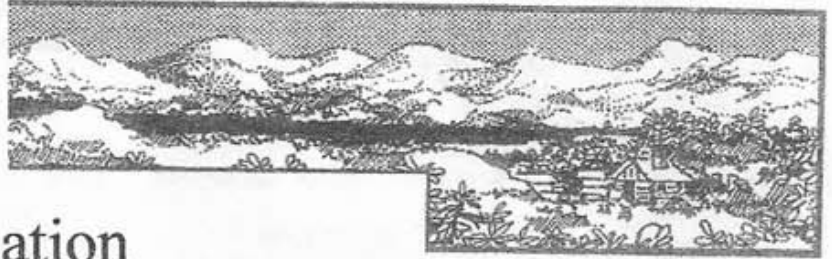


ESTATOEE

Quarterly Newsletter



Yancey History Association

Volume XXI, No. 1

Preserving Our Appalachian Heritage

Spring 2012

2012 Grand Opening Event

A Civil War Living History Event and Confederate Soldiers' Encampment will be held at the 2012 season opening of the McElroy House on Saturday, April 21st from 10am to 4pm.

This year's celebration honors the service of Yancey resident "Big Tom" Wilson whose life and adventures are legendary.



Please join us in a salute to all CSA and Union veterans of the Civil War with special flag ceremony at 10am and 4pm. Guest speakers, interpretative narrations, period music, crafts and demonstrations will fill the day. Watch the soldiers marching and drilling and visit with our volunteers in 1860's attire. Additional exhibits: "Chaplains of the Civil War – Heeding the Call for God and Country", "Music On the March" - favorite songs of soldiers and civilians and of course the "Big Tom" Wilson story. Admission is FREE. More on Big Tom on page 2 & 3.



Raising of the colors in front of the McElroy House (Rush Wray Museum).

Raising of the colors in front of the McElroy House (Rush Wray Museum).



In conjunction with the Living History Event, The First Annual YHA Fundraising Hike to Mitchell Falls, April 21st the Yancey History Association will start a new tradition by drawing our county's storied past, holding the First Annual YHA Fundraising Hike to Mitchell Falls. Sponsored by the NC High Peaks Trail Association, the hike will cost \$50 per participant (all funds are donated to the Yancey History Association) and includes transportation and lunch.



Big Tom Wilson, right, at the site of Mitchell Falls

Mitchell Falls, located within a private conservancy that is not open to the general public, is named in honor of Dr Elisha Mitchell who died in a pool at the base of the falls on June 27, 1857. Dr Mitchell had just visited the peak that now also bears his name, Mount Mitchell, to confirm which of the Black Mountain Peaks he had measured as the tallest peak in the United States (first measured by Dr Mitchell in 1835) and was on his way to visit Big Tom Wilson to compare notes of previous visits to the peak on which Big Tom had acted as his guide. When Dr Mitchell failed to arrive, several search parties went out, one consisting of the 'Buncombe Boys' and another of the 'Yancey Boys.' It was the 'Yancey Boys,' led by the legendary mountaineer Big Tom Wilson, that found the tell-tales signs of Dr Mitchell's fateful path that ended in the pool at the base of Mitchell Falls.

The First Annual YHA Fundraising Hike to Mitchell Falls will be April 21 (Saturday) and is limited to 20 participants. Please contact Yancey History Association (Wednesday thru Saturday,) 10 to 4 at 678-9587 and NC HighPeaks president Jake Blood at 284-6878) to register for the hike.



A GLIMPSE AT BIG TOM WILSON

(used by permission of author,
George Ellison. First published
in the Smoky Mtn. News -
Mountain Voices, May 2002.)

The occasion for this column is some Big Tom material that I recently chanced upon in a book published in the late 19th century. But before we turn to that material, let's sketch in Big Tom's life.

