

BIG TOM WILSON

When Big Tom Wilson led searchers to the body of Elisha Mitchell in 1857, he cemented his reputation as North Carolina's most famous mountain man.

written by Tim Silver ©1997

In the years after the Civil War, some of the tourists called it a "plantation." But that was stretching the truth a bit. It was really only a small farm on the upper Cane River, near the tiny community of Pensacola, N.C. The buildings were simple: a nondescript three-room cabin, a crudely constructed open stable and a springhouse. Corn and other crops flourished on small plots nearby; chickens and livestock wandered aimlessly around the grounds. In summer, a loom with a half-finished piece of cloth sometimes stood on the porch. A motley collection of fishing rods, guns, traps and other hunting paraphernalia dangled from rafters and pegs throughout the house; a family Bible usually lay open beside one of the feather beds. From all appearances, it was an ordinary household with ordinary furnishings.

However, the man who lived there with his wife and children was hardly a typical mountain farmer. He entertained dignitaries from as far away as Boston and New York. He parleyed with state politicians. Newspapermen pestered him for interviews. Sketch artists and photographers sought him out. Indeed, he had so many visitors that someone eventually painted his name in block letters on the side of the cabin—either as a

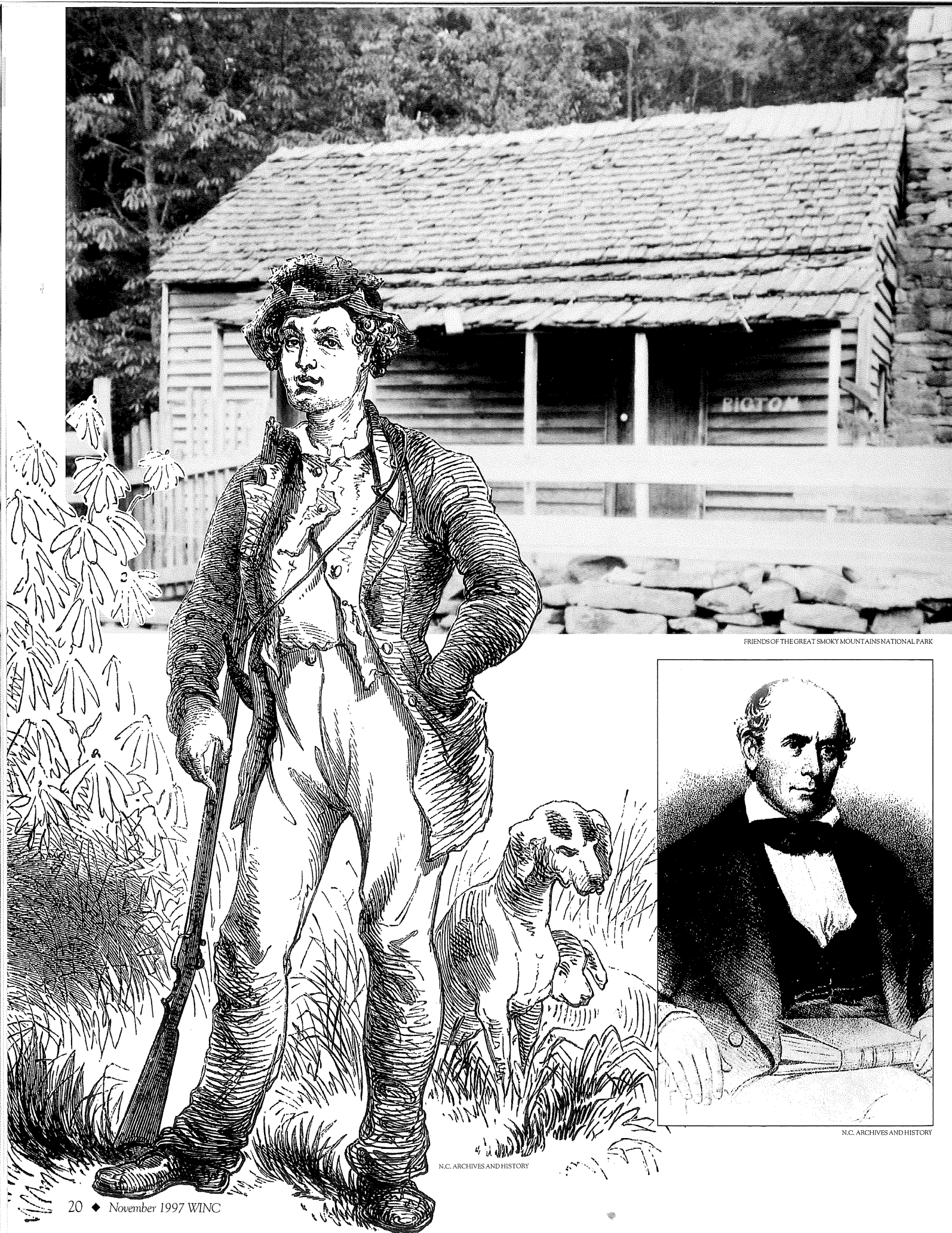
photographic backdrop or perhaps to make it easier to find the place. The sign read simply "Big Tom," and all who saw it knew they had arrived at the home of Big Tom Wilson, the foremost hunter, tracker and woodsman of the Black Mountains.

