

History of the Ouachita Trail 1970-1997

John Archer



Irons Fork Creek Bridge
Ouachita Trail

In the late 1980s I began thinking about some things we could do to make the OT more attractive to the public. I remembered that the Appalachian Trail had trail shelters located about every seven to nine miles. I spent a cold night in one in the Smokey Mountain National Park when I was in Boy Scouts. While on a district on the Daniel Boone National Forest we built some Adirondack shelters at dispersed recreation sites on Lake Cumberland. When I moved to the Jefferson National Forest, the Appalachian Trail had this type of trail shelter. I found a plan in my junk I stored in a cardboard box at home. David Saugey was our Biologist/District Resource Assistant at the time. I showed David the plan and asked him what he thought. He liked the idea but suggested we make them out of logs. There was a place over at Mena that made logs. I also asked Mike Curran, then our Forest Supervisor, what he thought about trail shelters. He said, "Have at it."

We picked the first location next to a creek that ran full-time, was fairly accessible and close to the trail. Mike Bean, one of our timber markers, was the builder. David ordered the materials and Mike went to work. We named that shelter the Big Bear Shelter. Tommy Savall, also one of our timber markers, was quail hunting one day in a Weyerhaeuser plantation that was nearby and had an encounter with a big bear. The bear rose up in front of Tommy and made a threatening gesture. Tommy held his shotgun, that was loaded with birdshot, at the ready to defend himself. The bear finally left Tommy to his bird hunting.



Big Bear Trail Shelter

The Uncle Bill Potter Shelter got its name from a shooting incident that occurred long ago. Jack Daniel shot Bill Potter on Potter's farm that was close by beside Irons Fork Creek. Daniel and his brother hid themselves behind some pine logs on nearby Sandlick Mountain. A posse led by the Yell County Sheriff was tracking the Daniel brothers with hounds. They got within rifle range of the fortified-up brothers who then opened fire. Two of the Sheriff's posse were killed and one wounded before the posse retreated. The Yell County Sheriff arrested three friends of the brothers in Garland County and took them to the Danville jail. A mob of fifteen masked men broke into the jail, got two of the friends and hanged them off the nearby Petit Jean River Bridge. The Daniel brothers escaped to their original home in Georgia. A version of the story was printed in Old West Magazine in the fall 1980 addition. Hot Springs author Oral E. Allbritton wrote an account of the events in the article, *The Deadly Summer* that was published in the 2000 edition of The Record, a publication of the Garland County Historical Society.



Uncle Bill Potter Trail Shelter

We built six shelters on the Jessieville District. When the Jessieville District and Winona Districts were combined in the mid 1990s we started east of Highway 7 with the shelters.

In the summer of 1973 there was a residential Youth Conservation Corps program set up at Camp Clearfork. We provided a trail project for a few of their crews. It was a trail from Iron Springs Recreation Area to the top of Short Mountain, then on to the Ouachita Trail. It would provide another trailhead or a starting point for a hike on the Ouachita Trail. The crews had reached the top of Short Mountain but had a way to go before reaching the Ouachita Trail. Tom Hawks told them that if they finished the trail to the Ouachita Trail they could name the new trail. They reached the OT on time and named the new trail after their Camp Director, James Hunt.

That fall I took my family on a hike on the new trail. When we got to the OT we decided to follow it back to Highway 7; then we could walk down to Iron Springs along the highway. While walking the highway an idea popped into my head: why not build a trail to Iron Springs parallel to the highway. That way we would have a loop trail about the right distance for a Sunday afternoon hike. The highway wasn't the way to complete a hike. Dillard Graves located that trail and the next summer the YCC built it. The Hunts Trail became the Hunt's Loop Trail.



Short Mountain Vista (elevation 1372 feet)
Hunt's Loop Trail

The "creek" at the trailhead on Highway 7 presented some problems. It is actually the Middle Fork of the Saline River. We first figured that it could be crossed on stepping stones, but any stones we put in the creek washed away. The first bridge was made by our maintenance worker, Ab Newkirk. It was made from four by fours decked with one inch boards. It didn't take long for it to wash away. The next bridge was longer and higher off the water. It used treated pole stringers and concrete abutments. One end was tied to a tree with a cable. It stayed up longer than the others but when the water got over it, one end washed off the abutment.

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It took a crew to get it back in place. Eventually we anchored both ends with cable. It floated up then came back to rest on the abutments. It lasted longer but we hadn't had a 100 year flood which we seemed to get every ten years.



Bridge across Middle Fork Saline River
Highway 7 Trailhead

In the late 1980s State Highway 7 became a National Scenic Byway. I found out that there was money in a program called ICETEA. Now, don't ask me what ICETEA stands for but to me—it was money that would come from the Federal Highway Administration to the Arkansas Highway Department to the Forest Service to the Ouachita Trail for trailhead parking and a bridge that wouldn't wash out. After many meetings, public involvement, and environmental analysis we had several projects approved for ICETEA money for the Scenic Byway. One was the trailhead parking and bridge on the OT. Engineering in the Forest Supervisors Office had it designed before I retired in 1997. It was finished a couple years later.

Our maintenance person who worked at the Jessieville Work Center for a number of years was Rector Ward. Rector had been in the CCC at the Hollis Camp. He had been a tower man and had served on the Ouachita Pinnacle Fire Tower for a period of time. The OT runs through the site of the Ouachita Pinnacle Tower. I heard from another tower man that there was a spring on the south side of the mountain below the tower. Tower men used to live in the tower and would get their water from the spring. I had looked for the spring in years past but never found it. Rector told me how to find the spring. There was more than one spring surrounded by many ferns. The trail continued on down the mountain. I followed it to the bottom where I came to Road J62. I figured that someone wanting to hike from the Highway 298 Trailhead to the tower could walk an additional mile or so and would

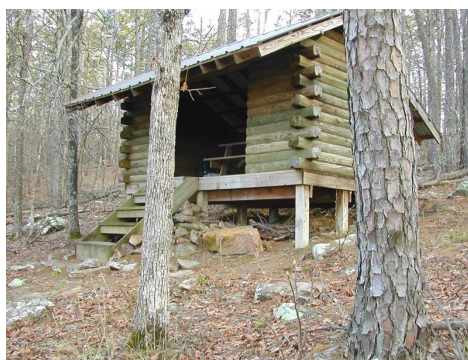
cut the shuttle time back to their vehicle in half. I imagine when the first Ouachita Pinnacle tower was constructed, this trail was access to the fire lookout tower.

Trail hikers and bikers owe a special thanks to those that did the digging of the Ouachita Trail. John England was the Foreman of the crew for the whole construction on the Jessieville District. Jim McTigert, Johnnie Carpenter, Bill Johnson, Raymond Johnson, Lawrence Wilson, James Davis, Joe Wilson, and Rector Ward were some of the workers. The State of Arkansas folks who did the hiring, paying, and other administrative jobs were Judy Koffman, Bud Witter, and Dan Zmuda.

And that's the way it was!



Plaque erected by the Ouachita National Forest in tribute to the excellent work of Green Thumbers of Garland County, Arkansas who constructed the Ouachita Trail.



John Archer Trail Shelter



Art Cowley
Originated Idea for Ouachita Trail



Ouachita Trail
West of Moonshine Trail Shelter



Trail Mile Markers

