

THE SEARCH FOR ELISHA MITCHELL

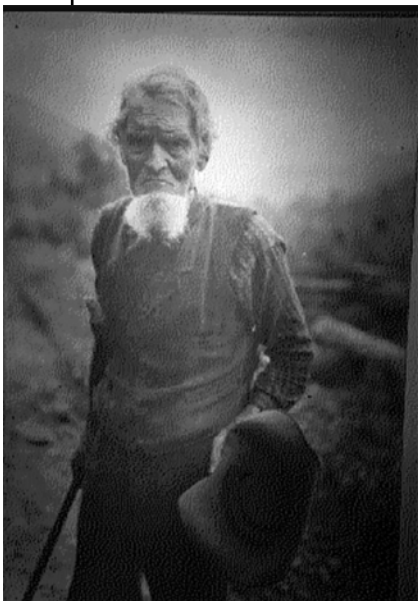
A New Play by Dylan Wilson

World Premiere, November 3 & 5, 2023
Burnsville, NC



Dylan Wilson, musician, storyteller, and relative of one of the most famous bear hunting families in the western Appalachian mountains, has researched, written, and staged the true story of the five men who found the missing professor on an eleven-day-old trail, in July of 1857.

In this story, the successful Burnsville search party—one of dozens of groups looking for signs within the steep thickets of the mountain now known as Mt. Mitchell—was led by Big Tom Wilson, brilliant animal tracker. How did they do it? Through careful research, Dylan Wilson has reconstructed this incredible story while shining a light on the talents, skills, and sensitivity to the land of these early mountain settlers.



This premier cast of six actors are all accomplished musicians and singers who draw on their talents from the deep well of their direct Appalachian ancestors. Throughout the show, you will hear music of the time played on instruments that Big Tom and his search party would have known and loved. Do not miss this once in a lifetime event.

Friday, November 3 (7PM) & Sunday, 5 (2PM)

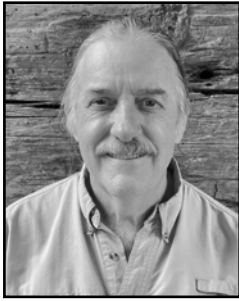
Mountain Heritage High School, Burnsville, NC

Tickets on Facebook: “The Search for Elisha Mitchell—A New Play by Dylan Wilson”, or locally at Fox Country Store, Andy’s Gas, Jill’s Hairport, Styles Automotive, and Yancey Graphics, \$15

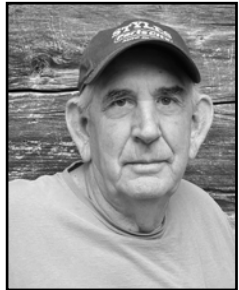
THE CAST of THE SEARCH FOR ELISHA MITCHELL



DYLAN WILSON, storyteller, playwright, musician, historian, and actor, plays the part of William Bryson McMahan (Dylan's third great-grandpa) in **The Search for Elisha Mitchell**. Dylan first heard the story of the Yancey County trackers told by his father who owned an autographed copy of John Parris' book, *My Mountains, My People* (1957), where it is unforgettably described. Later, Dylan studied Dr. Lloyd Bailey's historical documents, added his own research, and wrote the play premiering in Burnsville, right where this story began.



RON POWELL appears in **The Search for Elisha Mitchell** as Professor Charles Phillips, the man who comes to Burnsville in 1880 to hear the tale from the Yancey people who participated in the search. Ron is no stranger to the stage. He has acted in several Parkway Playhouse productions, including Dylan Wilson's previous shows, *Grand Ole Opry* and *The Night Hank Williams Came to Town*. Ron is a beloved singer, songwriter, and musician and leads the *Lucky Streak Band* of Burnsville, North Carolina.



NOLAN HARRIS brings deep authenticity to his role as Burton Austin in **The Search for Elisha Mitchell**. Nolan's family has roots in the Pensacola community spanning more than two-hundred years, the very same community that raised the men who set off to find Elisha Mitchell. Nolan was raised in the old ways of this 1857 search party, and has traveled the same paths—and he sings the same songs. A multi-talented musician, Nolan is the embodiment of Appalachian culture.