Big Tom had not always lived near Pensacola. He was born in the South Toe River valley in 1825. His ancestry was Scotch-Irish, and his full name was Thomas David Wilson. In the early 1850s, he moved to the Cane River region and married Niagara Ray, daughter of Amos Ray, a settler who held title to more than 13,000 acres on the river's headwaters. During their first years on the Ray property, Thomas, Niagara and their children worked the land in much the same way as other Appalachian farmers. They grew subsistence crops, occasionally sold livestock to local merchants and drovers, and augmented their annual harvests with chestnuts, honey and other forest produce. Exactly how and when Thomas David earned the name Big Tom remains something of a mystery. But family members agree that the title had little to do with his size (he was 6 feet 2 inches tall and spindly). Probably the Wilsons used the nickname to distinguish Thomas David from younger family members who shared his first name.

Big Tom adapted easily to life in his new home. He was skilled at robbing bee gums and always had some of the best honey to be found anywhere in the region. He was a master brook trout fisherman and deer hunter,

Bear hunter, tracker and master storyteller, Big Tom Wilson became an accidental celebrity after finding the body of a famous scientist.

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taking his share of both from the streams and forests on the family lands. But Wilson's real forte was stalking black bears.

In the 19th century, bear hunting was an integral part of male culture in the Black Mountains. A worrisome bear—one that rooted up crops or killed pigs—might be shot or trapped by a farmer at any season. But the most pleasurable and sporting way to take a bear was during the annual fall hunt. From late September until the first days of winter, small groups of men left their farms and camped deep in the forests. Using specially bred hounds (usually blue ticks or black-and-tans), the men hunted continuously for a week or longer, hoping to lay in a supply of bear meat and collect a few skins to trade with the region's itinerant merchants.

The hunt was as much a social as a utilitarian endeavor. The best hunters and dog trainers were rewarded not only with meat and hides but also with the admiration and envy of their friends. Many hunters must have been jealous of Big Tom Wilson. He developed an uncanny ability to negotiate rhododendron and laurel thickets and had a reputation for relentlessly following his dogs

Wilson was a well-known hunting guide even before his new fame. This engraving of Big Tom and his hunting dogs was published in Harper's magazine in 1857. After finding Elisha Mitchell (left), Wilson was pursued so avidly by journalists and other visitors that someone painted his name on the side of his cabin to guide them to his house (top, left).

over the most rugged terrain. Hunters from near and far marveled at his stamina. Sometimes he left home for a week with nothing more than a pocketful of cornmeal, relying on his marksmanship to supply enough game to feed himself and his dogs. On these extended expeditions, he often pursued his quarry on foot, storing any bears he killed in a safe cache and returning later on horseback to retrieve them. Tradition holds that he killed somewhere between 113 and 117 of the beasts (an average of two to three per year) during his days as a hunter.

