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Yancey Volunteers Fight As 'Black Mountain Boys'

When the war between the states broke out in 1861, division caused Yancey County to become a microcosm of that bitter struggle that found the men going off to war and families fighting each other.

Although there were only 362 slaves in the whole Toe Valley, most of these being in the southern part, Yancey County nonetheless was involved in slavery and had been since 1840 when the first real road was built here--from Burnsville to the crest of the Blue Ridge.

The county's stake in slavery lay in the fact that the big cotton plantations of the east bought heavily of Yancey's livestock and grain for their slaves. Between 1840 - 1860, production of livestock increased enormously, and drovers took thousands of animals down to the east.

Yancey, like most of the other western counties voted against secession, but when it actually came the county was divided sharply and bitterly on the issue. The pro-union northern part of the county clamored for and was made into a new county called Mitchell. The southern part, Yancey, remained with the South.

When war was declared Yancey County was among the first to raise a volunteer company for the Southern Army. The Black Mountain Boys were organized by Capt. John S. McElroy and reported to Raleigh where they were assigned to Company C, 16th North Carolina Regiment. The Black Mountain Boys proved themselves, on the whole, as sturdy and strong as the mountains from whence they came.

According to the old records of the Company kept by William J. Byrd the men in the company experienced many hardships; clothing and food were scarce, and the men begged for tiny pieces of paper from the record book to write a few words to their families (the reported condition of the old record book proved this story).

The men fought McClellan's army at Richmond and during those seven days they were thinned rapidly--so many dying in battle, some of their wounds and fever, others were taken prisoners, and many were detached or transferred to other companies. James McClellan was the first of these men to die in battle.

After the 12 months' enlistment had elapsed, some of the volunteers grew tired of war and wished to return to the mountains, and rather than be conscripted into the Confederate Army, joined the Federals and fought against the cause which they once upheld.

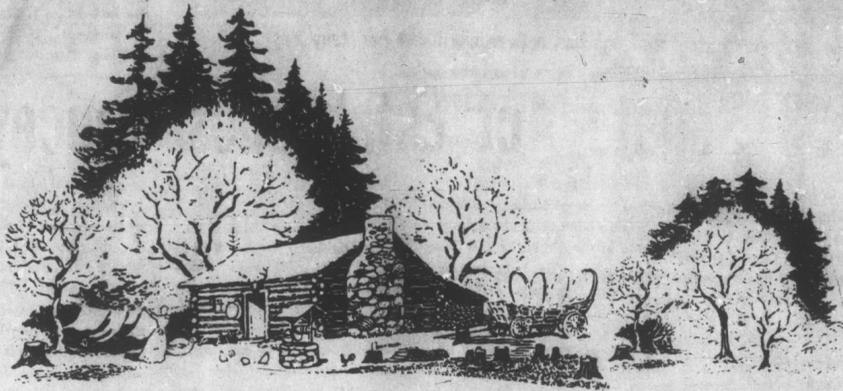
After Lee's surrender, the remaining "Black Mountain Boys" returned to their native hills, to find that allegiance had also waned at home. As the war went on, economic distress and division overtook the county.

Deserters from both sides had hidden in the mountains and joined with draft dodgers in guerrilla bands. They brought

terror to Yancey County as they came out of the mountains to plunder--raiding farms for food and supplies.

Traces of the strife and division caused by the Civil War are still apparent today in clannish attitudes shown within one county towards a neighbor-

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HISTORY EDITION

We would like to express our appreciation to the businesses and industries in Yancey County and elsewhere whose names appear on the following pages. Without their support, our History Edition would not have

been possible. We are also grateful to those who have contributed to this edition with pictures and stories from long ago. We are proud to publish The Yancey Journal's first History Edition.

'Big Tom' Wilson Leads Search For Professor Mitchell; Body Found Near Waterfall Atop Famous Mountain Peak

(The following account of the search for Professor Mitchell by Big Tom Wilson and his party was written in 1903, five years prior to Big Tom's death on February 1, 1908 at the age of 85. To our knowledge, this version of the famous story has never before been published.)

