



lake CLUB

WORDS BY KARA ADDY

Lake Toxaway offers abundant beauty, an active lifestyle, and rich history. But it's the annual event happening in late July that may best define what makes this community so special.

To say Lake Toxaway is special to Larry Bradner would be a significant understatement. The retired cable television and technology executive is the patriarch of three generations who have made memories at this Transylvania County mountain resort. Bradner is starting his 36th season in his third house here.

He and his wife, Donna, visited for the first time in 1986, spending a relaxing weekend at the renowned Greystone Inn, then in its second year of operation.

"When we stayed that weekend, it was pretty clear to us we had to be here," Bradner says.

The next Memorial Day, from a rocking chair on the porch of the historic Greystone, the then-35-year-old agreed to purchase a hand-built cottage near the inn.

"It turned out to be a magical place for my family," he says, recalling fond memories of their young son freely and safely roaming about the property.

Next, they lived on "the big lake," the almost 700-acre Toxaway, before building on adjacent Cardinal Lake, about one-tenth of its size. Separated by a dam, the two private lakes are quite different, Bradner says. "You've got the 'On Golden Pond' experience with Cardinal, and the recreational boating experience with Toxaway."

Today, Bradner's three granddaughters—ages 6, 10, and 12—find enchantment in the family's purposefully-created children's garden and spend hours on paddle-boards and kayaks in Cardinal Lake's pristine waters. The couple is amid a major renovation and addition to their home, to better accommodate their son's family and continue the legacy.

"It really is a multi-generational community," Bradner says. "If a kid starts coming here at a young age, they don't want to leave. They want to be a part of it, too."

A STORIED HISTORY

Since the late 1800s, Lake Toxaway—the largest private lake in North Carolina and the first artificially made in the Appalachian Mountains—has drawn not only families but captains of industry. Long ago, Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, and members of the Rockefeller and Vanderbilt families visited the Toxaway Inn, a tony resort accessible by railroad (at the time, the steepest system in the U.S.), with the most modern conveniences of its day. Legendary tales exist of the iconic businessmen retreating to the lake in their Pullman cars to plan the future of the U.S. automobile industry.

Built by a group of investors from Pennsylvania, including Edward H. "E.H." Jennings, the five-story, wooden structure—then the largest in the country—opened in 1903. French chefs prepared fine cuisine served on imported dinnerware, crystal, and sterling silver. Guests danced to a large orchestra and played games in the



billiard parlor and bowling alley. The lavish inn commanded the shores of the lake, which eventually would become its downfall.

In 1916, torrential rains caused Lake Toxaway to flood and burst its earthen dam, sending more than five billion gallons of water downstream, creating the iconic falls and scars on the mountain landscape that remain today. The inn survived the flood but couldn't thrive without its lake. It never reopened, standing vacant and unused until it was torn down in the mid-1940s, its various species of wood and fixtures salvaged and sold at auction.

"From the stories we know, the beds were made, and the tables were set for dinner when the flood hit, and they remained that way," says John Nichols, a founding board member of the Historic Toxaway Foundation. "But everyone left after the flood."

Nichols lives in the picturesque, former Toxaway Inn caretaker's cottage, a lakefront house built around 1900 and one of the few structures remaining from its early heyday. Wrapped by a wide porch with wood-shingle siding, the home sits across the lake from where the inn once stood.

The 1960s ushered in a new era. This time, the investors hailed from Columbia, S.C., with visions of returning Lake Toxaway to its glory days. The group purchased around 9,000 acres around the lakebed for \$50 an acre, rebuilt the dam, and restored the lake level to its original, 3,000 feet elevation.

Nichols' grandfather, R.D. "Reg" Heintsh, Sr., was among the investors.

"The original idea was that it was going to be small, summer cottages and cabins," Nichols says. "They expected to draw buyers from South Carolina and Atlanta."

Around its 14 miles of shoreline, investors began to develop what eventually became Lake Toxaway Estates, offering exclusive access to the water. For

the next four decades, their Lake Toxaway Company would build miles of paved, private roads providing access from highways 64 and 281. Still the largest community in the area, Lake Toxaway Estates comprises several neighborhoods with outstanding amenities. The company also built Lake Toxaway Country Club (which began operations out of the Greystone Inn) as well as its golf course.

In the 1980s, the lake's story began to come full circle.

Some of the country's leading entrepreneurs, celebrities, and chief executives—this time from the beverage manufacturing, music, home improvement retail, aerospace, and brewing industries—now regularly visit or live in the area. Nichols, whose successful commercial real estate brokerage company is based in Charlotte, understands why.

"They all have one thing in common: the desire to be near this tranquil, hidden lake in the mountains."



"I [practically] have Panthertown for a backyard. There's such a variety of activities here. The biggest issue is trying to figure out how you want to spend your day."

LARRY BRADNER, RESIDENT AND COMMUNITY LEADER

RECREATION ON MOUNTAIN WATERS

Encircling Lake Toxaway are Hawk, Panthertail, and Cold mountains as well as its namesake peak. Fed by the Toxaway River and natural streams, the lake flows into a waterfall and river by the same name, crossing under U.S. Hwy. 64. "Toxaway" is an anglicized version of a Cherokee Native American phrase; however, there are two thoughts on its translation—"place of thunder" or "land of the red bird."

Because its developers created present-day Lake Toxaway solely for recreation and not as a reservoir or hydroelectric source, it maintains a consistent water level except for periodic maintenance.

About 1,100 home sites dot the 5,000 acres along Lake Toxaway's shores. Property owners and guests enjoy boating, paddling, skiing, swimming, and fishing. Access is restricted to property owners, and outside boats are not permitted, so traffic is minimal. Only two locations offer rental boats for residents and guests: Greystone Inn Rentals and Lake Toxaway Marina.

