

A SHORT HISTORY OF
LAUREL PARK
NORTH CAROLINA

by

Lincoln F. Parker

5/27/07

Copyright status, date of publication and author information unknown.
Contact bmacdowe@insightbb.com with information.

Aeons ago the geological convulsions which formed the Appalachians from the original molten mass of the earth's interior provided for the age of humanity a varied and lovely scene for his habitation. A microcosm of this encompassing plan of the Creator is an area which we know today as Henderson County. This portion of the Hendersonville Plateau was formed by the erosion of the twice - uplifted mountain ranges which separate the eastern piedmont from the great central Mississippi basin. As the mountains were thrust upward by the unimaginable violence of nature's upheavals, these same forces, at a much slower pace, and acting as the earth's landscape architect, filled by gradual weathering and erosion the intervening valleys between the mountain ranges with a most fertile soil, traversed by free—flowing streams of pure water; thereby providing an attractive existence for the red men who were the first to see this beautiful and exciting land.

While it appears that the Cherokees never permanently settled in this particular area, they did frequent the region for hunting and recreational purposes. They are reported to have had many councils and tribal meetings at the Flat Rock, upon which now is situated the Flat Rock Playhouse, whose very foundation is based upon the great granite slab which imparts its name to this section.

More recently, this general location became a luxurious summer resort for many of the Tidewater planters and professional people from the vicinity of Charleston, South Carolina, who sought relief from the oppressive heat and ever present threat of malaria, which visited the coastal region every summer. This invasion by the antebellum aristocracy provided eclat for this location, which remains to this day, at least in the minds of

the present residents thereof. Many of the original summer "cottages" still exist, reminding us of a long—departed, but elegant and charming way of life which today, sorrowfully, is but a memory.

On December 15, 1838, Henderson County (named after Leonard Henderson, one of the original three justices appointed to the North Carolina Supreme Court), was established and was at first composed of parts of what is now Buncombe, Polk and Transylvania counties; a considerably larger entity than now.

Selection of the county seat engendered the usual acrimony and local rivalries between those county residents who wished the town to be located at a site on a bend of the French Broad River near the present Horse Shoe area and those who, because of the so-called Buncombe Turnpike (then a primitive high-way by any measure), favored the present more central site, based upon better access for vehicular transportation.

The first county functions seem to have been in February of 1844, held on or near the grounds of the Mills River Academy, located on the site where the present Mills River Community Center is now located. County Commissioners were chosen before any town with courthouse facilities was decided upon. Tax rolls were instituted and land taxes were assessed at the rate of \$1.05 for each \$300 property value. Oh, happy day!

At best the Commissioner's accommodations were most primitive. The first County Grand Jury held forth in a tent on the Academy grounds to which a "chimney on the cheap plan" had been added to provide an outlet, it is to be assumed, for a stove placed in the tent to comfort the sitting jurymen, it being winter

time when the first jury was empanelled. Future court sessions were held at "Osborne's old storehouse," near the present junction of Buncombe Turnpike and Haywood Road. It would appear, however, that the executive efficiency of the county was not fully operative until after the county seat finally was chosen.

Both the "River Site," located on a bend in the French Broad River near the present town of Horse Shoe, and the "Road Site" factions had potential benefactors who offered free land upon which to establish the seat of government: Hugh Johnson, a supporter of the "River" group, and Mitchell King, a "Road" location advocate. Nevertheless, it was three years before the present Hendersonville site was selected, and then only after a referendum was held. Despite the electorate's choice of Hendersonville's more central geography (no less than three appeals had been carried to court by the losers), they lost all the way to the North Carolina Supreme Court. Accusations and recriminations were bandied about during this period, but finally a decision was handed down from Raleigh, upholding the legality of the referendum, which resulted in the acceptance by the county of Mr. King's gift of 50 acres, and Hendersonville was confirmed as the County Seat. An additional 29 acres of land was contributed to the new town by John Johnson and James Brittain and the controversy ended.