By Harold E. Johnston
Thomas D. Wilson, the veteran bear hunter, trapper, and guide, of the Black Mountains, familiarly known to his friends and the public in general as "Big Tom" Wilson, was born on the Toe (Indian name "Estatoe") River in Yancey County, N. C., December 1, 1825, a region then almost an unbroken wilderness. To the south and east lay the Blue Ridge, separating the head waters of the Toe and Catawba Rivers; to the northeast the lofty Roan loomed up in bold relief against the horizon; to the north and northwest stretched the peaks of the Great Smoky Range, while on the west and southwest the majestic

Black Mountains, monarchs of the Great Appalachian System, proudly lifted their shaggy heads to the skies. From the tops of the mountains to the banks of the rivers stretched the forests unbroken, save where an occasional settler had penetrated the wilderness, made a small clearing and erected thereon his humble home.

The streams abounded in fish, the forests were full of game of various kinds, and in his youth Big Tom roved the forests chasing the bear and deer, or wandered along the mountain streams seeking to allure the wary trout from their haunts in the cool depths of the pools.

This life in the wilds developed him, as he grew from boyhood to manhood, into a figure tall, straight, lithe, rawboned and sinewy, possessing a rugged constitution, and he acquired in his roving a knowledge of woodcraft such as few men ever possess.

At the age of twenty seven

(in 1852) he married a maiden named Niagara Ray, who was born and reared in the vicinity of his home. Of this union nine children have been born, six of whom are living and reside in the neighborhood of where the old man now lives.

In 1853 he moved up near the head waters of the Cane River in Yancey County, settling at the foot of the Black Mountains, on the north side, on what is now known as the Murchison boundary, close to where his son, Dolph, now lives, and many years later moved down the river two or three miles to the place he now lives.

The country growing more and more thickly settled, fish and game grew scarcer year by year, but up to a few years ago Big Tom still followed his favorite pursuits of hunting and trapping until infirmities incident to age, compelled him to relinquish the pleasure of the chase.

During his life one hundred

and fourteen bears, besides a number of deer and smaller game have fallen victims to his skill.

During the Civil War of 1861-65 Big Tom served in the Confederate Army as chief musician of the brigade commanded by Gen. Robert B. Vance, and sometimes now, at the age of almost four-score years, as he recalls the memories of those stirring scenes of strife, he reaches up on the mantel of his humble fireside, takes therefrom his old fife, places it to his lips, and the listener hears once again the martial strains that cheered the Boys in Gray to battle or the mournful notes

of the dirge sounded for those who had fallen in conflict or succumbed to diseases in the camps, as their bodies were laid to rest.

"Neath the sod and the dew, Awaiting the judgment day."

Big Tom first came into prominence in 1857 as the leader of the party of searchers that found the body of Prof. Elisha Mitchell (for whom Mitchell's Peak is named) who had lost his life in the wilds of the Black Mountains attempting to prove that he had been the first person to measure the altitude of the highest peak east of the Rocky Mountains. From that time to the present, Big Tom

has been one of the most noted figures of the western section of the State, and many are the travelers that have visited him in his mountain home to hear the story of how he found Mitchell's body, and listen to the narrative of some of his adventures in the chase of the black bear, Nor was any trip to Mitchell's Peak complete unless Big Tom was the guide.

Up to ten or twelve years ago Big Tom would generally make two or three visits to Asheville each year, making the journey, twenty-seven miles each way, afoot, and his power-

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Dempsey's Fists Outlawed Here

Pittsburgh, Pa., Press, Oct. 23, 1949
Down in the mountains of North Carolina there is a place called Burnsville--hometown of Nathan Dempsey, grandfather of the famous Jack.

Many tales are told tourists of Nathan's might. He was a blacksmith who weighed 250 pounds and stood six feet, six inches. He was a wrestler, weight-lifter and handy with his fists.