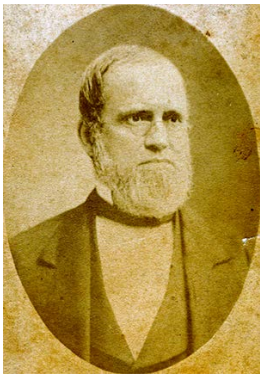
DUANE ALLEN, a gifted musician and singer, portrays his second great-grandpa, Adaniram Allen in **The Search for Elisha Mitchell**. Duane lives on the same mountain farm that his Allen ancestors have lived on for two-hundred years, directly in the shadow of Mt. Michell where this play unfolds. Like his ancestors, Duane has been roaming and hunting in the Black Mountains since childhood. He and Nolan know these lands as well as any men alive today.



NICK RASH, an accomplished singer, musician, and actor, portrays his fifth great-grandpa, Thomas David "Big Tom" Wilson, in **The Search for Elisha Mitchell**. Nick lives in the Pensacola community where his family has roots going back over two-hundred years. The legendary hunter, "Big Tom," returns to tell his tale through Nick's uncanny understanding of his renowned ancestor, the tracker who led his team to find the eleven-day-old trail, and ultimately, Elisha Mitchell.



LESA K. AUTREY steps into the character of her fourth great-grand-aunt, Rachel Allen, in a role that allows her lively personality to surprise and delight audiences in **The Search for Elisha Mitchell**. Raised in Yancey County, Lesa plays multiple instruments and sings with a distinctive and beautiful voice. Her solo song and memorable, spirited performance makes the pioneer Rachel come alive on stage.



Dr. Charles Phillips



Adaniram Allen



Rachel Roland Allen



Robert Burton
Austin



Big Tom Wilson

THE SEARCH FOR ELISHA MITCHELL: Cast members' real-life counterparts and Big Tom's cabin



Big Tom's cabin at the time of the search.
Photo: 1915



Big Tom's second cabin, home of his grand daughter, Niagara Riddle, and Big Tom's last home. Photo: 1915

Q & A highlights with DYLAN WILSON, playwright:

See insert for complete answers

How were you inspired to tell this story?

... My daddy had a book by John Parris called **My Mountains, My People**. In it was a story titled, "*The Greatest Tracker in All the Land.*" In elementary school my teachers would ask me to get up and tell the story of Big Tom or the story of Frankie and Charlie Silver, another story in the Parris book.

What kind of research did you do to write this play?

...I used books out of the Lloyd Bailey's **Toe River Valley Heritage** collection. These volumes can be hard to get and though I do own a couple, I often had to visit the collection at the Yancey County Historical Museum.

...through an invitation to join the Cane River Hunting Club, I finally had access, though with limits, to the places I had been studying and talking and dreaming about all my life.

Q & A with DYLAN WILSON, playwright, director, and performer in THE SEARCH FOR ELISHA MITCHELL

Continued: See insert for full answers

What part does music play in this production?

...This cast is not just a group of actors portraying characters, these are Appalachians [portraying family members] singing traditional songs and telling a story just like they were in the kitchen at home.

...This might be someone's only chance to see and hear the real thing from the people who are the best at it.

How did you find the actors for this original cast of THE SEARCH FOR ELISHA MITCHELL?

...I really got interested in genealogy research through Ancestry.com and I found out that everyone in this band had a direct grandfather in the five trackers who found Elisha Mitchell. That was three years ago and I have been consumed [with this play], ever since.

... The minute I finally accepted that something beyond my very limited ability was at work, was right around the time I realized I had a direct ancestor to play every part in the play except for Adaniram Allen...[read the rest of the story in the Q&A insert!]

What has been the most challenging aspect of this project?

...Probably trying to explain this play to people... In the words of Hank Williams, "*I just held onto the pen and someone else does the writing.*"

...Because of all these very generous people, there hasn't been a challenge that hasn't been met. Maybe the most challenging aspect hasn't shown up yet?

FOR MORE INFORMATION and to speak to or schedule an interview with Dylan Wilson, leave a message at: (828) 682-7878

FOR UPDATES ON THE PRODUCTION, see the Facebook page: *The Search for Elisha Mitchell—A New Play by Dylan Wilson*. Tickets available through Facebook page, starting October 1, 2023

FOR LOCAL TICKET SALES: \$15, Visit Fox Country Store, Andy's Gas Station, Jill's Hairport, Styles Automotive, and Yancey Graphics. If available, same-day tickets will be sold at the door. All local sales directly cover cost of the actors, technicians, and staging.