In the terms of Mr. King's original gift was a provision requiring that "Main Street should be of sufficient width to permit an ox team and wagon to make a 180' turn without the necessity of backing up." Thus, we are today indebted to a primitive form of transportation for the wide space which gave room for the development of the decorative planters and trees along the curbs, providing shade and ornament for downtown shoppers' pleasure.

So much for preliminary Laurel Park history.

Just west of Hendersonville, Jump Off Mountain rises over a thousand feet above the town, ending abruptly at its western terminus in a rocky promontory, which gives the mountain its name and from which unfolds a spectacular view of valleys and mountain ranges to the west, north and south. This additional elevation provides a cooler summer temperature during the day and even cooler nights than does the town of Hendersonville itself, and from these higher altitudes lovely panoramas of the surrounding mountain ranges are available in all their verdant beauty.

In 1876, arrived upon this scene with its healthful climate and most attractive scenery, a Mr. W. A. Smith, who had been born in Georgia some nineteen years previously. Mr. Smith began the practice of law upon his arrival even at that tender age, and as later developments indicate, he at once made his presence known in many civic ways. As Hendersonville's population continued to expand, the need for additional residential property increased, and by 1888, Mr. Smith joined with Mr. C. M. Pace, a native of the area, who served as Clerk of Superior Court for a great many years prior to his retirement in 1925. Together they purchased a large tract of land on Jump Off Mountain, long before Laurel Park as such was even a gleam in their eyes. They, must have, however, anticipated the future with perhaps more vision than was considered justified by actual realism when the property was first acquired in its virginal state. Ultimately, their faith in the future paid off, but certainly not so profitably for them as for the future generations which now enjoy their foresight.

An important contributing factor in the further growth and development of Hendersonville and its surrounding county occurred in 1879, when the Southern Railroad finally scaled the Saluda Range and reached the Hendersonville Plateau. This opened the way for many more visitors and expanded business opportunities for the farmers and commercial interests of the county. Even before this early date, Hendersonville's popularity with the summer visitors, because of the healthy climate of this salubrious region, made the ultimate growth of the area inevitable; but this surge in population was greatly stimulated by the coming of rail transportation.

At about the same time in 1888 that Mr. Smith and Mr. Pace purchased much of Jump Off Mountain, the Hendersonville town fathers had secured approval for a \$20,000 bond issue with which to build a municipal water system designed to supply water to the Main Street district from Seventh Avenue on the north to about the present location of the Main Street Winn Dixie store on the south. This was Hendersonville's first bond issue, and amazingly, it was passed unanimously by the electorate, which speaks well for the progressive leadership and citizenry of the town at that time. The present Laurel Park area played a prominent, if passive, role in this project since the source of water was a series of springs and rills which formed a small reservoir off Laurel Park Highway. Currently, this small pond has been most attractively landscaped and is now the site of the original Cedarbrook Apartments, which abut the pond's western edge. Gravity provided a steady flow of water to the growing town below. The continuing growth of Hendersonville, however, found this source of water to be inadequate in a few years and the expansion of the water system developed in a different direction.

The Smith-Pace property on Jump Off Mountain provided space for the natural western advance of Hendersonville. The first encroachment upon the folds of the mountain took place on the lower levels and consisted almost completely of summer houses and cottages from which the residents fled to warmer climes before the onset of winter. This original movement took place in the vicinity of Rainbow and Rhododendron (now known as Laurel) Lakes, and around Crystal Springs where Mr. Smith erected, according to pictures in the Baker-Barber collection, a latticed rustic gazebo, which added to the attraction of the clear, flowing spring as a picnic and trysting place for many of the beaux and belles among the townspeople, as well as the summer visitors. This section has been succeeded by a more natural ornament, consisting of containment walls with steps leading to the source of the water. This is constructed from the native rock and enhances the spring by emphasizing the natural beauty of its bosky and original setting. Frequently today a passer-by finds people filling jugs with the potable water to take home for their personal enjoyment.