Big Tom was born in a cabin on the Toe River in Yancey County in 1825. In 1852 he married a young woman with the wonderful name of Niagra Ray. The next year they moved to a cabin on the headwaters of the Cane River, where Big Tom served as the gamekeeper for a vast tract of virgin wilderness known as the Murchison Preserve.



*Tom and Niagra Wilson
at Green Ponds, their
home place.*

One of the reasons for his widespread fame came from the publication of a book in 1888 by Charles Dudley Warner titled *On Horseback: A Tour in Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company). Warner was a northern newspaper editor and author who wrote several novels and a biography of Washington Irving.

While traveling through the southern mountains collecting the materials that went into *On Horseback*, Warner inevitably wound up spending some quality time with Big Tom. Here are some of the highlights of that encounter:

" From Burnsville the next point in our route was Asheville (but) at the moment the easiest thing to do seemed to be to ride down to Big Tom Wilson's (because) not to see him was to miss one of the characteristic productions of the country, the typical backwoods-man, hunter, guide... Tom's plantation has an open-work stable, an ill-put-together frame house, with two rooms and a kitchen, and a veranda in front, a loft, and a spring-house in the rear. (The term *plantation* was often referred to as 'a homeplace' in earlier times.) Chickens and other animals have free run of the premises. Some fish-rods hung in the porch, and hunter's gear depended on hooks in the passage-way to the kitchen. In one room were three beds, in the other two, only one in the kitchen. On the porch was a loom, with a piece of

cloth in process. The establishment had the air of taking care of itself."

As is often the instance with memorable personalities, Big Tom's most striking attribute was his spiritual vitality, not his physicality: "Big Tom Wilson, as he is known all over this part of the state, would not attract attention from his size. He is six feet and two inches tall, very spare and muscular, with sandy hair, a long, gray beard, and honest blue eyes. He has a reputation for great strength and endurance; a man of native simplicity and mild manners ... There was an entire absence of braggadocio in Big Tom's talk, but somehow, as he went on, his backwoods figure loomed larger and larger in our imagination, and he seemed strangely familiar. At length it came over us where we had met him before. It was in Cooper's novels. He was the Leather-Stocking exactly. And yet he was an original; for he assured us that he had never read the 'Leather-Stocking Tales.'

" ... From Wilson's to the peak of Mitchell it is seven and a half miles; we made it in five and a half hours ... As we approached the top, Big Tom pointed out the direction, a half mile away, of a small pond, a little mountain tarn, overlooked by a ledge of rock, where Professor Mitchell lost his life. Big Tom was the guide that found his body. That day as we sat on the summit he gave in great detail the story, the general outline of which is well known:

"... Professor Mitchell (then in his sixty-fourth year) made a third ascent in June 1857. He was alone, and went up from the Swannanoa side. He did not return. No anxiety was felt for two or three days, as he was a good mountaineer, and it was supposed he had crossed the mountain and made his way out by the Caney River. But when several days passed without tidings of him, a search party was formed. Big Tom Wilson was with it. They explored the mountain in all directions unsuccessfully. At length Big Tom separated himself from his companions and took a course in accordance with his notion, of that which would be pursued by man lost in the clouds or darkness. He soon struck the trail of the wanderer, and following it, discovered Mitchell's body lying in a pool at the foot of a rocky precipice some thirty feet high. It was evident that Mitchell, making his way along the ridge in darkness or fog, had fallen off. It was the ninth (or eleventh) day of his disappearance, but in the spare mountain air the body had suffered no change. Big Tom brought his companions to the place, and on consultation it was decided to leave the body undisturbed till Mitchell's friends could be present. There was some talk of burying him on the mountain, but the friends decided otherwise, and the remains, with much difficulty, were got down to Asheville and there interred. Some years afterwards, I believe at the insistence of a society of scientists, it was resolved to transport the body to the summit of Mt. Mitchell; for the tragic death of the explorer had forever settled in the popular mind the name of the mountain.

(Continued on page 3.)