RUNNING TIME: 2 hours, includes music and one intermission

Q & A with DYLAN WILSON, playwright, director, and performer in THE SEARCH FOR ELISHA MITCHELL

Opening November 3 and 5, Burnsville, North Carolina

How were you inspired to tell this story?

My daddy had a book by John Parris called **My Mountains, My People**. In it was a story titled, “*The Greatest Tracker in All the Land*.” It was about Big Tom Wilson and his neighbor, Adaniram Allen, and how they found Elisha Mitchell on an eleven day old trail. I read that story until I could tell it like I was there. Every time I read or heard something about it I would commit it to memory. In elementary school my teachers would ask me to get up and tell the story of Big Tom—or the story of Frankie and Charlie Silver, another story in the Parris book. Later I found out about a set of books called **Toe River Valley Heritage**, 15 volumes from the historian Dr. Lloyd Bailey, another Yancey County native who now lives in Chapel Hill. In his books I learned there were five men in the group that found the Professor’s track. One, Brice McMahan, was my 3rd great-grandpa, and I learned I was also related to the others, including Big Tom. Lloyd Bailey’s books led to other books, but there has been something that I can’t explain leading and guiding me.

In the last few years I have been surprised by the number of people of all ages that knew nothing about this story. When I was growing up I thought every Yancey County kid knew about Big Tom Wilson. But now I realize the people around me knew it because I had told them the story! So now I want to tell as much of the world as I can about this one hundred and sixty-six year old story that has so deeply influenced and molded me, and my view of my people in these mountains.

What kind of research did you do to write this play?

I used books out of the Lloyd Bailey’s **Toe River Valley Heritage** collection. These volumes can be hard to get and though I do own a couple, I often had to visit the collection at the Yancey County Historical Museum. I added other books like **A History of Mt. Mitchell and the Black Mountains**, by Timothy Silver. I was lucky enough to talk to several of the searchers’ families who are still living on Pensacola. Then I was given a great gift that few have the privilege to even dream of dreaming of...I got to join the Cane River Hunting Club on the Wilson Boundary. The Wilson Boundary is a 13,000 acre tract on the headwaters of the Cane River, once owned by Big Tom Wilson’s father-in-law, Amos Ray. Within the Boundary is part of Mt. Mitchell, (up to the State Park), and Mitchell Falls, where the Professor was found. It is now owned by the Haynes Corporation and the “No Trespassing” restriction is strictly enforced. But the heirs of Big Tom Wilson have been permitted to bear hunt within the Boundary—the Wilsons are famous for bear hunting—Big Tom killed one hundred and thirteen in his life—So through this invitation to join the Cane River Hunting Club I finally had access, though with limits, to the places I had been studying and talking and dreaming about all my life.

But as crazy as it sounds, and I realize that it does sound crazy, I think that DNA has memory. There has always been something showing me when and where to look or listen to fill in the cracks. The story behind the story of how things mysteriously lined up for this play to happen, could, I think, make a documentary that rivals the main story.

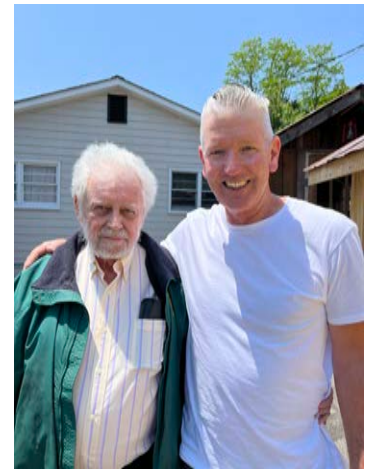
Who is Dr. Lloyd Bailey?

Without Dr. Lloyd Richard Bailey Sr. this play would not have been possible. Most of the first-hand accounts and interviews of the story of the search for Elisha Mitchell can be found in his collection, **Toe River Valley Heritage**, 15 volumes (and another on the way) of meticulous research about the history of Yancey County. Through countless hours of his valuable time he has saved very precious pieces, both in word and material, that would have been lost to time forever. He did this by driving countless miles on paved, gravel, or sometimes red clay mud roads, and walking, running, and sometimes crawling, uphill, down hill, through creeks and branches, under and over fences, briar patches, and rock cliffs. He has spent countless hours talking, and most importantly, listening—on the phone, through mail, or on porches and kitchen tables—listening carefully to people who are now gone. He has spent hours, both late and early, writing and re-writing, both by hand or keyboard.