Once a balky mule exasperated the mighty Nathan so he just threw the critter out of his shop. One day, so the story goes he sort of lost his temper when eight roddy mountaineers jumped on him in a free for all. At the end of the melee all eight were out cold.

And next day town council passed an ordinance stating that hereafter Nathan Dempsey should not strike a man with his closed fist. It (Dempsey's closed fist) was classified legally as "a deadly weapon."

provision of the act which required that the county seat should be within five miles of the home of James Greenlee, this church being one mile from Greenlee's home.

D. Angel was made sheriff pro tem, Amos L. Ray, clerk of the superior court, Joseph B. Ray, register of deeds and Burgess S. Gaither was appointed county attorney. The first senator from the new county was Thomas Baker and William Blalock was elected the first representative.

The first person convicted in the county was the first clerk of the superior court who was found guilty of a minor offense, but the first sheriff met with worse luck. He was convicted of murder in the first degree and was hanged!

The first fines paid in Yancey County were paid in a joint indictment against Rueben Keith and S. Byrd who were fined one gallon of cider each, which was paid into court.

Among the first white settlers in Yancey was Thomas Ray, Sr., who settled in the Cane River Valley and traded a horse and gun to the Indians for a large tract of land lying in that section. Among later settlers were: M. P. Penland, Samuel Flemming, John Bailey, Bacchus Smith, Thomas Young, the Griffiths, the Silvers, who settled in the BoJens Creek section, and the Byrds who settled in the northeastern part of the county.

The nearest markets for the early settlers were at Charleston, S. C., Saltville, Va. and Baltimore, Md. The pioneer settlers made trips to these ports in ox-carts and wagons.

The first general merchants in Burnsville were M. P. Penland, Thomas Young, Samuel Flemming, R. B. Johnson, Joe Mason, John Roberts, Jackson Brown and Captain W. M. Moore. There were several boot and harness shops. The bar rooms were operated by J. L. Hyatt Sr., Sheriff N. M. Wilson, and "Dad" Johnson. There were four blacksmith shops all operated by Boomes, who are direct descendants of Daniel Boone.

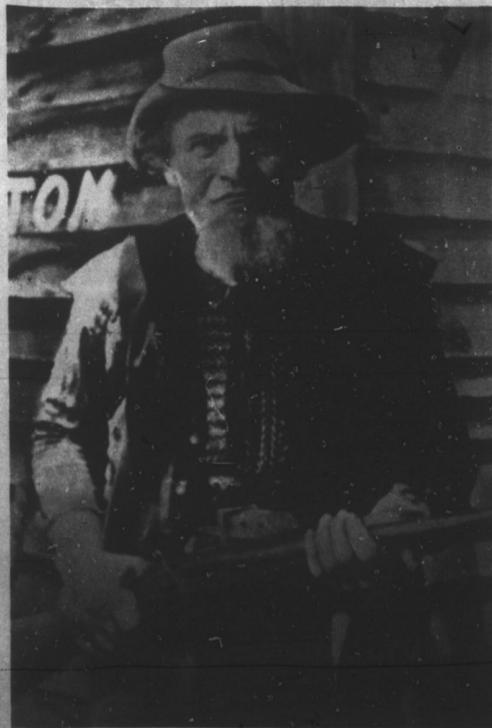
Travelers coming to Burnsville had the choice of four inns. These were operated by J. L. Hyatt, Sr., M. P. Penland, S. D. Poore, and the Williams brothers.

Tanning hides was one of the chief industries at that time. Ready-made clothes were almost unheard of and the four seamstresses were kept busy. These were: Miss Mary Jane McIntosh, Mrs. James McCannless and Mrs. McAllister, and Lucinda Griffith, a negro who owned the first sewing machine that was brought into Yancey County.

The county did not have a telephone system until 1905. The first line was built by W. B. Wray, and extended from Cane River to Burnsville. Later a line was built from Burnsville to Green Mountain, a distance of 15 miles. Green Mountain was at that time the nearest railroad point.

The first road bill was in-

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"Big Tom" Wilson, Leader Of The Search

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