

The Mysterious Rock Walls of Bartow County

PHOTOS BY BOB DILLEN

Several years ago, Chris Clemmons, one of my students, came by my office and invited me to come to Cartersville to inspect a rock wall that an elderly neighbor had said was built by Indians. At that time, I did not follow up on the invitation, but filed it away in my mind. Sometime later, I ran into Chris at a local store and reminded him of the Indian wall.

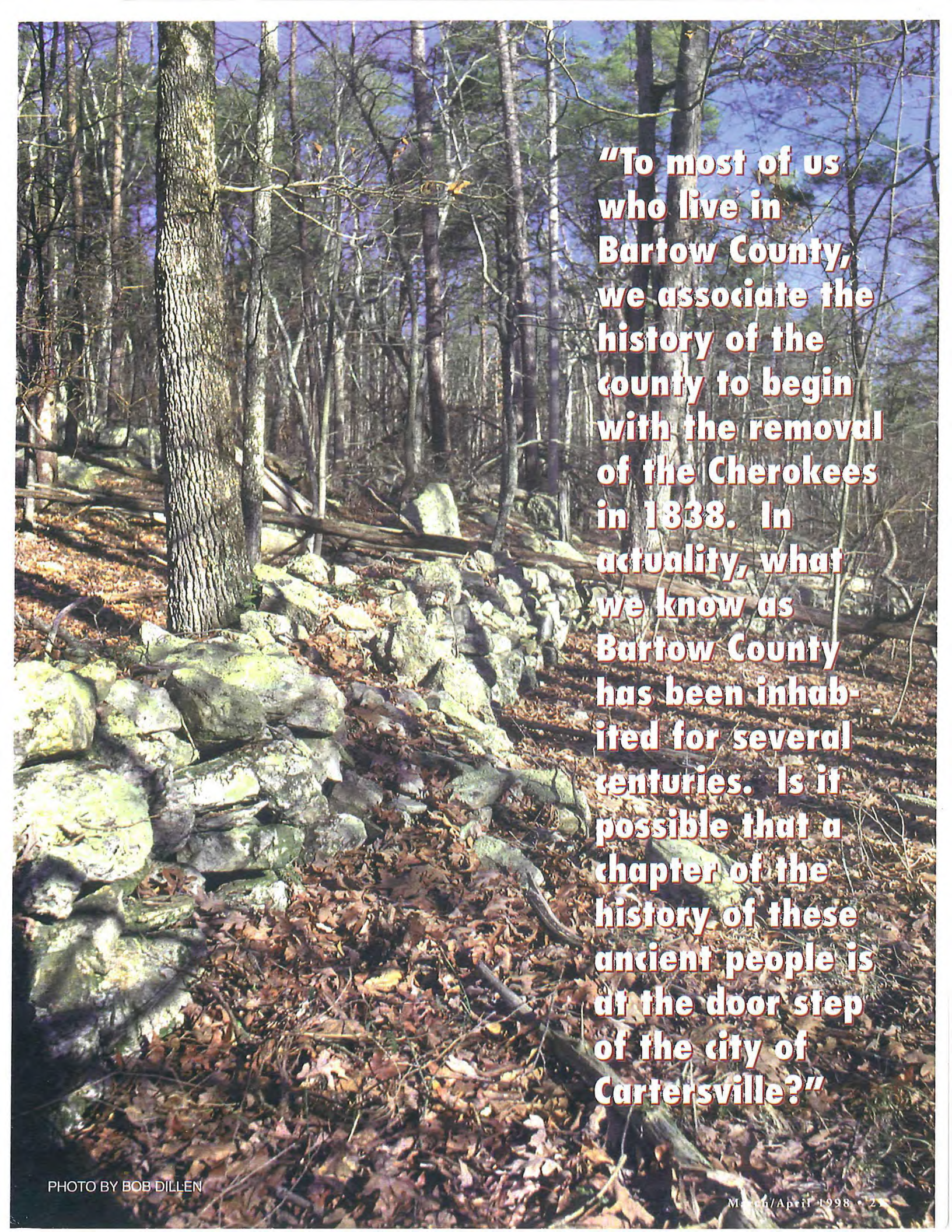
The next weekend, I met with Chris and we tramped through some incredibly wild terrain until we found the wall. The wall was approximately four feet high and at least a hundred yards long.