Greystone guests tour Toxaway at sunset aboard Miss Lucy, a 24-passenger handcrafted mahogany boat made by the century-old Hacker-Craft Company. (Its name mirrors that of the original owner of the Greystone property, Savannah, Ga., socialite Lucy Armstrong Moltz.) Offering daily departures during the warm months, Miss Lucy also has limited availability by reservation for non-hotel guests. Its sister vessel, Lucy II, can seat 10 for a private cruise, while the Lightning Bug, a three-passenger electric cruiser, is also an option.

Anglers appreciate the eight species of fish that swim in Lake Toxaway: rainbow and brown trout, large- and small-mouth bass, walleye, catfish, and blue gill. Because lake access is limited, a day's catch can be plentiful.

Open year-round, Lake Toxaway Country Club offers its members fine dining, a fitness center, an outdoor pool (part of its "Lake Club"), five Har-Tru tennis courts, pickleball, and championship



croquet lawns. In recent years, the club has been “completely renovated” and expanded, Bradner says, earning two awards. Drawing upon a “lakeside lodge” theme, it added architectural accents and landscaping, along with a new entry hall, casual grille, a pool pavilion with a pizza oven, expanded patio and porch seating, and a game room for teens. A stand-alone pro shop with access to new locker rooms was added. And “it now has the best indoor/outdoor bar I’ve ever been in,” Bradner proclaims.

In 2008, the club’s 18-hole golf course underwent a significant redesign by Kris Spence, nationally known for his architecture and restoration. Famed course architect and Western N.C. resident Tom Fazio designed its Golf Learning Center, a 20-acre facility with a practice putting green, short game, and driving range. (The area has a deep connection to the game; a nine-hole course, one of the first in the state, was located near present-day Lake Cardinal in the early 1900s.)

Dramatic, falling water lies beyond the lakes, particularly in the national forests and Gorges State Park, about 13 miles from Lake Toxaway.

The trailhead for Panthertown Valley is less than five miles away. Both protected areas offer waterfalls, multi-use trails, trout streams, and panoramic views.

“I [practically] have Panthertown for a backyard,” Bradner says. “There’s such a variety of activities here; it’s unusual to have the number of choices we do. The biggest issue is trying to figure out how you want to spend your day.”

Opportunities for recreation and relaxation aside, Bradner says his favorite part of Lake Toxaway is the people. He recalls a time when he was recovering from a medical procedure and neighbors made sure he and Donna were well cared for. “I don’t think we cooked a meal for five weeks. It’s remarkable. People really do think of the community first. They really do rally.”

GENEROUS COMMUNITY

Chip Brown knows about the generosity of the Lake Toxaway community.

For more than 17 years, the retired Alcoa executive has served Lake Toxaway Charities (LTC), an organization that supports more than 50 non-profit organizations in Transylvania County and beyond. As its volunteer executive director for the past decade, Brown is quick to point out the five populations LTC serves: the hungry, the homeless, the abused, and those in need of education and healthcare.

“We have a community culture of care and concern for others,” explains Brown. “In addition to the funds that are generated, we have more than 100 volunteers that support the various non-profit agencies. It’s all about giving back.”

On July 23, the organization will hold its annual “Sports Day and Dinner Gala Dance” at the Lake Toxaway Country Club. Most of its annual fundraising, about \$1 million, is generated during the one-day event.

“Our fundraiser is an all-day sports event with a thematic gala at night,” Brown explains. “People really enjoy the day’s activities as well as the cause.”

LTC’s goal is to build an endowment to sustain its support for longer-term needs and growth. But it’s also built to respond to emergent needs, as it did when the 2021 flood severely impacted the Rosman community.

Each year, a grants assessment team reviews the proposals from the agencies to determine how best to distribute the funds. But the support does not stop there, Brown says.

“We do site visits. We look at financials. We continue to monitor and discuss the agencies’ goals and objectives and the effective use of the grant money.”

LTC reinvests less than three percent of funds raised back into the organization for administrative support. And it tracks the number of people impacted—more than 12,000, or about one-third of the county, last year.

“I tell my neighbors that less than three miles from where we are standing, there’s poverty and need. I remind them we are not the real world here.”

LOOKING AHEAD

In 1985, Reg Heintsh, Jr. purchased a majority of the Lake Toxaway Company stock from his father, took the reins, and continued the controlled development of Lake Toxaway Estates. When development was completed in 2003, the Lake Toxaway Company transitioned the lakebed, dam, roads, and common amenities to the care of the Lake Toxaway Community Association. True to tradition within the area, the third generation of the family now has ownership and oversight of the club, marina, and new development. Will Heintsh, Reg Heintsh III, John Heintsh, and Mish Nichols are involved in day-to-day operations.

While the community is rooted in a rich and notable history, many have their eyes on its future.

“Although we started the Historic Toxaway Foundation to preserve and recognize the past, we also want to help plan its future,” Nichols explains.

Traditionally, commercial development has taken a backseat to the building of lakeside homes. Much of the area either lies within a protected community or a park, limiting its future development.

Nichols and others would like to see a thoughtfully-designed village “that fits with the history and charm of the area” where visitors and residents alike could gather among shops, restaurants, and maker spaces for artisans. Affordable housing for the local workforce could be part of the plan, as well.

For now, a handful of locally-owned shops and restaurants—including The Grand Olde Station, which Nichols opened about a year ago—serve the Lake Toxaway area. Located at the site of the former train station where the well-heeled once arrived, the restaurant features a collection of artifacts and serves as a sort-of museum—a depot where the past meets the future.

To learn more about Lake Toxaway Charities, visit laketoxawaycharities.org.

