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## Play tells tale of man and mountain

By ANNE BLYTHE, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL -- Perry Deane Young grew up in a small Buncombe County mountain community where storytelling was a way of life. As a youngster, he would sit rapt with a keen ear toward the family lore, which always was peppered with bits of North Carolina history.

The Chapel Hill writer's parents grew up in Yancey County, and his mother, especially, was one to go on about the people who settled in the rugged hills before them -- the mountaineers who farmed, mined and raised cattle for the better part of two centuries.

That was how Young became fascinated with Elisha Mitchell, the late UNC professor who laid claim to discovering the highest mountain peak east of the Mississippi River. The learned outdoorsman stayed with Young's great-great grandparents in the 1800s on his first visit to Yancey County, so the story goes, and Thomas Young, a great-great-uncle, was Mitchell's first guide to the top of the Black Mountains.

"I read about that when I was a little kid," said Young, a Vietnam veteran who lives in a basement apartment surrounded by books, old maps and boxes filled with papers from the past.



Staff Photos by Harry Lynch

Perry Young, a North Carolina history buff and author, shaped Elisha Mitchell's biography into a dramatic production.

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Since his childhood, Young has pored over the pages of history books, old magazine articles, letters and archived documents in the Southern Historical Collection. Not too long ago he hooked up with William Gregg, who also grew up in the small Buncombe County factory community of Woodfin.

Gregg, with a background in theater, asked Young, a North Carolina history buff and author of eight nonfiction books, to help shape the Mitchell biography into a dramatic production. Their collaborative work debuts Wednesday at the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theater at Mars Hill College. It is scheduled to run through July 18.

The Mitchell story is laced with the emotional highs of scientific exploration and discovery, the heartbreak of a former student challenging his claim and eventual tragedy.

"The story of betrayal is a classic story, whether it's Salieri and Mozart or somebody else," Gregg

said.

Gregg and Young sat across from each other at a table, and in intense spurts of energy shaped a story for the ages into a summer production for a theater in its 29th year.

To chronicle the life of Elisha Mitchell, a Connecticut Yankee, is to travel back in time more than 147 years to an age when there were no motorized ski lifts shuttling people from mountain base to the apex. It is to go back to an era when climbing a mountain meant hunching way over and cutting through thick laurel thickets inhabited by bears and snakes, then scaling craggy rocks hand over hand without any fancy, modern climbing equipment.

### **Death on the mountain**

Mitchell, a geologist who studied at Yale, was a popular Carolina professor from 1818, when he arrived on the Chapel Hill campus, until June 1857, when he apparently lost his footing at the top of a mountain waterfall and plummeted to his death.

Why Mitchell was making the 1857 trek is the basis for the Young-Gregg production -- "Mountain of Hope."

Thirty-two years before searchers found Mitchell banged up and drowned in a waterfall pool, the UNC professor first made his way to the Black Mountains -- a series of peaks just west of the Blue Ridge that rise up dramatically from the Cane and Toe river valleys and disappear into the clouds. In the bright midday light, the hook-shaped 15-mile-long range appears to be dark green, or nearly black, and hence the name.

For much of the early 1800s, scientists went to the mountains to study their flora and fauna. Mitchell, a mathematician, chemist, scholar and enthusiastic Presbyterian preacher, was drawn to the Black Mountains region as part of the North Carolina Geologic Survey in 1825.

At the time, the thinking was that Mount Washington in New Hampshire was the highest peak in the United States, which did not yet extend west of the Mississippi.

But Mitchell had other thoughts, and Young's great-great uncle helped influence him. In an 1829 geologic report, Mitchell wrote that he thought the Black Mountains were the highest peaks between the Gulf of Mexico and the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

But it was not until 1835 that he returned to the Blacks to actually try to prove his theory.

With no maps and only locals to guide him, Mitchell scaled one ridge top and another. At the pinnacles, he would measure the temperature and barometric pressure, readings that later helped him determine height.

The tallest peak, he determined, was 400 feet higher than Mount Washington in the Northeast.

But whether Mitchell actually climbed the tallest peak became the subject of much scrutiny.

### **A student's challenge**

In 1855, T.L. Clingman, a former student of Mitchell's who became a congressman, took his former professor to task in a Smithsonian Reports article.

Clingman claimed that Mitchell's measurements were off, and that the mountain he had thought to be the tallest really was the second-highest in the Black Mountains range. Clingman claimed that he was the first to climb and accurately measure the tallest peak, and with his political power he persuaded Congress to change the maps to note that

Mt. Mitchell became Clingman's Peak. For two years, Mitchell stewed.

"He had to be heartbroken," Young said. "What broke his heart was the smartest student he ever had published this thing in the Smithsonian."

In 1857, Mitchell, at 64 years old, was determined to make his way to the top of Mt. Mitchell and reclaim the honor he thought to be his. He and his son, Charles, reached the pinnacle, according to many reports. But the elder Mitchell took a different path down, determined to find William Wilson, the man who could substantiate that, indeed, the two had scaled that peak years before.

That was on a Friday in late June, according to Young. Mitchell was to preach to the locals that Sunday as he often did while in the mountains. But two days after father and son took divergent paths, the famous mountain-climber did not show up for Sunday service.

A full-scale manhunt was organized. For 11 days, men combed the hills.

Zeb Vance, a future Civil War governor, was part of the search party. So was Big Tom Wilson, a noted bear hunter and tracker who found Mitchell's body on July 7, 147 years ago, at the base of a 40-foot waterfall, submerged under a log.

Scientists determined later that the peak, indeed, was the highest this side of the Mississippi. In 1881, the mile-high mountain was again named for Mitchell.

Clingman got his peak -- Clingman's Dome, the highest point in the Great Smoky Mountains and the second-highest east of the Mississippi. And generations of mountaineers and North Carolina history buffs got a doozy of a yarn.

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