It began on top of a high ridge and led to the base of the mountain, which intersected with a bold creek. The wall stopped thirty feet from the creek and continued off the side of the bluff for another forty yards.

After examining the wall, we climbed out of the gorge back to the top of the ridge. In the distance we could clearly see the Indian Mounds, the Etowah River, and Ladd's Mountain. In my mind's eye, I felt that the rock wall was some how interconnected. This experience led to my fascination with the rock walls of Bartow County.

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A photograph of a stone wall in a forest. The wall is constructed from large, grey, moss-covered rocks and runs diagonally across the frame. The forest is filled with tall, thin trees, some with bare branches and others with green needles. The ground is covered in a thick layer of brown and orange fallen leaves. The lighting suggests a bright day, with shadows cast across the ground and the wall.

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To date, I have located four rock walls in the four quadrants of the county. All four walls have certain features in common: (1) They are three to five feet high and three to four feet wide. (2) The rocks are very carefully dry stacked and very skillfully laid. (3) Three of the walls exceed one hundred yards with one wall intermittently extending at least a mile. (4) All the walls are in high places going up the sides or on top of ridges. One of the walls zigzags up the side of a mountain, whereas the others are linear. (5) At two of the rock walls there were a total of forty-two rock piles each one knee-high, and five feet in diameter, each containing the same size stones as those built into the wall.

The central question of who built the walls, when, and for what purpose remains a riddle. From a white man's perspective a rock wall could be used to mark a property boundary, a corral for livestock, for defense, or to clear a field for cultivation. With one exception, the four rock walls examined in Bartow

County did not meet any standard of practical utility. A portion of one of the walls appears to have been used as a boundary line between property owners.

To most of us who live in Bartow County, we associate the history of the county to begin with the removal of the Cherokees in 1838. In actuality, what we know as Bartow County has been inhabited for several centuries. Is it possible that a chapter of the history of these ancient people is at the doorstep of the city of Cartersville?

Assuming that prehistoric Indians built some of the walls still in existence, there had to be considerable motivation to undertake such a strenuous task. There is a standing joke among archaeologists that when a phenomenon cannot be explained in any other way it can always be labeled "ceremonial." This observation leads to the most baffling aspect of determining the purpose of the rock walls. What stumps the experts is that there are no cultural artifacts or burial sites in

or near the walls. One possible explanation for the lack of artifacts is that the walls were sacred and were not to be profaned with the litter of every day life of the aborigines.

Another theory, which is promoted by archaeoastronomists, is the possibility the walls were built to keep track of time.

"As the Earth orbits the sun, the apparent position of sunrise in the Northern Hemisphere moves from its most northerly position at summer solstice to its most southerly position at winter solstice. By noting the passage of summer solstice, the shaman could determine that crops would soon be ripened and that migratory animals would also soon be on the move. Such knowledge meant that the tribe would no longer be surprised by the change of the seasons, thereby improving their chances for survival. Archaeologists have long known that the North American cultures began their change to an agricultural economy as opposed to hunting and gathering food at about the same time the walls and mounds were built," writes one such scientist.

Everyday hundreds of people drive by the base of Ladd's Mountain on the Rockmart Highway. It is a local landmark because it has been disfigured, with its face blown away by a hundred years of mining activity.

In 1881, George Whittlesey, an archaeologist, climbed the mountain and described a rock wall in an oval shape that covered forty acres that he estimated originally stood ten feet in height. There were six entrances to the interior of the wall. Whittlesey dismissed the possibility of the stone wall being an ancient fort, since it was easily accessible and the six openings were too wide to be a defensive work. He concluded that in all probability it was "the scene of imposing public processions and displays, and was approached by crowds of persons from all sides through the openings." Another writer stated that in all prob-