In the Late 19th century on the highest point of a shoulder of Davis Mountain was built a structure known as High Peak Tower, a 55-foot high building constructed to resemble a lighthouse. The interior of the frame tower contained a spiral staircase winding about the tower's core, leading to an observation deck surrounding the outside of the tower, which provided an unsurpassed view of the near and distant mountains and valleys to the north and west of Jump Off Mountain.

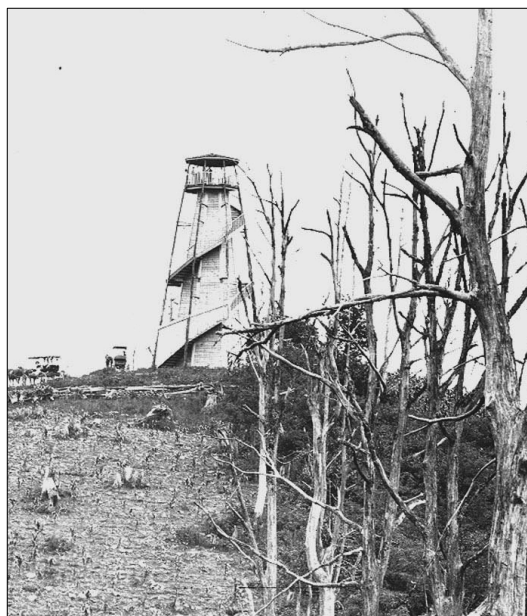
Based upon conversations with Jody Barber, custodian and owner of the invaluable Baker-Barber photographs, it appears to have been built upon the highest point of what is now known as the Kindy Forest subdivision. These old

pictures give the Impression that this location had been heavily lumbered before the tower was erected.

This vantage point seems to have succeeded the old Pickens Tower, which had been established on a small eminence overlooking Hendersonville. Sometime following the destruction of this tower, a large hotel was built upon this slightly location on the lot bordered on the east by Fleming Avenue, and on the north by Sixth Avenue. More recently the hotel was converted into the local Elks's Chapter clubhouse with the addition of a swimming pool and tennis courts adjacent thereto.

In 1979, a small fire damaged the old building and fear of additional fires caused the clubhouse to be demolished late in the year, thus requiring the Elks to seek pasture elsewhere. And so passed one of the last local landmarks which had embellished Hendersonville's reputation for fine residential and resort hostleries.

It must have required considerable effort in those days to reach High Peak Tower at the top of Davis Mountain, over the then primitive road, although it would appear that the rewarding view would have



more than justified the excursion from town for anyone who reveled in scenic beauty.

To this writer, and based upon the existing pictures, the site of High Peak Tower would appear to have been in what is now the Fleetwood section of Laurel Park at the apex of Jump Off Mountain. However, Mr. Jody Barber insists that the Davis site is correct and I bow willingly to his great knowledge of local history and locale.

About this time, much activity also centered around Rainbow Lake, which boasted a two-story pavilion with double-decked piazzas surrounding the main building. This small lake, just south of White Pine Avenue, was the first recreational development in the Laurel Park area, and was the site for a decade or more following the turn of the century, of the County Fair on the grounds of which horse shows also were held. The rather spacious pavilion served as the exhibition building for the fair and also a place for shelter and food for visitors to the scene.



Laurel Lake (known at that time as Rhododendron), which lies just west of White Pine and south of Laurel Parkway, is a sister to Rainbow, although a considerably larger impoundment. Because the two lakes are at an equal level, a connecting canal, constructed in

1913, joined these small bodies of water. Thus, it was possible to guide canoes and rowboats along the tree-lined waterway. It is not hard to imagine the many happy hours whiled away on the placid ponds by the younger generation in those happy days of yore.