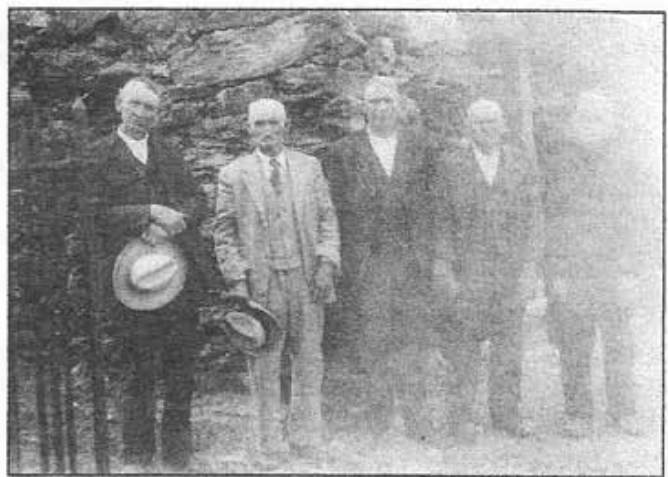
"... The summit is a nearly level spot of some thirty or forty feet in extent either way, with a floor of rock and loose stones. The stunted balsams have been cut away so as to give a view. The sweep of prospect is vast, and we could see the whole horizon except in the direction of Roan, whose long bulk was enveloped in cloud. portions of six States were in sight, we were told, but that is merely a geographical expression. What we saw, wherever we looked, was an inextricable tumble of mountains, without order or leading line of direction, — domes, peaks, ridges, endless and countless, everywhere, some in shadow, some tipped with shafts of sunlight, all wooded and green or black, and all in more softened contours than our Northern hills, but still wild, lonesome, terrible. Away in the southwest, lifting themselves up in a gleam of the western sky, the Great Smoky Mountains loomed like a frowning continental fortress, sullen and remote. With Clingman and Gibbs and Holdback peaks near at hand and apparently of equal height, Mitchell seemed only a part and not separate from the mighty congregation of giants.



Big Tom at the grave of Mitchell atop Mt. Mitchell

"In the centre of the stony plot on the summit lie the remains of Mitchell. To dig a grave in the rock was impracticable, but the loose stones were scooped away to the depth of a foot or so, the body was deposited, and the stones were replaced over it. It was the original intention to erect monument, but the enterprise of the projectors of this royal entombment failed at that point. The grave is surrounded by a low wall of loose stones, to which each visitor adds one, and in the course of ages the cairn may grow to a good size. The explorer lies there without name or headstone to mark his awful resting-place. The mountain is his monument. He is alone with its majesty. He is there in the clouds, in the tempests, where the lightning play and thunders leap, amid the elemental tumult, in the occasional great calm and silence and the pale sunlight. It is the most majestic, the most lonesome grave on earth."

*George Ellison is a writer who lives in Bryson City. He wrote the biographical introductions for the reissues of two Appalachian classics: Horace Kephart's **Our Southern Highlanders** and James Mooney's **History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees**.*



The five sons of Big Tom and Niagra. Left to right – Sam Wilson, Joe Wilson, Wood Wilson, Dolph Wilson and Rich Wilson. YHA member, Virginia Wilson Boone, is the granddaughter of Dolph Wilson, who built the first road up Mt. Mitchell. Dolph's son, Ewart, and Virginia's father, was President of the People's Bank of Burnsville and also owned a large hotel in Murchison during the heyday of logging in the Pensacola area. Member David Boone, renowned artist, son of Virginia, is the great-great grandson of Big Tom.

ASHEVILLE, N. C., Feb. 6.—News was received here to-day of the death at his home in Yancey County of Big Tom Wilson, the noted bear trapper, who found the body of Prof. Elisha Mitchell of Yale, for whom Mount Mitchell, the highest peak east of the Rockies, was named.

