



Southeastern Kentucky Mountain Country

By Melissa Wolcott and Al Martino

Photos by Melissa or Al unless otherwise noted

If you want a taste of America as our pioneering forefathers experienced it, and as numerous country music stars have immortalized it, a visit to Southeast Kentucky is in order. Take a trip on US 23 (the Country Music Highway) along the beautiful Appalachian mountains and soak in the breathtaking vistas, and the mountain culture.

We flew into Lexington via Delta Airlines, and drove about 1 1/2 hours to the Jenny Wiley State Resort Park. It was an amazing ride, past verdant rolling hills with horse farms, and on to the mountains. Jenny Wiley State Park is one of the largest in Kentucky, with a 1,100 acre lake, towering pines, peaceful mountains, and 10 miles of hiking trails.

We checked into the park's comfortable rustic lodge, our room overlooking pine trees and a stream. There are also



Jenny Wiley State Resort Park Lodge.

courtesy Jenny Wiley State Resort Park

duplex cottages available for rent. We checked out the lodge's spacious restaurant, and found it was open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, serving good old Kentucky cuisine with locally grown produce.

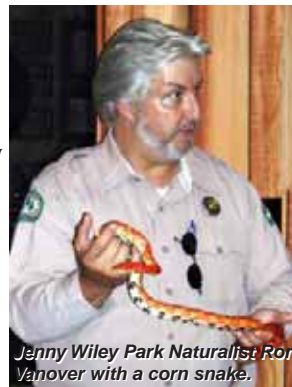
An unusual attraction at this state park is the outdoor amphitheater which presents Broadway musicals, comedies and dramas starring local and traveling actors. Nestled in the trees, it



A view of the gorge at The Breaks

is one of the prettiest spots to enjoy a play. One of the theater's most popular shows is *The Legend of Jenny Wiley*, which dramatizes how in 1789, a group of Shawnee and Cherokee Indians erroneously abducted Jenny (a young mother), from her cabin to avenge murders in their tribes which were actually committed by one of her neighbors. The Indians killed Jenny's children, but after remaining in captivity for 11 months, she managed a hair-raising escape to find her way home, reunite with her husband, have 6 more children and live to be 71. Her story is one of tenacity and faith and is representative of the spirit of the early settlers. It is fitting that the powers-to-be chose to name the state park after her.

The park has a nature center with informative programs presented by park naturalists from Memorial Day through Labor Day. We met Naturalist Ron Vanover, who introduced us to some of the park's wildlife, and actually had us up at the crack of dawn for chance elk sightings. It was very hazy in the early A.M., but we did manage to spot a few elk and deer. Elk were native to the area until around 1850, but were over hunted. They were reintroduced in 1997 (mostly from Utah) and now number around



Jenny Wiley Park Naturalist Ron Vanover with a corn snake.

4,000. The naturalists are hoping the numbers will reach 7,500.

At the Jenny Wiley pool we met a very interesting gentleman, named Russell

Rice, who carves wood canes. His canes are quite beautiful, and well thought out. He searches for interesting wood shapes — preferably branches that have vines on them. He pulls



Russell Rice with some of his hand-carved canes.

the vines off, and carves the naturally twisted branch into different shapes, according to what they "remind" him of — such as snakes, owls, flamingos, etc. He then paints and varnishes them. Each piece is unique. His canes and walking sticks are sought out by collectors, and are in the possession of some famous folk.

We mentioned the County Music Highway earlier — aptly named as the area has produced some of the biggest names in the musical genre. Loretta Lynn and her sister Crystal Gayle, Billy Ray Cyrus, Naomi and Wynonna Judd, Tom T. Hall, Patty Loveless, Ricky Skaggs and Dwight Yoakam are a few that come to mind.

Loretta (Webb) Lynn's story is perhaps the most well-known, with her auto-biographical song "Coal Miner's Daughter",



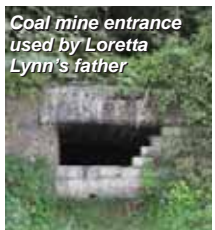
Loretta Lynn's brother, Herman Webb, outside their childhood home.

and her life story played out on the big screen. Her childhood home in the "holler" (Butcher Hollow) is still intact and open for tourists. We visited the home (located in Van Lear) one afternoon, and came away with a different perspective on "poverty". Yes, the home was a simple log



The original bedroom in Loretta Lynn's childhood home.

cabin when she was a youngster, with no running water and an outhouse, and certainly not enough room for a family with eight children, but at the time, and compared to most of the holler's inhabitants, the Webbs were not considered poor. On the contrary, they had their own well next to their house, which was quite desirable, and the home is situated on 8 beautiful green acres next to a tree-lined mountain. As they say, you can't miss what you've never had.



