

Mt. Mitchell play tells tale of bad blood

By DAVID WILLIAMSON, UNC News Services
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CHAPEL HILL -- "Mountain of Hope," a play based on the true story of the bitter betrayal that led to the death of UNC professor Elisha Mitchell on Mount Mitchell, is premiering at the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theater at Mars Hill College through July 18.

Much of the play is taken directly from original documents and letters relating to the life and death of Mitchell and housed in the Southern Historical Collection at UNC. It is the result of a collaboration between SART director William Gregg and author Perry Deane Young.

Mitchell was a much beloved UNC professor from 1818 until his death in 1857. He discovered that the highest mountain in eastern America was located in the Black Mountain range in Yancey County.

Until 1835, Mount Washington in New Hampshire was widely believed to be the highest. But that year, Mitchell spent two weeks in Yancey County doing scientific measurements of the peaks in the Black Mountains. He proved that the tallest was 400 feet higher than Mount Washington. It immediately became known as Mount Mitchell.

In 1855, Mitchell was shocked to read in the Smithsonian Reports that his former student and protégé, T.L. Clingman, claimed that his old professor had never reached the highest peak, but that he, Clingman, had. Clingman was a member of Congress and used his clout to have "Mt. Mitchell" changed to "Clingman's Peak" on all area maps.

Mitchell was determined to prove his claim to the highest peak but could not travel to the mountains until June 1857. He and his son were on the pinnacle when Mitchell left his son and set off alone down the Cane River side of the mountain to find William Wilson, the man who had guided him on his first trip to the mountain's summit. Wilson could prove that Mitchell had climbed the highest peak.

On the way, Mitchell fell from the top of a 40-foot waterfall and drowned in the pool below.

A colorful group of mountaineers roamed the mountain for 11 days before they found his body. These included the celebrated bear hunter Big Tom Wilson, the future Civil War governor Zeb Vance, and a school teacher named Thomas C. Westall, grandfather and namesake of author Thomas Wolfe, also a UNC graduate. Ninety-four men were on the mountain the day the body was found.

Although Mitchell was first buried in the Presbyterian graveyard in Asheville, he was reburied on the mountaintop in a formal ceremony conducted by the university a year later. When the ox cart hauling the heavy lead-encased casket became mired in the mud, the men from Yancey hoisted it on their shoulders and carried it the final miles up to the top.

After Mitchell's death, Vance, a former student, and UNC President David Lowry Swain led a nationwide campaign to discredit Clingman's claims and restore Mitchell's name and credibility to the mountain. Although Clingman went on to a fairly successful career as a scientist and public speaker, he was never elected to public office again. He died in the N.C. Hospital for the Insane at Morganton in 1897.

The play's author and the SART director are both mountain men whose families have lived in the area since before the Revolutionary War. When Mitchell and his wife first visited the region in 1827, they stayed with Young's great-great-grandparents, Strawbridge and Martha Wilson Young. When Mitchell came back in 1835 to measure the mountain, he stayed with Young's great-great-uncle, Thomas Young, who was his first guide to the mountaintop. Gregg's ancestors also lived in the area, and the name "Gregg's Bear Camp" near Mount Mitchell shows up on many of the early maps. As a counselor at Camp Sequoyah when he was in high school, Gregg frequently led hikers to Mount Mitchell.

This is the second collaboration between Gregg and Young. SART produced their first play, "Frankie," in 2001, and it will be featured in the company's 2005 season. "Frankie" tells the true story of Frankie Silver, who was hanged in Morganton in 1833 for the ax murder of her husband.

Young, a UNC graduate, wrote eight nonfiction books, including the widely praised Vietnam memoir "Two of the Missing," and "The David Kopay Story." He lives in Chapel Hill.

Gregg is the artistic director of the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre and associate professor of theatre arts at Mars Hill College. He previously served as a director of the New American Theater in Illinois, the Theatre Virginia in Richmond, the New Raft Theatre Company in New York City and the Alabama Shakespeare Festival.

Gregg has produced more than 200 plays in his 25-year career and lives in Mars Hill, where he can see Mount Mitchell from his front porch.