In the Black Mountain settlements, where rural people relied on storytelling to preserve their collective memories, talking about bears was almost as important as killing them. At church, around campfires and across fences, men regaled neighbors and newcomers alike with tales of autumn forest exploits. A hunter's reputation often depended on his ability to recount specific details of a given hunt—including his own adventures and achievements—without giving the appearance of bragging. When it came to this sort of overly modest talk, Big Tom had no equal. One of his sons later noted that "the old man" could leave home in the middle of a story "and talk right over" the mountains "and all the way back, and never make a break." Even today, family members fondly recall his remarkable ability to "paint a picture with words."

Yet Big Tom Wilson, bear hunter and storyteller without peer, might have lived and died in relative obscurity had he not been involved in one of the most sensational events of the 1850s: the search for Elisha Mitchell. The

account of Mitchell's disappearance in the Blacks is an old and oft-told tale, but few who repeat it understand all its nuances or the peculiar way in which it shaped Big Tom's life.

Elisha Mitchell was a professor of science at the University of North Carolina and made trips to the Black Mountains in 1835, 1838 and 1844. Using a barometer to measure elevation, he determined that the Blacks were the highest mountains in eastern America. By 1844, however, he seemed unsure about which peak was tallest and exactly when he had been on it. In 1855, he became embroiled in a dispute with Thomas Clingman, a congressman from Buncombe County, who also claimed to have been first to calculate the elevation of the highest peak. After a brief visit to the mountains in 1856, Mitchell went back the next year, seeking more information that might bolster his claim.

