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IMAGES OF THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS: THE ALBERT "DUTCH" ROTH PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

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In 1924, Albert Gordon "Dutch" Roth, a young photographer with a fascination for the wilderness of the Great Smoky Mountains, signed on for an informal hiking excursion organized by leaders of the YMCA camp in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. On a clear day in late October, the hiking party climbed to the summit of Mount Le Conte, spending the night among the Fraser firs and sand myrtle on Cliff Top. Perhaps inspired by the magnificent vistas from the summit, the group discussed taking other hikes into the Smokies. Within a year, this incidental occasion was formalized as the Great Smoky Mountains Hiking Club, an institution that would afford Dutch Roth opportunity to pursue his favorite pastimes, hiking and photography.

Born September 23, 1890, in Knoxville, Tennessee, Roth cultivated his penchant for photography. As a youth, he used film to document his hikes through the unexplored areas near his home. Roth's enthusiasm for hiking and the formation of the Great Smoky Mountains Hiking Club converged at a time when the Smokies were still largely unknown to the outside world, a *terra incognita*, as Horace Kephart famously christened it. Certainly lumber companies had made serious incursions into the lower reaches of the Smokies, and agricultural areas like Cades Cove, Cataloochee, and Oconaluftee had developed roads to outlying towns, but for the most part the mountains were a primitive wilderness rarely visited by outsiders. But within the next 20 years, drastic changes would come to the region. During this period, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park would be established, the Appalachian Trail cut along the spine of the main Smoky divide, the Little Tennessee River dammed to form Fontana Lake, a highway extended over the mountain at Newfound Gap, and a tourist-friendly observation tower set on Clingman's Dome. It was this period of transition in the Great Smoky Mountains that Dutch Roth would fortuitously chronicle with his camera.

Top of page: The building of a National Park brought roads, cars, and people to the many isolated pockets of the Smokies. Pictured is a new bridge on the Blue Ridge Parkway near Mount Mitchell in the Black Mountains of North Carolina. (Albert "Dutch" Roth Photograph Collection)
Left: Smoky Mountain Hiking Club members in the trees during a trip to Williams Bluff. (Albert "Dutch" Roth Photograph Collection)



Right: One of Roth's earlier photographs of the Smoky Mountain Hiking Club during a 1924 trip to House Mountain, the highest point in Knox County. (Albert "Dutch" Roth Photograph Collection)



Smoky Mountain Hiking Club members at Cliff Top on Mount Le Conte, looking west along the spine of the main Smoky divide during a 1937 excursion. (Albert "Dutch" Roth Photograph Collection)

Although not professionally trained, Dutch Roth was sufficiently qualified for contract photography work with the newly formed Tennessee Valley Authority. His photographs, however, were often eclipsed by those of his friend and hiking companion, Jim Thompson, a well-known professional photographer whose work was widely disseminated in books and popular journals and used extensively by promoters of the National Park movement. Nevertheless, because of his dedicated participation in hiking club activities, Roth was often there to capture the rapidly changing Smoky Mountain environment.

The men and women of the Great Smoky Mountains Hiking Club were rarely reticent about exploring the more inaccessible reaches of the mountains. Impenetrable rhododendron thickets, water-slickened cliff faces, and torrential downpours were often common fare for club outings. To these difficulties Roth added the burden of carrying a bulky Kodak Autographic A122-3A camera, often with a heavy wooden tripod. That particular Autographic Kodak would be the only camera he would use throughout his lifetime. It was not uncommon for him to shimmy 20 or 30 feet up a tree or hang out over a steep precipice to get the photograph he wanted. As his pictures attest,

Roth was rarely hindered by the extremities of Smoky Mountain weather or the hardship of its unforgiving terrain.

