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A Wild River's Favorite Son

By [Gwyn Ingram](#) on Apr 4, 2010



A retiring river manager remembers

"No matter what disasters may occur in other parts of the world, or what petty little problems arise...no one can find us up here."

~ Ed Gentry in the film "Deliverance"

Those words might have been true in 1972 when the movie *Deliverance*, filmed partly on the Chattooga River, thrilled and horrified audiences across the United States. But not any longer. In high-use seasons, some 75,000 people paddle or float the 35-mile stretch of the lower Wild and Scenic Chattooga River that creates a border between South Carolina and Georgia. The rapids on the river range from Class I to Class VI, with VI being the highest difficulty ranking that exists in whitewater. It wasn't always such a popular destination...and Sumter National Forest Forestry Technician and River Manager David Hedden saw all the changes come about.

"My job's the second best job in the Forest Service," Hedden said, standing on the banks of the powerful river just before he retired in March after 38 years with the agency. What job, then, was the best? "I don't know, but there must be one better somewhere."

Hedden grew up along the banks of the Chattooga, specifically, in Mountain Rest, SC, at the headwaters of Whetstone Creek, one of the main tributaries of the river in South Carolina. In those days, the now famous-even infamous-river did not hold its 'wild and scenic' designation.

"Three things really happened at once as far as the river was concerned: public interest in rafting and whitewater paddling was just getting started in the late 60s and early 70s; then *Deliverance*, the movie, was made in 1972; and the wild and scenic river designation came along in 1974. They all kind of happened to the Chattooga all at once."

Interest in the river spiked immediately and built rapidly from there.

In the close-knit mountain communities of western South Carolina, the sudden attention came as a culture shock, quite literally, remembers Hedden. The outside world had taken no real notice of the mighty Chattooga before then, but the locals of those mountain towns had a long and very personal relationship with it.

"Here at Woodall Shoals [a Class VI rapid] the locals were used to driving down to get sand to make mortar for building blocks," said Hedden. "They wouldn't go buy sand; they'd just come down here and collect it. Earls Ford was a popular place for people to have baptisms, and all of a sudden you couldn't drive down there anymore. There was a lot of intense feeling about all of that. It had been a way of life."

And more, said Hedden, people were coming to the river in busloads and paying to raft it; trails were being built to and along the river. From the local perspective, their historical uses were being taken away, and the river given over to a new use, one in which they were not interested, one which they considered dangerous.

"When I was coming up, there was hardly any boating at all on the Chattooga. I used the river some, but I fished it. I didn't get out in it growing up. Almost nobody did. We respected the river because it was a known killer even then," said Hedden. He remembers being warned never to play in the water "where Warwoman Creek comes out at Earls Ford, because there at the confluence, the water would pull kids under, almost like a riptide."

"Still, even way back, some folks braved the river. They welded old Ford car hoods together. They were V shaped, so they'd weld the backs of the hoods together and make a sort of metal canoe out of them. They quite often used those, at least in a place or two. I don't think they ran any big rapids. That was just one way of navigating the river," said Hedden.

A "Drop Dead Gorgeous Killer"

Those "three things" that changed the course of the river's future were purely coincidental, Hedden believes, but the release of *Deliverance* may have been the most influential of them. Many rivers now are designated as wild and scenic, but only one on which the popular movie was filmed. It is still widely referred to as the "Deliverance river," a stigma, says Hedden, that people may or may not like.

When the craze hit, whitewater paddling was, at best, in its infancy. Kayaking was thought of as something that native Alaskans did.

Back then, said Hedden, "They basically had flat-water canoes to paddle in and really no whitewater kayaks. They were still just flat-water kayaks when they first started kayaking the river. Technology in boats has changed dramatically. It used to be that a Class VI was impossible to run and now they're paddling off waterfalls, so a Class VI is no longer what it was."

Indeed, nowadays expert paddlers and novices alike flock to the Chattooga from around the world. The river does not discriminate between them. Thirty-nine deaths have been logged since the Forest Service began keeping records in 1970, most of them paddlers, says Hedden, and some of them experts. In the last few years, the river has taken a higher toll on swimmers as well.

The turbulent hydraulics at the base of the stronger rapids can hold a person in their rotation, typically spitting them out when they lose consciousness and go limp, says Hedden. But perhaps the greater danger on the river is the wedge-shaped crevices formed by submerged rocks and trees which can snag legs and arms in the tremendous flow of the river.

Whatever their interest in the river-environmentalists, paddlers, fishermen or locals-it's at these tragic times that people unite with single-minded determination, says Hedden.

"I've said before that once people visit this river, they develop a personal relationship with it; they love the resource and try to protect it. Even totally polar opposite sides on the issues on this river, when they need to, they'll pull together. I've seen that especially in these tragedies more than anything else: at one point we had about 300 people out there setting up a porta-dam to recover a swimmer-locals and people from every interest group working together."

Beginnings

Hedden started his Forest Service career on the Andrew Pickens Ranger District as a temporary hire in 1972 after he returned home from three years as a Marine during the Vietnam era. He earned \$2.39/hour working in timber stand improvement. Three years later, his interest in recreation led to a promotion to wilderness ranger in the Ellicott Wilderness, which borders the Chattooga. Still a temporary employee, he moved on to a position as river ranger, finally becoming a permanent employee, marking timber, in 1984. In 1989 he settled in as river manager, in charge of dispersed recreation on the Chattooga, the Chauga River and the Ellicott Rock Wilderness.

Being native to the area was a huge plus where the Chattooga was concerned, says Hedden.

"I already knew all the access points on the South Carolina side, and learned, later on, most of the Georgia access points on the ground. I paddled a good bit on the job and learned the basics of, I guess, pretty much every rapid on the river."

That experience has helped in other ways, too.

"It's a pretty complex job as far as the political aspects, dealing with outfitters, dealing with the public, acting as kind of a liaison between the Forest Service, the outfitters and the locals, meshing all that together. It's been complicated at times."

Hedden suspects that many visitors to the Chattooga, to the Ellicott Rock Wilderness and to the Andrew Pickens Ragner District itself, don't fully realize the uniqueness of the area.

"Maybe they haven't had the opportunity to compare it to other areas to recognize that it's one of the best places in the world probably, certainly the paddling aspects are world class."

The son of a subsistence farmer, Dave Hedden landed a dream job, the likes of which, as a youngster, he never realized he even wanted. It took him a full year to convince himself it was time to retire.

"I'm 60 and a half. I doubt I'll live to be a hundred and a half, so I want to be able to do things. But I tell you what, it's the third hardest thing I've ever done in my life. It was really a very difficult decision," admitted Hedden. What were the first two?
"Burying my parents."

Hedden and his wife Carla, also a native of Mountain Rest, now live on 87 acres in Walhalla.

"I've been remodeling my house for about ten years, so I'm going to finish that. I like British automobiles; I've got two of those to restore. I've got a 1963 Triumph TR3B and I'm finishing up on a 1971 Triumph Stag. And I just acquired a 1939 Chevrolet truck. So I'll be keeping busy."

Hedden's long career includes five years operating the front line fire dozer, trails layout and design, and migratory bird studies.

"My one regret, my only regret," he said, "is that I didn't start sooner."