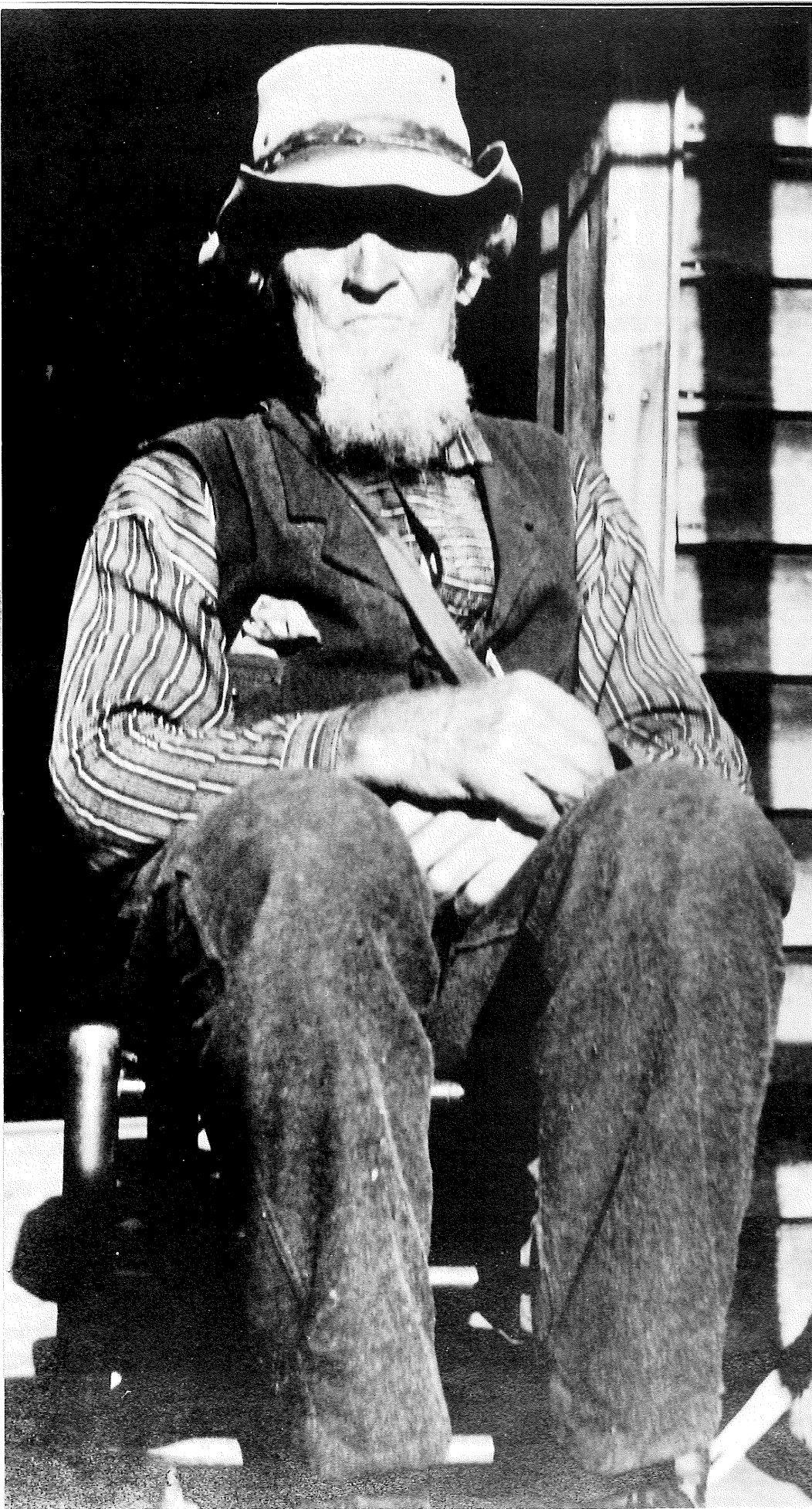
On Saturday, June 27, 1857, Mitchell left his son Charles on the south, or Buncombe, side of the Blacks. The professor then headed off alone, intending to descend the northwest side of the range to the Cane River settlements. There Mitchell hoped to refresh his memory of earlier work by talking with someone who knew the route he had taken in 1835. Mitchell was to meet Charles the following Monday. When the professor failed to show, Charles began a search that eventually took him to Big Tom's farm. Upon hearing the news, Big Tom organized a group of local woodsmen and joined the search. They picked up Mitchell's trail and followed it to a small tributary of the Cane, where they found the professor's body at the base of a 40-foot waterfall. Mitchell's broken watch suggested that he lost his way in the dark and plunged to his death sometime after 8:00 on the evening of June 27. As Big Tom later remembered it, "underneath a pine log... I saw his body, and called to the boys, 'Here he is! Poor old fellow!'"

The professor was scarcely dead and buried in Asheville before Zebulon Baird Vance, then a little-known Buncombe County politician, and Charles Phillips, one of Mitchell's colleagues at the university, began a massive campaign to rehabilitate Mitchell's reputation and to discredit Clingman, whom Vance regarded as a political enemy. As some recent work by historian Thomas E. Jeffrey has shown, Vance and his supporters traveled throughout western North Carolina seeking evidence that Mitchell had indeed identified the highest peak before Clingman. One of those Vance was most eager to contact was Big Tom. The

Dolph Wilson, son of Big Tom, points to the spot below Mitchell's Falls where his father found Elisha Mitchell in June 1857.



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bear hunter immediately offered testimony supporting the professor, even though he had not known Mitchell well—if at all—and had to rely on the stories of other guides and acquaintances to prove the claim. Mitchell had been popular among mountain people, and others in the region soon rallied to his cause. By the time the public relations machinery stopped turning, Vance was a congressman (during the Civil War he would serve as governor); the professor's grave had been relocated to the mountain that now bears his name; and most North Carolinians knew Mitchell as a courageous explorer and Clingman as a backbiting scoundrel. Big Tom, however, was simply a celebrity.

