain and adjacent slopes, which had once been in the plans of The Mountain Land Improvement Company, were beginning to see development by the Melrose Mountain Development Corporation under William E. Hyotlaine of Jupiter, Florida. Abutting, as it did, the western end of Gillette Woods, what was to happen in that area was of great concern to the Association. Mr. Hyotlaine was invited to speak at the April annual meeting and, in fact, did so, providing an overview of his concept for "Melrose Mountain Lakes" (which echoed those publicized earlier by Mountain Land) as well as promotional materials for attendees. The Association formed a "watch dog" committee under William J. Davis to observe the development and report anything of concern.

The State of North Carolina enacted a law in October 1971 requiring that all water systems providing service to more than fifteen families be established as public utilities. This affected the system serving homes on Hogback Mountain Road and Dug Hill Trail, and because

The Mountain Land Improvement Company had been liquidated and Mr. Hester now personally owned the system, he tried to interest both Mr. Hyotlaine and the Town of Tryon in purchasing the system. Atop the mountain, Mr. Hester proposed a union of the two systems under the management of the Melrose Mountain Development Corporation. The talks went on for over two years without agreement. In 1973, when he could make no deal, Hester turned the system over to the two dozen or so families then using the system at no charge, and they formed the private, non-profit Mountain Water, Inc. As a part of the arrangement, the Town was permitted to install a holding tank on private property at Sandy Gap in return for a commitment to provide a back-up source of water to these owner-users in the event of drought. This marked the final transaction in the original development of Gillette Woods. Waverly Hester, involved in it for a half-century, died not long thereafter.

By 1976, the members of the Gillette Woods Association felt the organization had so matured that it ought to be formalized and given legal status. Members in committee began the task of revising the covenants, some of which had been overtaken by time, and to undertake the steps leading to incorporation of the Association. Incorporation and the new covenants became effective on 1 January 1979, with 126 "Charter Members." The Association officers who spearheaded this effort were President Edwin C. Rinker; Vice Presidents William J. Davis, James M. Kirk, and Wallace W. Lockwood; and Secretary-Treasurer Mrs. Elizabeth Patterson. Dues were set at \$10.00 a year. The first annual meeting of the new corporation occurred on 21 May 1979 at the United Methodist Church with "nearly 100" attendees.



By 1980, so many new owners had appeared in Gillette Woods that the Ingwersen map of the area was impossibly outdated. J. Howard Gotthardt undertook making the revisions so that the Association could have a current edition for publication. Unfortunately, a high turnover in owners caused the effort to have to be repeated in 1984. That edition, too, soon was outdated, but the Association leadership came to the conclusion that there were enough maps of the now-well-established area from other sources to render further effort and expense unwarranted.

The year 1980 also saw new road and entrance signs approved, carved by Robert F. Shannon. These, in turn, were replaced in 1994 by new ones carved by Mervin Oakes.

The Tryon Town Council decided, in 1984, to review its 17-year-old zoning ordinances to determine if any changes were necessary. Since, under North Carolina law, a town exercises zoning authority over the area out to one mile beyond its established limits, this meant that virtually all of Gillette Woods might be affected. Association leadership attended meetings as the review process proceeded and made sure those in town government involved were aware of the existing covenants.

When the revised ordinances were enacted the following year, all of Gillette Woods south of Hogback Mountain Road was zoned in accordance with those covenants, but the area north of that road, most of which was beyond the Woods boundary, was zoned for single family dwellings on half-acre lots. The Association's lawyer at the time, however, reported that, under North Carolina law, the covenants, being a private compact, took precedence over such ordinances where litigation occurred.

In 1995, at the age of fifty, the Gillette Woods Association can look back on a half-century of dedicated effort contributing to the improvement and preservation of the quality of life in the community. From pressing for road paving and fire hydrants in the early days to preserving the natural beauty found here, under the leadership of some very dedicated residents the Association has, in a largely unheralded manner, fulfilled its purpose of promoting and protecting the interests of the home owners within its boundaries.



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