

1924- 9/21/24  
GREAT SMOKIES, SETTING OF  
POPULAR OLD-TIME SONG

BY MRS. C. F. SPRADLING.

ORIGIN OF THE SONG

When You *and* I Were Young, Maggie

Setting in

*The* Great Smoky Mountains

BY

Daisy Rice Spradling

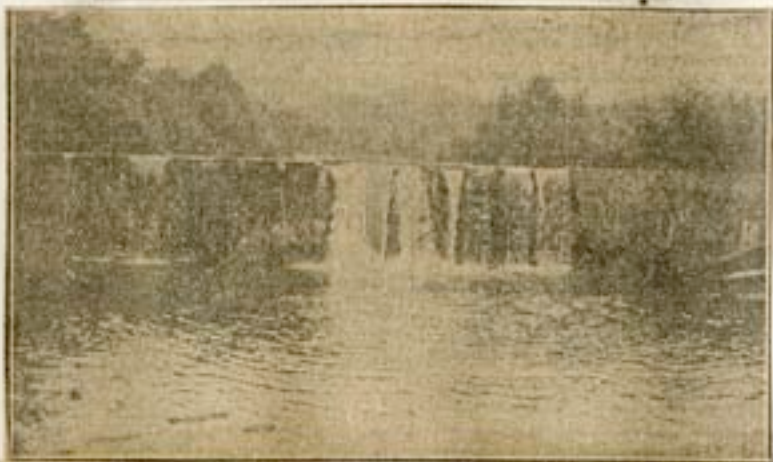
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The dam of "The Creaking Old Mill."

To the reader:—

In describing the wonderful "Great Smoky Mountain" in which the following brief story has its setting, words can tell but little. They can only be appreciated by visiting them. We can see the ragged, irregular slopes looming in the distance, exquisitely blue, and they are beautiful, but it is only when you are among their wild cliffs and enclosed in their primeval forests, that you appreciate them the most.

When surrounded with the dream-like slopes the grand trees, the tall cliffs, the deep ravines, rushing streams, and the wild flowers and plant life of every description fill the air with their fragrance, you are possessed with a peculiar feeling of reverence.

Is it any wonder then that it was in this section of the "World's Primeval Forest" that George W. Johnson, was inspired to write that sweet old familiar ballad, "When You And I Were Young, Maggie," a poem that was destined to become so popular and in many instances in life's hurry has been instrumental in keeping the home ties sacred. The scenery alone, without the other associations, would have been sufficient to have caused the inspiration.

Recently Polk County was presented with a metal symbol to mark the site of the "Old Mill", by the State of Tennessee. The description on the marker gives a brief sketch as a guide to tourists visiting the place. The old dam is falling into decay, and the ruins of the Mill, if not rebuilt, will soon be obliterated. The stream on which the "Creaking Old Mill" is located, is one of the main tributaries of the Hiwassee River.

The Author.

After exhausted research, historians of Tennessee have come to the conclusion that both the author and the subject of that old famous sentimental ballad, "When you and I were young, Maggie," were native Tennesseans.

Evidence points conclusively to the undisputed facts that the plot of the song was laid in the Unaka Mountains, a chain of the "Great Smokies" in Polk County, Tennessee, five miles South-East of Reliance.

In a recent visit of the writer to these mountains, the different points alluded to in the song were discovered and show plainly "the hill", where the lovers often wandered to "watch the scene below", "the creek", "the creaking old mill", now falling into decay, "the field where first the daisies sprung", the cemetery on the hill which was alluded to in the song, as "a city so silent and lone."

The reputed author, George W. Johnson, it is supposed, lived near the mouth of the Hiwassee river, his parents being early settlers, having come from Virginia and leased land from the Indians, as many white people did in those days, which lay along, and near the Hiwassee and the Tennessee rivers, and which was said to have been the first river bottom land that was cultivated in East Tennessee.

In the early part of the eighteenth century, having learned from a friendly Indian that there was gold in East Tennessee, young Johnson contracted the gold fever and sought the Unaka Mountains locality, where according to legends, fabulous wealth was being found. It appears that the presence of gold was known to the Cherokee Indians living in that region, long before it was known to the whites, who did the first mining in the year 1827.

After brief preparations Johnson loaded his canoe with provisions and the lonely

WHEN YOU AND I WERE YOUNG, MAGGIE

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"The Creaking Old Mill"

journey of several days duration began. After rowing up the Hiwassee river to near where Reliance now stands, Johnson came to Spring Creek, a tributary of the Hiwassee. Going up this stream for a few miles, he camped for the night. Early the next morning, finding the creek swift and shallow, he left his canoe and had followed the stream for about one-half mile, when he heard the creaking of a mill. After walking a short distance, he came to what was then known as the Harris mill.

The clear morning sunlight reveals a most picturesque scene. Being in the spring time, the hill slopes were covered with laurel and ivy, the pink and white blossoms blending with the green foliage that clustered around the bluff. The birds were flying from the moss-covered boulders to the tree tops above, singing as they built their nests. The great ridges surrounding the place were clothed from base to crest with trees of every description, quivering and nodding in the cool morning breeze; the quiet valley, the lovely glades, wet with dew; the beautiful stream with the clear water running over the great overshot wheel; the streaming water falling to the depths below, forming a mass of white rolling foam, sparkling in the early morning sunlight. The creaking of the wheel as it slowly revolved on the axle, must have been a most welcome sound after hours of solitude in that unknown land.

