



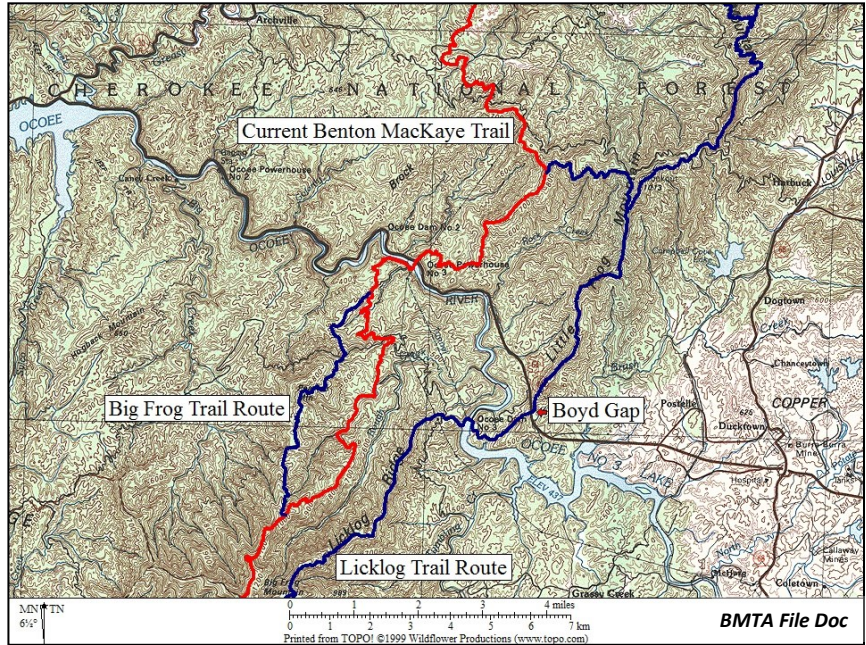
# TRAIL ROUTES THAT DIDN'T MAKE THE CUT PART 1

By Marty Dominy

Over the years, various routes have been proposed for particular segments of the Benton MacKaye Trail. Many are part of the trail as we know it today while others never made it beyond a line marked on a map. A few proposed trail routes actually were scouted and flagged before being rejected.

For those unfamiliar with the original concept plan, the proposed route between Springer Mountain and Rocky Mountain in what is now Section 6 was drastically different from the Benton MacKaye Trail of today. As proposed, the trail would have run parallel to Forest Road 42 to Doublehead Gap, then along the Tennessee Valley Divide to Rich Mountain, over Big Bald and Little Bald, down to Stanley Gap, then along the old Rich Mountain Trail where the trail now intersects the Stanley Gap Trail. The biggest problem was the private property west of Doublehead Gap. The proximity of Forest Road 42 to the trail for the first seven miles was not a mark in the plus column, either. This route would have required substantial rehabilitation of parts of the now abandoned Rich Mountain Trail south of Stanley Gap. The Forest Service proposed the current route from the Duncan Ridge Trail on Rhodes Mountain, so that is where construction started in 1980.

In the late 1980's, a route was scouted through the eastern part of the Cohutta Wilderness. Keep in mind that the Forest Service had a policy at that time that new long trails had no business in a designated Wilderness. Going around the Wilderness to the east would have been a daunting task and would have bypassed the great high elevation features we know and love today. In the early 1980's, a road was open all the way to the old firetower on Hemp Top. In time, this road was closed back to the Peniten-



January 8, 1989. There was a brief scouting trip that started on the east side of Haw Knob, just into North Carolina and about a mile from Mud Gap where the Benton MacKaye Trail is now located. This picture shows the construction of the Cherokee Skyway. There was an existing trail, the Hooper Bald Trail, that ran from Mud Gap over Haw Knob and Big Junction to Hooper Bald, well east of the current Benton MacKaye Trail route. The Skyway was superimposed on parts of this old trail.



