

The Chatuge Fish and Game Club

by Bruce Roberts

A couple of years ago, I was exploring the upper reaches of the Hiwassee River, along the route of the old Unicoi Turnpike. I was looking for several old home sites that showed on the historic maps, hoping to find a nice stone chimney to photograph.

I hadn't gone very far before I encountered a steep rise in the terrain. It didn't look natural, and after climbing to the top, it appeared to be an old earthen dam. It was covered with trees and blended in with the rest of the woods. There was water behind it, and among the trees that were growing in the water, I noticed a small concrete structure. A closer look revealed what looked like a drop inlet riser (spillway inlet) for a pond.



Pond 1, showing drop inlet riser

Going back further up slope, I came to a second dam, also partially filled with water, and another drop inlet riser. Continuing my exploration, I found a total of four ponds lined up one after the other, each enclosed by earthen dams. One pond was almost full, two were partially filled, and one was completely dry.

These ponds didn't show on any of the historic topo maps and I had no idea what they had been used for. I asked Jerry Taylor, who didn't know either. Jerry asked one of his former students who was from the area, and the mystery was solved! It turns out that they were fish raising

ponds from about 1950. To the best of the former student's recollection, either GA- DNR or the USFS had a sort of fish hatchery operation up there. His parents were actually caretakers here for two years (ca 1950-1951).



Pond 4, now dry. Post for nesting box, with drop inlet riser and dam at rear

Additional research revealed a more complete story. Decades ago, a friend who is retired from the Forest Service had rescued some old documents from the trash. Among them were several papers related to this project.

One memorandum is a USFS report of a meeting held in the summer of 1947 between the newly formed "Chatuge Fish & Game Club" and several other interested parties. The purpose of the meeting was to "discuss the ways and means of developing a fish rearing station on the head of the Hiawassee (sic) River", on USFS land. Interestingly, among the 15 folks in attendance were two representatives from Charlie Elliott's office. Some of you may recall Charlie Elliott as Georgia's legendary dean of southern outdoor writers.

The memo continues: "... a certain group of sportsmen and business men in Towns County are interested in providing better fishing as one means of increasing the recreational value of this particular section". The new club proposed to "construct 8 to 10 bass rearing ponds, and living accommodations for a caretaker or warden."

A USFS Special Use Permit was approved in August 1948. Apparently only the four ponds currently visible were ever constructed.



1949 Postcard (courtesy Eileen Hedden)

By 1956, the ponds had been abandoned. A USFS memorandum from April of that year states "This area is still in a terrible mess. The ~~present~~ tenant, Jim Garrett, has moved away and there are no fish in the pools. I strongly recommend that the use be cancelled, and that the shanties now located on the property be moved or destroyed."

As a point of historical interest, one of the referenced "shanties" was eventually moved and improved as a residence that now sits along the present day Unicoi Turnpike (GA 17/75) here in Towns County.

For additional photos and documents of the ponds, see my webpage at: <https://www.be-roberts.com/se/odds/ponds/ponds1.htm>