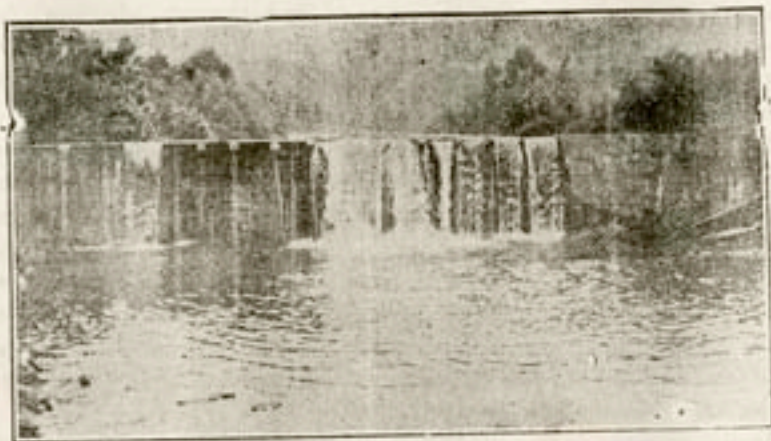
Surrounded by the beauties of nature in that wild woodland, the youth was attracted by the voice of a young girl singing. As he strode toward the mill, a scene fairer than all others greeted his eyes. A young girl, Maggie Harris, Maggie of the song, was standing in the doorway of the building. It was indeed a great surprise to see the beautiful white girl in the wild surroundings. It is said that Maggie in the absence of her father used to attend the mill, and did the work quite as well as her father.

It appears that the Harris family migrated to that section from upper East Tennessee and leased land from the Indians for the purpose of erecting a mill, as the Indians in those days had no mills of their own. The mill was a very important feature in the pioneer days for what the club is to the city, the general store or postoffice to the citizens of the country village, so was the mill to the native of the backwoods. It was there the mountaineers for miles around went to have their corn ground into meal. Many a good tale might be told of those exciting days, when the woods were full of deer, bear and wild game of every description.

The fact that Maggie was reared in the mountains did not keep her from acquiring an education, for it is quite probable she attended the old Cog Hill Academy in the Conasauga valley, a distance of about twenty miles from her home, and where the mountain folks for miles around, attended.

This meeting was the beginning of a romance, a love which endured through the trials of life, and in all after years those days so full of mystic beauty, lived in their memory. Johnson instead of seeking further for gold, found a more precious treasure; he sought and won the hand of Maggie. After a brief courtship, he took his bride and returned to his home down the river.

They spent many happy years together, often returning to revisit the place of Maggie's childhood. After many years when both were aged and gray, their thoughts turned again to the mountains, to the sacred scene of their first meeting and courtship, which was ever sweet to their memory. The husband, now feeble with age, again wandered to "the Hill", where he and Maggie had so often wandered in days gone by, "to watch the scene below". "The creaking old mill", was then still; the little house in which Maggie



"The Old Mill Dam"

was born, and where she grew to young womanhood was deserted, for her parents were sleeping on the hill, in the "city so silent and lone".

The old romantic scene revived memories of the vanished years, with an inspiration, resulting in that sweet old song with words so full of love and tenderness for wife, the sweetheart of his youth.

Although they were aged and gray,

And trials of life nearly done;

Maggie was as fair to him then,

As when they both were young.

Johnson died never realizing what a gem he was leaving in the little poem. After a few years, it is reported, J. A. Butterfield, who was a great musician came across the poem quite by accident. It attracted his attention, he set the words to music, and had the song copyrighted in the year 1866, with a renewal in 1894. The song soon became famous, but never so popular as in recent years.

The Song:

*"WHEN YOU AND I WERE YOUNG, MAGGIE"*

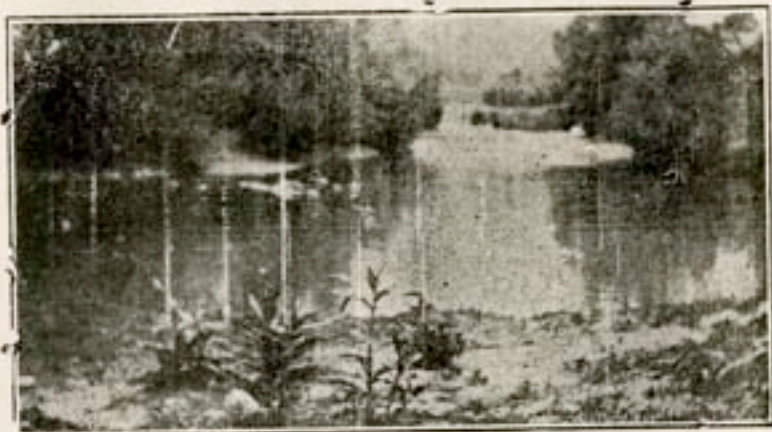
I have wandered today to the hill, Maggie,  
To watch the scene below,  
The creek and the creaking old mill, Maggie,  
As we used to long ago.  
The green grove is gone from the hill, Maggie,  
Where once the daisies sprung.  
The creaking old mill is still, Maggie,  
Since you and I were young.

(Chorus)

But now we are aged and gray, Maggie,  
The trials of life nearly done,  
Let us sing of the days that are gone, Maggie,  
When you and I were young.

A city so silent and lone, Maggie,  
Where the young and the gay and the blest,  
In polished white mansions of stone, Maggie  
Have each found a place of rest;  
Is built where the birds used to play, Maggie,  
And join in the songs that were sung,  
For we sang as gay as they, Maggie,  
When you and I were young.

They say I am feeble with age, Maggie,  
My steps are less sprightly than then,  
My face is a well written page, Maggie,  
But time alone is the pen.  
They say we are aged and gray, Maggie,  
As spray by the white breakers flung,  
But to me you're as fair as you were, Maggie,  
When you and I were young.



"The Creek"