Dr. Bailey was born here in Yancey County. He has published more than 20 books, hundreds of articles and has appeared many times on The History Channel, The Discovery Channel, and A&E. He has done all this while teaching at Duke University, Mt. Olive College, and Meredith College.

I have been blessed by becoming friends with Dr Bailey. I think that every school in Yancey County should have a complete set of his books, as well as every home.

This play is dedicated to my friend, Dr. Lloyd Bailey.



What part does music play in this production?

The make up of every culture in the world usually has three main ingredients: food, music, and language. Appalachian culture is no different. Most colleges offer classes on all three. Most cooks can get the cooking pretty close, with practice, and good musicians can get the instruments pretty close. But the singin' and storytellin'—that's something else.

This cast has something they can't teach in school. I've been to shows and plays where actors are portraying Appalachian people. It is so frustrating to me to hear someone talk or sing like us. It must be hard to pull off. Most just do a southern accent like Georgia or Alabama. This cast is not a group of actors portraying a character, these

are Appalachians in the truest form singing traditional songs and telling a story just like they were in the kitchen at home.

One thing that inspired me most to share this story was one night at Nolan Harris' house—sometimes on winter nights some of us will gather there to make music. Nolan's wife Kay will always make a dessert that is unforgettable. We will sing a song, then tell three or four tales, and laugh and cut up. One night I was just sittin' back and takin' it all in. Suddenly I realized I was seeing something that will be gone soon. I thought about all the people in the restaurants in town at that moment —the ones that are visiting or moved here to see or be part of our culture who will never be part of what I was seeing at that moment. They won't even know they missed it. So in this play I thought I could give everyone a chance to experience something like this. **The Search For Elisha Mitchell** might be a person's only chance to see and hear the real thing from people who are absolutely the best at it.

How did you find the actors for this original cast of THE SEARCH FOR ELISHA MITCHELL?

The actors were hand picked by what I can only describe as some sort of divine intervention. A friend of mine, Lucy Doll, asked me to help with a benefit concert for the local Lions Club. I put together a band of three more musicians to do a show at Burnsville's Town Center. About this same time my wife, Jennifer, joined Ancestry.com. I really got interested in genealogy research through the website and I found out that everyone in this band had a direct grandfather in the five trackers who found Elisha Mitchell. That was three years ago and I have been consumed, ever since.

Most of us in the cast of this play are not only related to the five, but also to other guides Dr. Mitchell used through the years of his explorations and measurements in the Black Mountains. All of them have contributed both big and small pieces of the puzzle of this story.

The minute I finally accepted that something beyond my very limited ability was at work, was right around the time I realized I had a direct ancestor to play every part in the play except for Adaniram Allen. He is the man Big Tom always gave credit to for first finding Mitchell's track. It came to me that Duane Allen, his 2nd great-grandson, still lived on the same farm where most of this story took place—and he was a musician. But I hadn't seen Duane for well over a year, probably closer to two. The next morning, as I was leaving for work, I saw Duane standing next door to my house, at Sam's Oil Company, talking to another of our Allen cousins, Charlie Brown. I just stood and stared for a minute, knees weak and wobbly. I looked up and said, "Ok. I get it. Thank you." That is just one of many stories of how things have just been mysteriously lining up. I hope someday to write that story.

What has been the most challenging aspect of this project?

That's a hard one...Probably trying to explain this play to people. If I have time to write, I can get it down, but I have always had trouble talking person-to-person, and I feel I have to add so much information, and I start talking and talking, and then start running rabbits until I make it a mess. Now writing the play was no problem. In the words of Hank Williams, "*I just held onto the pen and someone else does the writing.*" Now I can get on a stage and feel as comfortable as at home in the bed because I'm in control and no-one is talking back!

Another thing is that I'm not at all tech savvy. I don't even have a cell phone. But I have been helped by so many people, and I haven't even had to ask. I would start naming them here but I know I would leave someone out. I plan to have them listed on the playbill and anywhere I can. Because of all these very generous people, there hasn't been a challenge that hasn't been met. Maybe the most challenging aspect hasn't shown up yet?

If you need more information, please leave a message for Dylan Wilson at: (828)-682-7878.