Unlike his friend Jim Thompson, Roth was a chronicler of hiking club adventures. His camera focused on the groups who hiked, the people they encountered, the places they visited, the camps they occupied, and the sights and adventures they enjoyed. His camera left a record of the sheep that once grazed on Spence Field and Parsons Bald, old makeshift lean-to camps found on remote peaks, cabins abandoned in remote hollows, and grist mills left stranded on forgotten streams—as well as the club members' building the "cabin in the 'brier"—and the new roads, tunnels, trails, and shelters introduced by the advent of the National Park. In short, Dutch Roth's camera captured a new wave of incursions into the mountains; the Appalachian Trail Conference, the National Park Service, the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club, and similar institutions transformed the Smoky Mountains from a sparsely populated wilderness into a national playground.

If there is a theme to his photography, it can best be understood by knowing that Roth was a promoter, an organizer, and an enthusiast. Beginning with its second year,

Roth was for the next six years an officer in the hiking club. He was active in building the club cabin in Greenbrier, blazing the trace for the Appalachian Trail, leading club hikes, and coordinating club social functions. He hiked and camped frequently with the most prominent promoters of the National Park movement, as well as with many hiking club members. Accordingly he took his pictures not to impress others with his fine technique or his eye for composure but to record friends and fellow club members enjoying the best of the Smoky Mountains.

On occasion Roth's pictures would show up in local photograph contests or be used to illustrate the Hiking Club's annual handbook, but for the most part they would remain unseen by the outside world. Recently his daughter, Margaret Ann Roth, granted the University Libraries permission to make her father's photography publicly accessible through the Internet as a digital collection. Negatives of the images were professionally scanned by JJT Inc. of Austin, Texas. Using information Roth had scribbled on the backs of the photographs, a small core of data was collected for each image. People, places, and dates were the most common elements identified in Roth's handwritten captions, but occasionally he would include brief details or



Far left: Dutch Roth and naturalist Dr. H. M. Jennison (left) measuring one of the large chestnut tree in Porters Flats, an area of the Smokies famous for its cove hardwood forests. (Albert "Dutch" Roth Photograph Collection)

Left: A 1937 photograph on the trail to Alum Cave Bluff, one of the most popular hikes in the Smokies. (Albert "Dutch" Roth Photograph Collection)

casual comments. Roth's notes were augmented by the visual information of the image itself. All of this information became part of a searchable data file for each photograph. Librarians at the University of Tennessee indexed the data by subject fields and, using standard retrieval software, linked the data to individual images so that the scanned images could be searched by subject terms or keywords.

During his lifetime Dutch Roth preserved more than a thousand of his Hiking Club photographs, images not only of the Great Smoky Mountains but also of club excursions in Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky. Since the group was not restricted to outings in the Smokies, several of the images he preserved are of places and activities outside the region. Together, all of the digital images and their corresponding data fields are stored on a computer server and made available through a University of Tennessee Libraries' Web site dedicated to the Albert "Dutch" Roth Photograph Collection.

The Roth Collection is the first installment of an ambitious effort by the Library's Great Smoky Mountains Regional Project to develop a series of Great Smoky Mountains digital collections. Digitizing these images



A 1927 photograph of Smoky Mountain Hiking Club members in front of the Indian Gap Hotel, one of the few hotels in what is now the National Park, just below the Chimney Tops picnic area. Pictured left to right are Dutch Roth, Bruckway Crouch, Margaret Watrans, and an unidentified hiker. (Albert "Dutch" Roth Photograph Collection)

preserves the photographs by adapting them to a medium that can be easily and frequently accessed without causing further deterioration to the original objects. Building these digital collections establishes a body of primary source material, which preserves the heritage of the Smoky Mountains and provides valuable resources for scholars and researchers of the future.

The Roth Collection is part of the Digital Library Center, which generates and hosts an aggregate of loosely related collections available in digital format. The Digital Library Center is a major undertaking of the University Libraries to serve the people of Tennessee by delivering information through digital and Internet technology.

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT THE WEB SITE:
<http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/dlc/roth>