All who met the famous tracker now wanted to hear about his discovery of Mitchell's body. Born talker and subtle self-promoter that he was, Big Tom always obliged. He gave at least two official accounts for publication, one in 1877 and another in 1903. The two versions differ slightly on some details but are remarkably consistent on three points. First, Big Tom was the only one of the searchers who believed Mitchell would be found on the Cane River side of the Blacks. He favored continuing the search even after those who had worked the Buncombe side were ready to give up and wait "until the buzzards circling around over the body should point out its direction." Second, when his party found an indistinct trail through moss and laurels, Big Tom insisted—even when others were skeptical—that the tracks were those of a man, not a bear. Finally, Big Tom alone negotiated the treacherous terrain around the waterfall and first saw Mitchell's body.

The Mitchell-Clingman controversy generated unprecedented interest in the Black Mountains. During the last half of the 19th century, the region became a mecca for tourists, hunters, fishermen and travel writers. Even before the professor's disappearance, Big Tom had established an informal hunting and guide service, which he operated from his cabin. He regularly escorted visitors on overnight trips to various high peaks and showed sportsmen the best techniques for taking deer, bear and trout. An account of one such excursion appeared in the November 1857 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, complete with a sketch of Wilson, his rifle and two bear dogs.

As word of Mitchell's death and the details of the search spread, Big Tom became the most popular hunting and tour guide in

Big Tom Wilson stayed true to his mountain heritage throughout a long life of hunting, tracking and guiding.

the region. In the 1880s, he entertained one of his most famous clients: the New England-born editor and essayist Charles Dudley Warner. Warner, who, with Mark Twain, coauthored *The Gilded Age*, was traveling through the southern mountains collecting material for a lengthy essay titled *On Horseback*, published in 1888. Not to see Big Tom, Warner knew, "was to miss one of the most characteristic productions of the country, the typical backwoodsman, hunter, guide."

By the time Warner visited the Wilson farm, some of the lands once held by Amos Ray had passed into the hands of absentee owners, who used the tract as a semiprivate hunting preserve. In addition to guiding visitors, Big Tom worked as a caretaker and gamekeeper, driving off stray cattle and local poachers who "explod[ed] powder in the streams to kill the fish." Like others who had visited the Wilson household, Warner found that talking with his host required "not the least effort." Indeed, once the bear hunter got started, the stories "flowed on without a ripple." Sitting before the cabin's massive hearth, Warner learned that Big Tom had served in the Confederate army, not as some crack-shot infantryman but as a fifer and musician. The Wilsons had also developed a passion for what, in mountain parlance, was called "lawin." At the time of Warner's visit, Big Tom was caught up in a protracted legal battle with a neighbor he had accused of trespassing. "There was an entire absence of braggadocio in Big Tom's talk," Warner later wrote, "but somehow as he went on, his backwoods figure loomed larger and larger." The visitor had an eerie feeling that he had met this intriguing fellow before, that he somehow knew this craggy mountain man with the "splendid physique" and "iron endurance." Finally it came to him. He had encountered someone much like Wilson, not in real life, but in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper. Big Tom "was the Leather-Stocking," that straight-shooting, forest-loving, wilderness hero who, under various names, appeared in several of Cooper's tales. Warner wondered if his new friend ever read such books. No, the rangy woodsman answered, and launched into yet another story.

The next morning, Big Tom took his guest up the narrow horse trail across Mount Mitchell. The guide showed the writer the usual sights: a giant poplar tree, the spot where Mitchell died (which conveniently afforded Big Tom the opportunity to entertain Warner with tales of the search), and the magnificent forests of the Blacks where "oaks, chestnuts, poplars, hemlocks, the cucumber, and all sorts of other northern and southern growths" met and mingled "in splendid array." At the summit, Big Tom shyly asked if his companion had a flask.