Regardless of its small area and scant population, one can never successfully accuse some of Hendersonville's residents at the turn of the century, and for some times thereafter, of not having expansive ideas about public transportation for their town. Laurel Park was a temporary beneficiary of the mass transportation mania which gripped the town when four franchises were granted - two of which were given almost simultaneously for competing streetcar lines.

Laurel Park was, however, most concerned with the franchise secured in 1904 by the ubiquitous W. A. Smith, called the Laurel Park Street Railway Company. This, of course, was designed to stimulate the growth of the Laurel Park holdings which Messrs. Smith and Pace had originally purchased in 1888. The objective was to provide ready access to the small lake, pavilions, baseball fields, and cottages and rooming houses already constructed on the lower slopes of the mountain upon which Laurel Park was at that time situated.

The track was built along the north side of Fifth Avenue, shortly after the franchise was granted and the operation continued until 1918.

Originally the source of power was a steam contraption known as the "Dummy," which consisted of a 25 horsepower locomotive to which was attached, as an integral part, an open-air streetcar capable of carrying 40 to 50 persons. The pictures of the unique vehicle, as shown in the

Baker-Barber photographs, depict the ingenious combination of the conveyance. Occasionally, when demand required, a flat car was towed which could transport luggage and freight to the Laurel Park resorts from the Southern Railroad Station.

Shortly after the line's construction, a steam plant was built where Richardson's Fuel and Supply Company now stands on Fifth Avenue West and the railroad crossing. The electricity generated by the steam plant was used to electrify the line, if not the Hendersonville populace. Prior to this improvement, the "Dummy" must have been more of a nuisance than a convenience as it puffed its smoky and noisy way along residential Fifth Avenue on its way to and from Rainbow Lake. No mention is made, however, in the available records concerning complaints of air or noise pollution from that day's more hardy adjacent residents who were less conscious of the hazards of pollution than is today's more effete populace.

One of the strangest features of the "Dummy" line was that it had no turnaround at either terminus. Therefore, it backed all the way from Rainbow Lake to its genesis at Main and Fifth Avenue, from which it ran on the hour from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day during the season. Fare was five cents each way, which makes one envious of one's forebears in this day of high fuel prices.

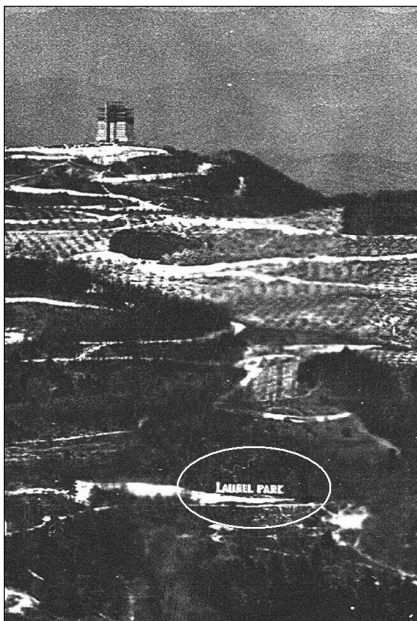
About this time another more or less supplemental track was built by the Appalachian Inter-urban Railway which ran from just beyond the "Dummy's" terminus at Rainbow Lake south to Laurel Lake. Strangely, the tracks of the two lines were never connected; thus, anyone coming from town by rail who wished to go to Laurel Lake had to transfer and take the A.I.R. whose right-of-way, even to this day, may be observed leaving the south end of

Rainbow Lake, and bits are also visible along Railroad Avenue off of Woodbyne.

Another rather short-lived venture of the A.I.R. occurred a bit west of Rainbow Lake where the "Electric Counterbalanced Railway" climbed partway up the Davis Mountain shoulder of Jump Off Mountain to an abandoned quarry where a small observation perch had been built. From this vantage point, a splendid view of Long John Mountain and the northern section of Hendersonville, as well as Bearwallow Mountain could be enjoyed.