Coal mine entrance used by Loretta Lynn's father

Driving around the county, you may see some very humble homes, but everyone one of them has a green yard, trees and an incredible view of the mountains.

Herman Webb (Loretta Lynn's brother) is soft-spoken gentle man, and lives just down the road from their childhood home.

He gave us a tour — and the low-down. The house is about 100 years old, four rooms downstairs and two upstairs, and everything in it is original but one couch. The Webb's ancestry in the area goes back 180 years. In 1986, he put cement under the house (it was on rocks) and there was no indoor plumbing in the whole hollow — nor electricity until the 50s. The mines were active until 1948, and the family moved out in the 50s, but the home was never sold. Herman said the movie "Coal Miner's Daughter" was very close to the truth. Although her digs have somewhat improved (14 room plantation home), Loretta and her husband "Moonie" stayed overnight at the old home on their 25th wedding anniversary. Moonie passed away in 1996. The Webb house built for the movie is an exact replica, and Loretta had it moved to her plantation, which is now open for tours.

The toughest part of life in the holler was for their daddy, Melvin, the coal miner. (In this part of the world, everyone calls their parents mommy and daddy forever.) Melvin and the other miners worked on their hands and knees with picks and shovels. The ceilings were too low to stand up, and miniature mules hauled out the coal on flat cars. They worked 12 hours a day, 6 days a week for no cash. They received "scrip" which could be turned in at the company store to buy their goods. The Tennessee Ernie Ford song "Sixteen Tons" comes to mind with the line "I owe my soul to the company store." The 100 year-old company store is located down the road from the old Webb home, and was bought a few years back by Herman for preservation.

We drove to Mountain Home Place in Staffordsville for lunch and a tour of the "living history" museum. Our delicious tender beef and home-made sauerkraut lunch was provided by



The 1860 McKenzie house at Mountain Home Place.

Wilma's Restaurant, who caters Mountain Home Place from her restaurant in Paintsville.



The McKenzie house hearth.

Mountain Home Place is a reconstructed 1800s Scotch-Irish settler's farmstead with costumed interpreters. All the buildings were moved there from Paintsville. The setting is wonderfully replicated, with



Costumed interpreters perform 19th century duties at Mountain Home Place.

acres of land and trees, and no sign of anything past the 19th century in sight. Buildings are spaced far apart, as they would have been in the day. The McKenzie house dates to about 1860, and the one-room school-

house to 1889. To build the school back then, every family had to donate 4 logs. Teachers had to be very well educated. Our



A Mountain Home Place resident.



The one-room schoolhouse at Mountain Home Place.

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document was an educator, and claimed she couldn't pass the test they gave back then for teachers, it was so difficult. Students in those days used goose-quill pens and ink made from elderberry juice. One of the important crops raised at the time was cane sorghum, and corn was grown as feed for the animals, and for grinding into meal for the family.

In Salyersville, we visited Pioneer Village, a collection of early log cabins that was founded by the President of the Historical Society, Todd Preston, who had the vision to rescue these old treasures from various spots around the county and transport them to a town square. Dating from 1810 to 1868, they represent the early settlement of eastern Kentucky.



Todd Preston gives a tour at Pioneer Village.

Riding along the byways we noticed a lot of homes still had their own small family grave sites near the house, well tended and full of flowers. It would appear Southeastern Kentuckians are not very transitory, which speaks well for their love of home and hearth.

The Big Sandy Heritage Center is located in Pikeville, and was originally a railroad depot built in 1924. The museum houses the history of the region, and has exhibits relating to the Civil War, Daniel Boone and even the most famous feud in American history — the one between the Hatfields (W.VA) and the McCoy's (KY). The feud (begun in 1863) was over a lot of things — a forbidden romance between the two families (a la Romeo & Juliet), stealing, murder, interstate election improprieties, etc. That's why it carried on for so long. By the end (1924) public sentiment was on the side of the McCoy's. (Could that be because they were Kentuckians?)



A typical pioneer display at the Big Sandy Heritage Center.

