



History of the Ouachita Trail 1970-1997

by John Archer



I was the District Ranger in the early 1970s on the Jessieville District of the Ouachita National Forest. One day Art Cowley, Forest Recreation Staff Specialist, stopped by our office that was in an old CCC building on Indiana Avenue in Hot Springs. We were going to participate in a new program with the State called Green Thumb. The State would hire and pay workers and the Forest Service would furnish the work. It was a program to employ senior folks to do good work and supplement their income. Art told me about his idea of building a foot-trail across the Ouachita National Forest. It sounded like a great idea.

In a short time, each Ouachita NF Ranger District that would be involved had a Green Thumb crew of five to eight people. Art had plotted out a general route for the trail on a Forest map. He had the locations where the trail would enter and leave each District. I presented the trail proposal to my District Staff. Most were a little apprehensive about whether the trail would be used by the public. Leonard Ernst was our Resource Assistant; he would be our trail construction manager. The problem was Leonard had never been around trail construction. Luckily, I had quite a bit of trail experience as District Ranger of the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area in Virginia.



Ouachita Trail Dedication
left: Alvis Owen, Ouachita NF Supervisor
right: Judy Koffman, Green Thumbs Director AR

The District had just received new USGS Topo Maps for the middle of the District going east to west. All we had previous to this were planimetric maps which would be useless for locating a trail. We got the new maps out and taped together enough to put a rough location for the trail. One of the first things I noticed was that we had two major creeks to cross. They were North Fork and Irons Fork.



John Archer retired in 1997 from the U.S. Forest Service after 42 years of federal government service. From 1970-1997, he was Ranger for the Jessieville District of the Ouachita National Forest. John, a graduate of North Carolina State University with a BS in Forest Management, began his Forest Service career on the Cherokee National Forest (TN). Before coming to the Jessieville RD, John was a Forester on the Cumberland NF (KY), Forester and then Assistant Ranger on the Daniel Boone NF (KY), and Ranger on the Jefferson NF (VA). John and wife Sue live in the Hot Springs, AR area. They have two children, two grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. John enjoys photography and shooting his pistols and antique M-1 rifle.

Irons Fork was a long way off so we didn't worry about that crossing. I didn't figure we would get money to construct a bridge across either; though we could cross North Fork on the State Highway 298 bridge. At that time Highway 298 (Possum Kingdom Road) was dirt and gravel. The section by the road was close to some pretty scenery and might be a good place to train the crew and start construction. Leonard and I went out to flag the first section of trail. I took a picture that has faded over the years. It took about two weeks to build the trail to the North Fork Road. Now the crew was ready to start building west from Highway 7.



Gravel Highway 298 (1970)
aka Possum Kingdom Road

The Green Thumbers started digging west toward Highway 298. My idea was to build trail connecting little used old roads and put it through as quickly as possible. We would then backtrack and replace the roads with dug, single-track trail on a more permanent location. Construction went good through most of 1971. The crew moved to Ouachita Pinnacle and continued west from the tower site. We used a considerable part of FS Road 107 on the east end of Blue Mountain as trail. That part would have to be relocated later. On one occasion, the crew encountered a mountain lion while driving to the tower site. The crew was walking over two miles to get to

their work which seemed to be a lot for people their age. We decided to move to the other end and continue east from where the North Fork of the Ouachita River section ended. The trail progressed well until the walking distance got excessive again. There was a four-mile section in between that seemed unreachable by the Green Thumb Crew. The shortest way to the top was to hike straight up the mountain. The Forest Supervisor gave us enough money to use some of our younger people to build that section. We had enough for four people for two weeks.

Dillard Graves was the FS crew leader. He would locate the trail as well as help with construction. Wimp Adams, Dewey Watson, and Earl Teal were the crew. They had worked for a couple of days, and I hiked up on the mountain to see how they were doing. There were lots of rocks where they were working. Progress was slow. Wimp was a long-time resident of Possum Kingdom, an area south of Blue Mountain. He told me of a trail that was used years ago by a man named Joe Noles. It was around the time of the Civil War that Noles, who lived north of Blue Mountain, carried corn on his back from his place on the North Fork, to the grist mill in Possum Kingdom. The trail went down the ridge top of the mountain. Wimp said, "Here it is." He kicked some leaves back and there was a smooth place. It took some imagination but you could almost see the Joe Noles Trail. You could feel it because there was a tread or path with few rocks. Some of the old trail was lined with rocks. We could resurrect that trail much easier than we could build a new one. The only problem was the Joe Noles Trail didn't pay much attention to slope. When the ridge top went up steeply, so went the trail. Some places were over 20% grade. I made the decision to use this old historic trail

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as part of the Ouachita Trail. We could relocate later if we got too much use and it eroded. To my knowledge the trail remains at that location.