Warner did not, and it was just as well, Big Tom said. He was not in the habit of using whiskey but thought a drop on Mount Mitchell might be appropriate and might do him good. He left Warner on the south side of the mountains and headed home. Warner rode on toward Asheville, convinced that he had met a real pioneer, "an original."

During the last years of the 19th century, Big Tom continued to make his living as a gamekeeper, guide and farmer. After publication of Warner's essay, the aging hunter became an almost mythical character, regularly posing with his gun for visiting photographers. Big Tom annually made several pil-

"... his powerful figure with its massive head, snowy locks, and beard, and kindly eyes, attracted great attention as he walked the streets."

grimages on foot to Asheville, where, according to one acquaintance, "his powerful figure with its massive head, snowy locks, and beard, and kindly eyes, attracted great attention as he walked the streets." Everyone "claimed the honor of being his friend, from the highest to the lowest [they] vied with each other in doing him honor." Even in old age, when he walked with a cane, the mountain man spent as much time as possible outdoors, often sitting alone on the riverbank near his home trying to tempt a wary trout.

Big Tom Wilson died in 1909 at age 83. In an informal eulogy, a family friend described the mountain man as "honest to the core, kind of heart, keenly intelligent although unlettered, devoutly religious and thrifty as only a canny Scotch-Irish hillsman knows how to be." Although never wealthy, Wilson "left a goodly estate of mountain lands, a worthy family of sons and daughters, and a name... honored in his native hills."

By the time Big Tom died, the region he had helped define was changing. The vast uncut forests attracted the attention of lumber companies, and in the years before World War I, loggers began to strip

red spruce, Fraser fir and other timber from the high peaks. They spared only the most inaccessible tracts, including a small stand of trees on Mount Mitchell's summit that, in 1915, became part of North Carolina's first state park. The railroads that served the loggers stretched up the Cane, bringing more people and brief boomtown prosperity to Pensacola and the nearby communities of Murchison and Eskota.

Even so, Big Tom's family worked hard to preserve his memory and way of life. His son, Adolphus Greenlee Wilson (known as Dolph), allegedly killed some 112 bears and then retired from hunting so as not to exceed the number of bruins taken by his father. Dolph also worked as a hunting and fishing guide and operated a hotel that catered to sportsmen. During the 1920s, Dolph's son, Ewart, built a toll road that allowed visitors to travel by car from Murchison to Stepp's Gap, just below Mount Mitchell. Appropriately enough, Ewart named his thoroughfare the Big Tom Wilson Mount Mitchell Toll Road. Construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway eventually afforded tourists another way to the mountain. But bear hunters continued to use the Wilson route. Bill Sharpe's *New Geography of North Carolina*, published in 1961, explained that "when Big Tom lived, the hunters came from afar in wagons or on horseback. Now they come purring up in shiny automobiles... [and] drive up the old Big Tom Wilson toll road as far as they can and then are placed on stands along the bed of an old lumber railroad."

In 1947, several prominent North Carolinians, including Gov. R. Gregg Cherry, made sure that Big Tom Wilson's name would forever be associated with the Black Mountains. The group petitioned the federal Board on Geographic Names to rename two peaks adjacent to Mount Mitchell and previously known as the Black Brothers. The one closest to Mount Mitchell was christened "Mount Craig," in honor of former governor Locke Craig, who had been instrumental in securing the land for the state park. But the northernmost peak, with an elevation of 6,593 feet, was officially designated "Big Tom." It was perhaps the best possible tribute to the lanky, gregarious mountain man who, in the words of one admirer, had reigned over the region "as one of nature's own princes." ☐

Research was drawn from S. Kent Schwarzkopf, A History of Mt. Mitchell and the Black Mountains: Exploration, Development, and Preservation (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1985), and from Thomas E. Jeffrey, "A Whole Torrent of Mean and Malevolent Abuse': Party Politics and the Clingman-Mitchell Controversy," North Carolina Historical Review 70 (1993).