Of particular interest to us was a small exhibit of a young black poet — Effie Waller Smith, born in 1879, the daughter of slaves. She was a gifted writer who mused about life on the Cumberland Mountains, and achieved some notoriety in spite of racial adversity, but died in obscurity. She left three volumes of verse, three short stories, and a few poems she wrote for exclusive literary magazines, all published during a thirteen-year period. There is movement afoot to have her prominently recognized as an important early black female writer. You can read several of her poems at http://www.womeninkentucky.com/site/literature/e_smith.html.



Effie Waller Smith

On to another scenic wonderland — the Breaks Interstate Park (the "Grand Canyon of the South") bordering Kentucky and Virginia. This is one of the largest canyons east of the Mississippi, and where Daniel Boone came looking for the best

A magnificent view at The Breaks



The Breaks Park Interpreter, Terry Owens

route across the Appalachian Mountains. He finally settled farther west on Cumberland

Gap, but surely not before enjoying the vistas from these mountains. The park has 15 miles of hiking trails, with loads of colorful wild flowers, and a lodge with breathtaking views of the gorge and Russell Fork River. Our park interpreter, Terry Owens, pointed out that osprey, turkey vulture and red-tailed hawk could be seen flying in the gorge.

A drive to Elkhorn City revealed a great gem for railroad enthusiasts — The Elkhorn City Rail Road Museum, with over 1,000 pieces of memorabilia. We saw several cabooses and motor cars, antique uniforms and equipment, and heard some colorful stories by our guide, Wendell Ward. There was a bit of history on one of the most famous cats in America, the sleeping "Chessie", the sym-



The Elkhorn City Railroad Museum displays.

bol of the Chesapeake RR, which started as an ad for how comfortable their sleeping cars were. Chessie soon adorned calendars and posters, and



"Chessie"

became as famous as a movie star in her day, receiving lots of fan mail.

Neither of us play golf, but we were almost tempted to take up the sport just to be able to play at the StoneCrest Golf Course in Prestonsburg, which is an 18-hole championship course set on a mountain top, with amazing vistas. We arrived at sunset, and drove a golf cart around the 7,000 yard course just for the beauty of it. The area is a community in the making, with homes, a proposed industrial park, and various sports fields



The beautiful Stonecrest Golf Course.

located on different levels of the mountain. The attractive clubhouse has a dining facility, and we enjoyed a delicious steak dinner catered by Four Guys and A Grill.

Speaking of food, there are a lot of great "home cookin'" places in Southeastern Kentucky, as you would



"Home cookin'" at the Windmill Restaurant.

expect. Some of the ones we sampled were Billy Ray's in Prestonsburg (home of the "Pool Room Burger" and Billy Ray's "Prime Roast"), and The Windmill in Pikeville, serving fried green tomatoes, stack cakes, home picked and canned beans, and yummy "sawdust pie" (similar to pecan pie).

Something we came away with from our Southeastern Kentucky trip is a respect for the

people, a lot of which come from generations of hardscrabble living, yet are filled determination and love of their land. They have their own culture, are proud people — warm, friendly and generous — and live in God's country. Who needs the big city? ❁

If You Go...

- Big Sandy Heritage Center** - Pikeville, KY, 606-218-6050; www.bigsandyheritage.org
- Billy Ray's - Prestonsburg** - (606) 886-1744
- Breaks Interstate Park - Breaks, VA** - 276-865-4413; www.breakspark.com
- Delta Airlines** - 800-323-2323; www.delta.com
- Elkhorn City Rail Road Museum** - Pikeville, KY, 606-754-8300
- Four Guys and A Grill** - Prestonsburg, (606) 889-0048
- Jenny Wiley State Resort Park** - Prestonsburg, KY, 606-886-8052; www.kystateparks.com
- Loretta Lynn Home (Butcher Hollow)** - Van Lear, KY, 606-789-3397
- Mountain Home Place** - Staffordsville, KY, 606-297-1850; www.mountainhomeplace.com
- Paintsville Tourism** - 606-789-1469; www.paintsville.org
- Pikeville - Pike County Tourism** - 606-432-5063; www.tourpikecounty.com
- Pioneer Village** - Salyersville, KY, 606-349-7678
- Prestonsburg Tourism** - 800-844-4704; www.prestonsburgky.org
- Russell Rice** - East Pointe, KY, 606-886-8687
- Southern & Eastern Kentucky Tourism** - 877-TOUR-SEKY; www.tourseky.com
- StoneCrest Golf Course** - Prestonsburg, KY 606-886-6777; www.prestonsburgky.org
- Wilma's Restaurant** - Paintsville, KY, 606-789-5911
- The Windmill Restaurant** - Pikeville, KY, 606-432-2222

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