Ouachita Pinnacle Fire Tower (1966)

By August 1972, we had a walkable trail of 21 miles going from Highway 7 to Highway 298. Leonard got a call from the leader of a Boys Club from Memphis, Tennessee. They would like to take a backpack trip on the Ouachita Trail. He put them on to our new trail. They decided to hike the entire 21 miles in three days. I went out and met with them. There were a lot of young boys in the group. I took their picture. To my knowledge, they were the first group to backpack on the Ouachita Trail. They didn't make the whole 21 miles.

One of the problems we had in early days of the trail was signage. Signs were to be ordered from the Regional Sign Shop. A District had to have a completed sign plan approved by the Regional Sign Coordinator before a sign order could be processed. I had an approved sign plan for my District in Virginia before coming to the Ouachita. It would take a month for a person to complete. There are a lot of signs on a 100,000 plus acre District with several hundred miles of road. We were working on the sign plan as time allowed so we could order signs for the trail. Jim Wanner, Forest Recreation Staff, called me one day and asked, "How would you like to make your own signs." Jim had been assigned the job of Forest Sign Coordinator by the Forest Supervisor in addition to his other jobs. He had been working with a representative from the 3M Company on a big sign for the Kerr

Arboretum in Oklahoma and discovered that 3M sold sign-making materials. We could buy brown aluminum back ground material and reflector letters; just make the sign with those materials and mount it on a ¼-inch board that was cut to size. All the early signs were made this way. Later, Green Thumb furnished a crew to make routed signs; the Forest Service bought the equipment. They worked for years in their shop on Indiana Avenue in Hot Springs.

Between signs we marked the trail with a triangular reflecting marker. These were neat. The trouble was they made good souvenirs. Dillard came in one day and said that log trucks had been picking up lost Texans on the Gladstone Road. That road runs parallel to the trail about one to three miles to the north. We decided to mark the trail with blue paint. This helped lots.

Leonard Ernst was transferred south and was replaced by Tom Hawks. Tom came to us with trail construction experience. Even better, he liked to get out and flag the location on the ground. He did a lot of good work locating the trail section from Highway 298 west to Highway 27. The big problem was how to cross Irons Fork. We looked up and down the creek. We decided on a beautiful place where we could make a crossing with a cable bridge. Engineering in the Forest Supervisors office vetoed that idea. The Forest Engineer had worked on the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee where they had several swinging cable bridges. People would get them swinging and would eventually pull out an anchor making the bridge unsafe. We ended up crossing the creek on Road 148 at a gravel crossing.

In mid-1974, Tom Hawks was promoted to District Ranger on a District in the mountains of Georgia. Rex Mann replaced Tom as our District staff person in charge of the trail. Dillard Graves, our Engineering Technician, was doing most of the relocation for the final trail location. Rex and I were checking a section of the trail on the north side of Blue Mountain that replaced Road 107 with a single-track trail. An owl flew out of a tree and glided down and crossed the trail. Rex said, "Look at that hoot owl!" We noticed that backpackers had been camping at that location. That place became known as Hoot Owl Gap. Later we located a wildlife water hole nearby. I know that water holes are not the best source of drinking water but it's better than walking a mile to a creek.

During the mid 1970s the Forest Service was requiring employees working with tools in the woods to wear government contracted steel-toed boots. The low bid on the contract was by a company I had never heard of. We were getting a lot of complaints about those boots. Rex said that he would find out if the complaints were justified. He planned to walk the section of trail from Ouachita Pinnacle to Highway 298, and do some painting and check on trail condition. He wore the dastardly boots. I dropped him off at the tower and went on with what I was doing that day. Later I was to pick him up at the 298 trailhead. I got a radio call from Rex, "Pick me up at the North Fork road trail crossing." When I met him he was barefooted. Those off-brand boots were not for serious trail hiking!



Inspecting Completed Section of Trail
(center: John Fleming, long time Outdoors Editor, Arkansas Gazette)

In the late 1970s the trail was getting more use. We had some young engineers in the Forest Supervisors Office that took an interest in the Trail. They designed the concrete bridge that now crosses Irons Fork. Long ago, a logging railroad followed Irons Fork going to the logging town of Stillwater. Looking for a place for the crossing, we saw numerous artifacts left by the railroad. It was said by old timers that the railroad washed out numerous times by the fast moving creek after a storm. I had doubts that the concrete bridge would last with the flooding that occurred annually.

In 1980 a contract to build the Irons Fork trail bridge was awarded to a couple of men from Mount Ida. It was completed for final inspection August 31, 1981. I went to check it out after the first big rain. Sure enough, it was still there. I hiked that section of the trail with the Ouachita Mountain Hikers. When they came to the bridge the first comment I heard was, "Isn't this a beautiful place!" The hikers were looking up and down the creek. That made my day.