

Our State

North Carolina

"A Fine Kettle of Fish"

Issue: July 2005

"A river lost in time" is the way Jerry Anselmo describes the Little Tennessee. When he first saw it in 1991, Anselmo, now the owner of the Great Smokey Mountains Fish Camp and Safari, decided that the Little Tennessee River was the most awe-inspiring place he had ever seen. "I've been all over the world," he says, "and I knew I was home when I saw it."

Anselmo was actually lost when he stumbled onto the area that would become his new home. He was on his way to Clemson, South Carolina, to see about buying some land for a fish camp, when he got turned around on N.C. Highway 28 near Franklin. Alongside the road, the serene waters of the river flowing nearby caught his eye — and captured his heart. He decided to follow the 20-mile route of the river to see where it would take him. When he reached the end, he knew that he'd never leave.

Big fish

Just two days after driving alongside the river Anselmo, an avid outdoorsman and fisherman, decided to canoe it. There were no river outfitters in the area, however, so Anselmo borrowed a canoe to float the long stretch. While on the Little Tennessee, Anselmo was struck by the seclusion and serenity. He saw a lot of fish but never another person, and that was all it took. "I knew this was where I was going to start my fish camp," he says. Anselmo, who was then living in Louisiana, quickly acquired 20 acres of land where an old mining camp had been. He also bought several tracts along the river strategically spaced four-to-five miles apart to use for the convenience of different float trips, including canoes and kayaks. The building of the camp took "two long, hard years," Anselmo admits. The camp includes a main building that has two rooms Anselmo rents out to river-riders and folks who love to fish. There are also 10 campsites at the lodge and eight RV sites. Each parcel of land along the river has campsites, as well. In 1993, Anselmo opened his camp, and the fishing began. He declares the Little Tennessee "the best place to catch smallmouth [bass] in the world..."

And Anselmo should know, having been named one of the most famous smallmouth bass fishermen in the world. "When I go out," says Anselmo, "I expect to catch at least a couple of two- or three-pounders. There are some five- to seven-pounders out there," he adds. The Little Tennessee is also home to several other species of fish, including walleyes, brim, catfish, and trout. Great fishing is one of the main reasons people return year after year; Anselmo's personal touch is the other. Anselmo customizes each group's trip down the river using his four properties along its banks.

Dr. Jimmie Sain, a repeat fisherman for seven years now, looks forward to his trips to the river. "I live in Charlotte, so it's just about three hours away from me. When I heard about the Great Smoky Mountains Fish Camp, I decided to take my son fishing; I couldn't believe it when I got there." Sain says there are three reasons he loves the Little Tennessee: "The mountains are breathtaking, the fishing is great, and the sound of the running water is so soothing. You can't beat it." He's right. Other than the voices of your fellow river-riding companions, you hear no one. Anselmo describes it as "what it is used to be like going down a river." The only other sets of eyes you may see on the trip belong to the neighboring cows, munching slowly on stalks of long, yellow grass along the riverbanks. On occasion, a crane may swoop in and out of the coves. Slower river-trippers may try a leisurely ride in an inner tube. And for landlubbers,

Anselmo maintains hiking trails and bikes to ride. For a taste of the good life, arrive at one of Anselmo's campsites, and it's likely he'll greet you himself with one of his delectable dinners. In addition to being an expert fisherman, Anselmo is also a gourmet cook. A former owner of five-star restaurants in Memphis, Tennessee, and Hot Springs, Arkansas, Anselmo always has something wonderful cooking in his kitchen.

His love for cooking began at an early age — while growing up, Anselmo worked in his mother's steak-houses washing dishes and, later, as a fry cook. In college, he opened up his own restaurant and lodge. Some of his favorite meals take on a Cajun or Italian flavor. Those who spend the night at his camp may wake up to a riverside breakfast featuring Anselmo's own homemade sausage, eggs, and banana nut pancakes with lemon zest and fresh herbs grown right outside the lodge. Those who are traveling on the river can take along a lunch prepared by Anselmo. "I never know what I am going to fix until that day," he says, "but so far no one has complained." Beautifully cut zinnias and snapdragons, grown by Anselmo, adorn the breakfast tables and decorate the lodge.

Anselmo's hospitality springs from a simple desire that guests leave refreshed after spending time on the river. "This river has so much to offer," he says. What the Little Tennessee has to offer is one of the most intact aquatic ecosystems in the entire Tennessee River system. Brent Martin, with the Little Tennessee Land Trust, shares Anselmo's love of the river. "The first time I saw it I thought it had to be one of the most amazing places I had ever seen. "Jerry has offered his camp as a base for our annual river cleanup that takes place in late spring or early summer," Martin continues.

This year Anselmo is helping by trying something different. "He is going to lend his canoes so the volunteers can be more thorough with the cleanup than by walking the river. We are lucky to have an outfitter that cares so much about the Little Tennessee." Anselmo, who has been involved in conservation for many years, says the reason he feels so strongly about taking care of the Little Tennessee is the simple act of giving back to it. "It has been good to me, and I want to be just as good, if not better, when giving back." Anselmo and the Little Tennessee have a relationship not many share. Lucky for him - and lucky for the Little Tennessee. . Diane Silcox-Jarrett lives in Raleigh.

