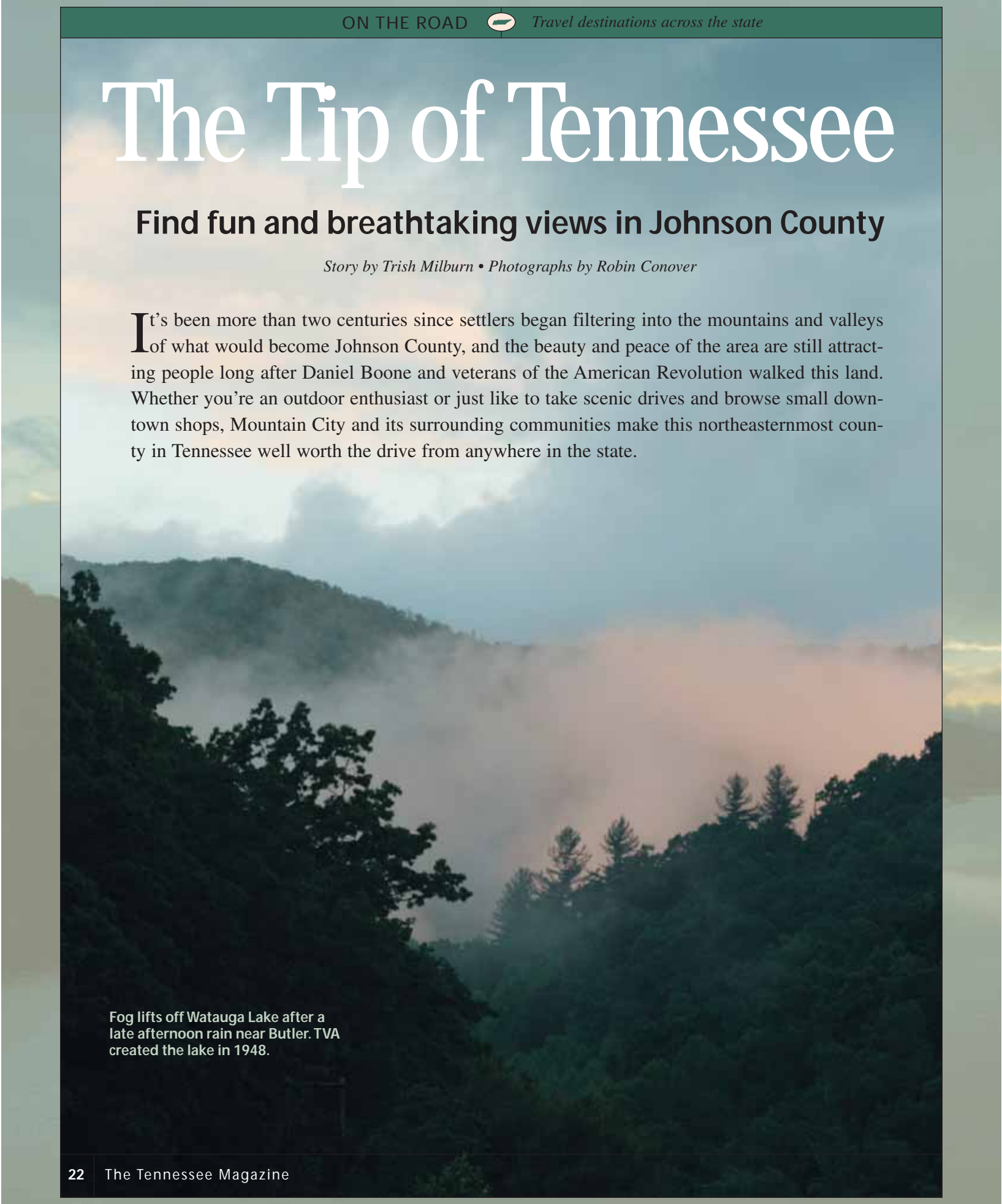


The Tip of Tennessee

Find fun and breathtaking views in Johnson County

Story by Trish Milburn • Photographs by Robin Conover

It's been more than two centuries since settlers began filtering into the mountains and valleys of what would become Johnson County, and the beauty and peace of the area are still attracting people long after Daniel Boone and veterans of the American Revolution walked this land. Whether you're an outdoor enthusiast or just like to take scenic drives and browse small downtown shops, Mountain City and its surrounding communities make this northeasternmost county in Tennessee well worth the drive from anywhere in the state.



Fog lifts off Watauga Lake after a late afternoon rain near Butler. TVA created the lake in 1948.



The drive there is part of the beauty of a trip to Johnson County. Highway 321 takes you along a meandering path along the shore of Watauga Lake, which is hugged by rolling green mountains and is one of the most beautiful lakes in the state. Picnic areas and trailheads leading into the Cherokee National Forest invite you to stop and enjoy the natural wonders of the area at a more leisurely pace.

Highway 67 will take you across the lake and into Johnson County and the small community of Butler, “the town that wouldn’t drown.” When the Tennessee Valley Authority created Watauga Lake in 1948, the original town of Butler was flooded. Prior to the flooding, many businesses and homes were moved to higher ground and the town reborn.