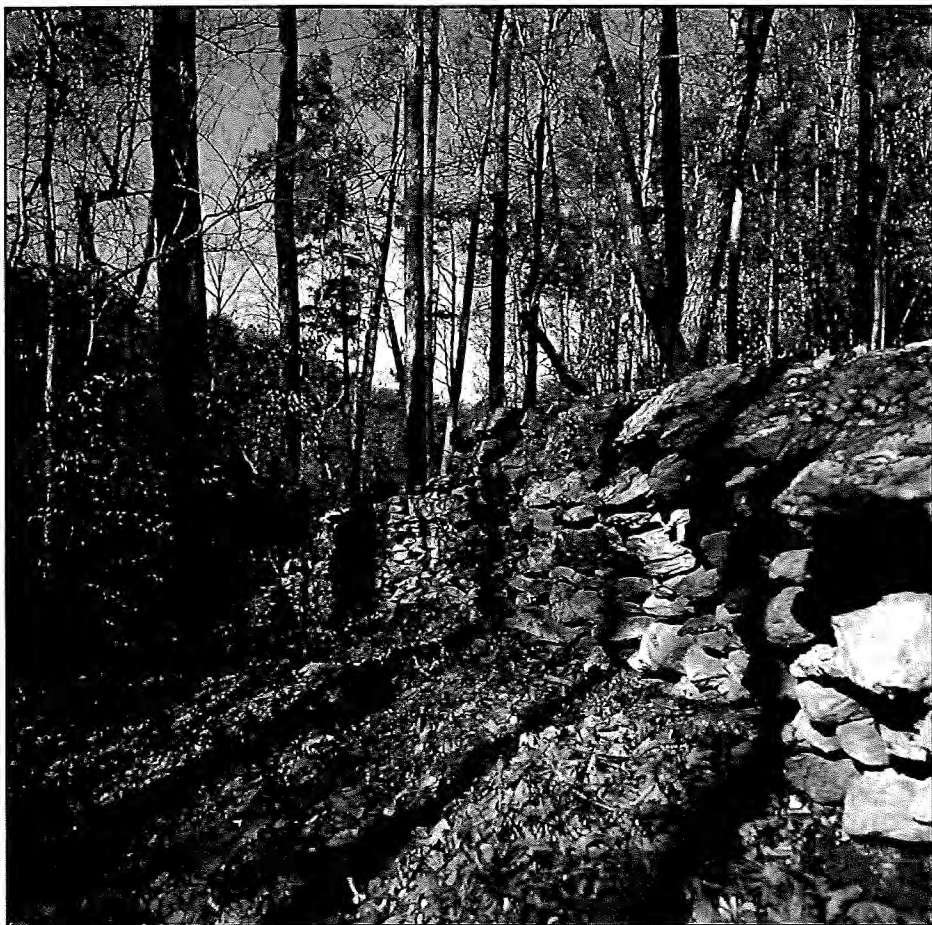


PHOTO BY BOB DILLEN



Archaeologist sent to record the destruction of the Rock Walls located on Ladd's Mountain.

ability the stone walls were astronomical clocks for determining ceremonial dates and planting times. Almost identical stone structures were built by the Celts in Britain prior to being conquered by the Romans.

This stone wall was still in existence until 1935 when the county purchased the rock wall from the landowner for five cents a ton. The county built a road up the backside of the mountain to crush up the rock to be used as a road base for the Rockmart Highway. Although this site was recognized as an archaeological treasure, the Department of the Interior could not stop the project, since it was on private property. The end result was that the National Park Service could only send an archaeologist to record the destruction of the wall.

Two miles west of Ladd's Mountain stood a stone mound in the shape of a horseshoe that was estimated to be ten feet high and fifty feet in diameter. In 1940, Mr. Frank Shaw, the owner of the property, sold the rock mound to the county for road material. A rock crusher was set up, the mound was demolished and no artifacts were discovered in the rock layers. However, in the center of the horseshoe, an Indian burial was discovered. The skeletal remains were that of an adult male who had been buried with an

ornate copper breast plate on his chest, and on each side of his head was a tapered copper Celt. This was an extremely important discovery, since this burial appeared to be the reason for the construction of the rock enclosure. Once the burial artifacts were evaluated, it was determined that they date back to the Adena-Hopwell culture of the time period 400 B.C. - 200 A.D.

The closest facsimile to the Ladd's Mountain wall is the prehistoric stone wall at Fort Mountain State Park. The Fort Mountain wall is the foremost example of rock walls in North Georgia, and was preserved by the National Park Service and the State of Georgia. Fort Mountain Park is located in a very inaccessible area in the North Georgia Mountains, yet forty thousand visitors viewed the site last year. One can only speculate about the lost possibility of thousands of tourists visiting Ladd's Mountain to inspect the ancient wonder.

In Bartow County and throughout the southeast, these ancient people have left a legacy of stone piles, earth mounds, and rock walls that appear to be interconnected to their culture. Sadly, their culture and their unrecorded story may remain a mystery, lost in the mists of time, or tragically destroyed by the hands of modern man. □