Dr. Mitchell lost his life in trying to ascend Mount Mitchell alone. A party of 500, led by United States Senator Zebulon Vance, continued the search for two weeks, but Dr. Mitchell's body was found by Big Tom at the foot of a deep precipice.

Big Tom was one of the pioneer settlers of the mountains and held the record for having killed more bears than any one else. He had 110 to his credit, and his son Adolph ninety. He was known as the guide of the Black Mountains. He was seven feet tall and weighed 250 pounds. He was 85 years old.

This obituary was found in the New York Times, February 1909. As with all legends, it grows larger with each telling - note the size of Wilson in the obituary and his size in a previous paragraph on pg. 2.

Rush Wray MUSEUM HOURS

Year Round

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday & Saturday

10:00 am - 4:00 pm

(Holiday & Special Events to be announced)

828-678-9587

Email: yhmuseum@frontier.com



UPCOMING EVENTS 2012

April 4, Grand Opening - The Rush Wray Museum will be open for tours during regular hours.

Wednesday 4th - YHA Board Meeting - 4:00 pm-Conference Room-Annex.

April 21, Saturday—A Civil War Living History Event in and around historic McElroy House featuring guest speakers, interpretative narrations, period music, crafts and demonstrations. 10:00 to 4:00.

1st Annual High Peaks Hike - to Mitchell Falls in the Pensacola area of Yancey County. Cost, \$50.00, includes a box lunch - limited to 20 participants. For information call either the YHA office, 678-9587 or HighPeaks President, Jake Blood at 284-6878.

MAY & JUNE 2012

May 12 - Students attending the Mountain Heritage High School Prom have been invited to have their pictures taken in and around the McElroy House the evening of the dance.

June 6 - Thursday - Quarterly open meeting with a guest speaker the event is free and open to the public beginning at 6:30 pm. June Board Meeting will proceed this meeting beginning at 4:30 pm in the Conference Room. Program to be announced.

June 16- June is the month for brides and exhibits are planned beginning in late May featuring Bridal gowns from bygone days and decorations to go with them. On Saturday, the 16th, a Bridal Crème Tea will be held beginning at 2:00. Tickets will be available for purchase by calling or visiting the YHA office, 3 Academy Street, Burnsville. Cost— \$15.00/person and must be purchased prior to the event. (Home schooled students will be present, in costume, to serve at the tea.)



JULY & AUGUST, 2012

During the entire month of July our Hometown Heroes will be honored. YHA will have a display of various war memorabilia related to the Veterans of Yancey County. A program is also planned inviting Veteran's to be our guests and more information will be announced.

During July and August a display of old/antique tools will be displayed in the museum.



July 11—YHA Board Meeting, 4:00 pm, Conference Room, Annex.

July 28 - Saturday - Second annual Yancey County Genealogy Research Program will be held at noon to 5:00 at the Public Library. You are encouraged to bring a covered dish for lunch and your computers are encouraged as the library has WI-FI.

August 1 - YHA Board Meeting - Board Meeting, 4:00 pm. Conference Room.



During August of there will be a change over from the Heroes July exhibit to a Blue Ridge Pottery exhibit featuring displays from various collectors in the Yancey County area.

SEPTEMBER 2012

September 5—YHA Board Meeting - Board Meeting, 4:00 pm. Conference Room

September 29 - Saturday - Old Timey Days, Burnsville Square with tours of the McElroy House preceded by a free wagon ride from the Town Square area. YHA will have a number of activities during this time and are pleased, once again, to be involved in this activity.

This calendar will continue in the Summer Issue.

(Special thanks to member, John Elsegood, for his rendering of the Yancey History Association's logo.)

The BLTPresents "Goodnight Mr. Lincoln"

As A Fundraiser For The History Association.

The Burnsville Little Theatre will open it's 85th season with their production of "Goodnight Mr. Lincoln. The play was presented at the Parkway Playhouse in 1957 when it was a summer theatre for The University of Miami. The play was written by Jack Kelly, who was then manager of the playhouse for the university. Mr. Kelly's wife, Blanch, played Mrs. Lincoln in the 1957 production. Their son Barry is now a Burnsville resident and is a member of the cast.