*Up on Forest Road 221 south of the Ocoee River Gorge. Dominy believes this is looking northwest toward Chilhowee Mountain.*



*On the sharp ridge south of Ocoee #2 Dam looking west or downstream over the Ocoee River Gorge. It's doubtful you actually can see the river due to the shadows, but the highway is on the right and the flume is on the left. This was the ridge Clayton Pannell and Dominy descended.*

tiary Branch Trailhead. Scouting and flagging took place to get the trail off the road as soon as was practicable north of Watson Gap. The objective was to have a trail that had no contact with an active road until it exited the Big Frog Wilderness in Tennessee. The Forest Service eventually approved the route from Watson Gap to the Jacks River Trail. They rejected a route that continued north along the west slope to a point north of the Penitentiary Branch Trailhead where the Benton MacKaye Trail would have joined the closed segment of the road to Hemp Top. The rejected route stayed about a quarter-mile west of the road to preserve the perception of a trail in the wilds. What wasn't known by those scouting the trail at the time was that the closure of the road from Dally Gap to Penitentiary Branch Trailhead was imminent. The Forest Service directed the BMTA to design a more direct route from the Jacks River Trail to the now closed road at a point one mile north of Dally Gap. That is where the trail is located today.

Just across the line in Tennessee, there was a great debate about where to cross the Ocoee River. Some influence on this crossing was made by a similar debate of where to cross the Hiwassee River. The concept plan had the trail crossing the Hiwassee at the Highway 68 bridge just outside of Farner. In the meantime, while a crossing of the Ocoee at Ocoee #3 Powerhouse and the use of the Dry Pond Lead Trail was favored, other options were explored. Some suggested that the route could follow the Licklog Trail after leaving Georgia, cross Ocoee #3 Dam, cross Highway 64 at Boyd Gap, and follow the ridge leading directly north to Sassafras Knob at the north edge of the Little Frog Wilderness. This suggestion was taken so seriously that most of the BMTA Board of Directors toured Ocoee #3 Dam one Saturday. In addition, the abandoned trail between Boyd Gap and Sassafras Gap was scouted and measured so that an accurate evaluation could be made. But, the Ocoee #3 Powerhouse crossing with the Dry Pond Lead directly across the highway was hard to beat, so that is where the trail would be located.

If one thinks that the selection of the Ocoee River crossing made things simple between the north end of the Big Frog Wilderness and the Ocoee River, one would be wrong. The initial thought was to follow the Big Frog Trail all the way to its north end at the Sheeds Creek – Peavine Road (Forest Road 221). A route was scouted and flagged to build new trail west of the existing Forest Road 45 all the way to the river. Lo and behold, the Forest Service determined that most of that route would be the ideal location for a relocated and much improved upper half of Forest Road 45. So, it was back to the drawing board. Plan "B" was to depart the Big Frog Trail at the Fork Ridge Trail, descend to the west

on the Rough Creek Trail, follow the abandoned [roadbed down and build new trail to Forest Road 221 opposite where old Forest Road 45 intersected.](#)

North of Forest Road 221, the Benton MacKaye Trail would follow the roadbed of old Forest Road 45 and cross to the west side of the current Forest Road 45. [A short section of very old, graded trail would be used to approach the rim of the gorge.](#) This is where a big challenge started. Clayton Pannell and Marty Dominy waded through briers to scout the ridge leading directly to Ocoee #2 Dam and the rafting put-in. The idea was to descend along the west slope of this ridge above the flume before circling the ridge near the dam and coming out into the flats near Thunder Rock Campground. In retrospect, it was decided that kicking loose rock down the steep slope into the river would not improve hiker – rafter relations. Others got in on the act. At one point in time, there were at least five different



*In this picture, you can see the powerlines, the highway, the river, the bridge over the river at Ocoee #3 Powerhouse, and if you look carefully, the surge tank above the powerhouse. The ridge in the background should be the south end of Little Frog Mountain with the high point on the left being Panther Knob*

lines of flagging ribbon with various colors extending from the rim of the gorge to the banks of the river. Eventually, a route down the cove where the trail currently resides was approved by the Forest Service.

One of the most controversial and drama filled events in the history of the BMTA occurred on the workday advertised as the first day of building trail into the gorge. Participants for the workday arrived on the site to be informed that construction would be postponed in hopes of getting the Benton MacKaye Trail routed to a yet-to-be-built bridge at the proposed Olympic whitewater venue. While maintenance on other trail sections took place that day, it was expressed in no uncertain terms that the effort taken over months and months to get the trail route into the gorge approved would not go wasted. Trail construction into the gorge proceeded in the following months.