A few miles north of Mountain City, Highway 133 runs through one of the shortest tunnels you’ll ever see. The Empire Mining Company blasted through Backbone Rock in 1901 to lay train tracks for the Tennessee Lumber Company. The ridge is about 75 feet high and 20 feet thick. With several hiking trails, picnic tables and campsites, the area is now managed by the Tennessee Wildlife Agency.



A marker in Laurel Bloomery commemorates the Daniel Boone Trail Highway. More than 350 of these markers were erected between 1913 and 1938 by the Boone Trail Highway and Memorial Association.

Today, the Butler Museum tells the story of the town and its struggle to survive. Walking through the exhibits is like strolling down the streets of Old Butler. There’s the general store selling dishes, food items and clothing; the post office with the original post office

boxes; the barber shop; and the Blue Bird Tea Room and Bus Station. Other exhibits detail the history of the Watauga Academy; the railroad’s contribution to the area; the floods of 1902, 1916 and 1924; and the arrival of TVA in the valley. The basement of the museum houses barn photos from a past Smithsonian Institute exhibit, old cash registers, farm tools, a horse-drawn hearse and old caskets.

Russell and Freida Pickett enjoy an evening of dining and dancing at the Butler Barn located between Mountain City and Butler.





The scenery in Johnson County includes old barns surrounded by acres of farmland and Beaverdam Creek, below, which snakes along Highway 133 through the Cherokee National Forest.

nessee Twigs, is located in an old ham curing building in downtown Butler. He makes birdhouses, planters and arbors out of driftwood from the lake and downed limbs he collects in area forests. He has appeared on QVC with his “Appalachian home decor” and is a frequent exhibitor at craft shows around the country.



Another Butler area attraction is the Butler Barn, home to a good country cooking buffet, live country music and dancing on their large hardwood dance floor on Friday

and Saturday nights. Find out more by visiting www.thebardandd.com or calling (423) 768-2226.

One of the best times to visit Butler is during Old Butler Days the second weekend in August. You'll get to enjoy music, storytelling, arts and crafts, tales of life in Old Butler and a home and garden tour.

Butler is home to Iron Mountain Bed and Breakfast and numerous cottage and cabin rentals along the lakeshore, affording a wonderful getaway and striking views.

The drive on up Highway 67 through Doe Valley toward Mountain City takes you along the edge of the Iron Mountains, which the Appalachian Trail traverses.

Mountain City is the county seat of Johnson County and has several interesting stops to offer a visitor to the county. Be sure to collect some area information, including brochures on local lodgings, from the Johnson County Welcome Center on South Shady Street. A campground with full hook-ups and tent sites sits adjacent to the welcome center and local history museum.

The downtown area has some interesting stores including Forgotten Treasures, where you can find birdhouses, yard accessories and other gifts; the Victoria Rose Mini Mall; Mee Maw's Knick Knack Knook; and The Cabin Store, filled with rustic furniture and accessories that would be perfect for a log home or cabin — or for anyone who loves items with a bear or moose theme.

Locals recommend the Main Street Cafe and Cook's Cafeteria, which is famous for its roast beef,

Mountain Memories

For more information on Johnson County and its various communities, contact the Johnson County Welcome Center at (423) 727-5800 or <http://pages.preferred.com/~jcwcc>.



Johnson County



as a couple of choices for a tasty meal while in town.

The area also offers outdoor activities other than the plentiful hiking and water recreation opportunities. Among the choices are golfing at the Roan Valley Golf Course, situated in a lovely setting that legend says derived its name from Daniel Boone's roan horse, and horseback riding and ATV excursions at Callantee Campground and Riding Stables.

Other small communities throughout the county offer special events and spectacular scenery. Trade, on the border with North Carolina, is the state's oldest settlement and hosts Trade Days each June to celebrate the town's mountain and Native American heritage. It's also a short distance from Boone and Blowing Rock, two popular tourist spots in Western North Carolina.

Shady Valley is famous for its cranberry bogs and the annual Cranberry Festival, Oct. 8-9 this year. The festival offers tours of the bogs, crafts and a yummy bean supper Friday night.

The drive from Mountain City toward Laurel Bloomery along Highway 91 is a wonderful way to conclude your visit to the area. Laurel Bloomery is home to Old Mill Park, which hosts performances by country musicians and renowned fiddlers, and the striking Gentry Creek Falls, a double waterfall accessed by a 2 1/2-mile trail. You're also likely to see several fly fishermen along the way and may even choose to try your luck alongside them.



The Roderick Randon Butler home was completed in 1870. Lt. Col. Butler served in the Civil War in the 13th Tennessee Cavalry. He also served in both the Tennessee state legislature and the U.S. Congress.

After leaving Laurel Bloomery, continue on Highway 91 toward Damascus, Va., then follow the signs about 11 miles back to Interstate 81, which will allow easy traveling back home.

Even though more and more people are discovering all Johnson County has to offer, it's still a peaceful area nestled among some of the most beautiful mountains the state has to offer. Plan a visit to this tip of Tennessee and see for yourself. ➡



Every week Mary Wills and Marilyn McClellan meet with their friends at Angelo's Main Street Cafe in Mountain City for a friendly card game.