The play takes place on the day of Lincoln's assassination, beginning with a dream he had about his death. The play portrays his breakfast with his family; his morning work; an afternoon cabinet meeting, and the complicated set of circumstances that led to his decision to attend Ford's Theatre that evening. The cast includes: Barry

Kelly, Bob Simes, Patti Smith, Nathaniel Ledford, Gavin Henry,

Lanny Heidenfelter, Jim Carter, Bob Wilson, Don Harmon, Duncan Porter, and Bill Wheeler. The play is scheduled to run April 13th, 14th and 15th at the Town Center in Burnsville

As is the tradition of the Burnsville Little Theatre, proceeds from their plays go to local organizations. We at the history association are pleased to have been chosen to benefit from this production. Tickets may be purchased at the History Association and the Town Center. For more information call 678-9587 between 10:00am and 4:00pm Wednesday through Saturday.

Yancey County History Association

Membership Form

Join the Yancey County Historical Society and participate in a powerful network of individuals and businesses that share our commitment to preserve, promote and interpret Yancey County history.

Members receive:

- Four newsletters/year
- 10% discount at the Ce-Nan Gift Shop
- Free Museum admission
- Free use of the Genealogy library
- Annual Meeting & Program
- Free copy of *McElroy House: A Glimpse of NC—Yancey County History* by Michael Hardy
With a \$250 or greater membership

Please indicate your level of membership by circling:

- Individual (one person) - \$20.00 or more
- Family (Two+ persons) - \$40.00 or more
- Senior (60+) - \$15.00
- Senior Family (60+) - \$30.00
- Basic business - \$100.00 or more
- Elite business - \$250.00 or more with
free advertising in YHA newsletter

(Please Print)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ St. _____ Zip _____

Phone _____

Email _____

Make checks payable to YHA.

Mail to: Yancey History Association
3 Academy Street
Burnsville, NC 28714



A FEW COPIES ARE STILL AVAILABLE!

Images of Yancey Co., NC Vol.II A Pictorial History

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_____ @\$53.50 picked up at the Yancey History
Association office, 3 Academy Street, Burnsville.
_____ Total enclosed

Make checks payable to YHA.
Mail to: Yancey History Association
3 Academy Street
Burnsville, NC 28714



Yancey History Association
3 Academy Street
Burnsville, North Carolina 28714

Estatooe Quarterly Newsletter

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Museum Volunteers needed....

- ◆ Docents for the museum, providing tours, 3-6 hours per week, as needed
- ◆ Dress in Period Clothing for various events held by YHA
- ◆ Work in the Jim Ray Heritage Garden (1-2 days a month)
- ◆ Volunteers to staff the office in the Rush Wray Annex – 2-6 hours per day, when open

Please call 828-678-9587 and let us know your area of interest.

2012 MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL DUE

We trust you will be renewing your membership dues very soon. The membership period is for the calendar year, 2012. Simply complete the enclosed form and return it along with your check payable to:

**Yancey History Association
3 Academy Street
Burnsville, North Carolina 28714**

Editor note:

Please forgive me for not having a Winter Issue of *Estatooe*. Sickness and surgery kept me down for a long period, but we will make it up to you, our members, in the months to come. Thanks for your patience.



ESTATOOE

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Estatooe (es-to-toe-e)
Estootowie in early records. A Cherokee place name, shortened to Estatooe/Estatoah, from which the name Towe or Toe River is derived.

Officers and Staff Directory

Editor & Treasurer: Vivianne Bradley
Contributing Editors: Lloyd Bailey & Elaine Dellinger
President: Jake Blood
Vice-President:
Secretary : Jake Blood
Historian & PR: Chris Carter
Board of Directors:
Bob Wilson - Past President

Staff: Marilyn Oakley & Lynne McCullough