This operation consisted of a steeply-inclined single track with a switch midway to the top which permitted the two cable cars to pass one another. To a large degree, each car acted as a counter weight to the other, and for a few years the operation provided an attractive jaunt up this part of the mountain the easy way. Today, all that remains as a reminder of this A.I.R. venture is a couple of moldering concrete pylons which carried the track above Davis Mountain road.

A somewhat more visible, but also a more garish advertisement for Laurel Park, was a sign composed of 12-foot high



wooden letters spelling the subdivision name which appeared above the abandoned quarry. This sign identified the location of Laurel Park and was plainly in sight of all travelers who passed by on what is now known as U.S. 64.

By 1918 the popularity of the automobile sounded the death knell for local mass transit and the Electric Counterbalanced Railway. Use of the automobile also was responsible for the development of roads and highways which, among other advantages, led to the expansion of Laurel Park to the higher and more scenic elevations on Jump Off Mountain.

Prior to the flowering of the automobile and its consequent effect on suburban residence, the climate and beauty of this place, with its several small lakes, proved attractive to summer camps, which abound even today in this region. At least two camps were located in what is now incorporated Laurel Park. Perhaps the first of these was the Laurel Park Summer School Camp for Boys, established in 1910 by Major L. B. Brown of Charleston's Porter Military Academy. To quote from an early brochure, this camp was "located on 230 acres of tire most beautiful natural park in America, consisting of forest and streams, laurel and rhododendron." To this writer, this chauvinistic claim seems to be but a slight exaggeration of the true facts. The camping season lasted from July 1 to August 26, and the season fee, "plus \$10 for breakage," was \$80. This arrangement must have provided a welcome surcease for the campers' mothers who wished to spend a quiet summer in a pleasant Hendersonville hotel, as well as a happy vacation for the campers.

The other camp to be located within the present Laurel Park limits came a little later, and was the direct result of the real estate collapse in Florida; the ripple effect

of which spread rapidly to this area due to the many Florida residents who spent their summers in Henderson the charming book, "Isabel," depicting some of the experiences in the remarkable life of Isabel J. Foster, whose daughter, Neil Foster Jennings, is still a summer resident of Laurel Park. The camp came about because of some friends in Florida who had purchased a large place with a magnificent view high on Jump Off Mountain, which was then operated as a tea room.

Mrs. Foster had little interest in running the place as a tea room for her Coconut Grove friends, but the suggestion that she and Nell establish a camp for teenaged girls at that location struck a responsive chord. The success in the summer of 1927 with which "Camp Happiness" was put into operation at this location speaks volumes about the ingenuity, enterprise and opportunism of Mrs. Foster and her daughter.

Disaster soon came to the Florida land boom bubble after the hurricane of 1926, and the comfortable finances of the Foster's became a bit strained, making maintenance of dual residences in Florida and North Carolina impossible at the time. Because the opportunity of running a camp on the Laurel Park Mountain provided a summer residence and modest livelihood for the Fosters, they rose to the challenge and preparations began immediately to establish the camp, at what was then called Echo Inn Tea Room. It is now known by its present owners as Echo Inn, and is one of the two remaining transient accommodations in Laurel Park.

It required considerable vision to convert the tea room into an attractive summer camp. This was accomplished by a maximum application of elbow grease and a minimum of cash outlay. The swimming facilities consisted of the ponds constructed in the Apple Hill development

known as Echo Lakes, the hikes to which from the campsite at Echo Inn involved considerable exercise in themselves.

Camp Happiness continued successfully for four years before Mrs. Foster, in 1931, sold its equipment to another summer camp located in Henderson County. However, it did serve two purposes during its existence. First, to provide a summer vacation for its campers from their families; and, second, to make possible the enjoyment of summer living for the Fosters in Laurel Park during these four trying years.

So far, most of what small progress there had been in the Laurel Park development occurred at the lower levels, because roads at that time were mostly nonexistent, or in a primitive state at best at the higher altitudes. The coming of the automobile changed all that almost at once, demanding improved roads and access to the more remote potential residential locations. The pretty canal, overhung by trees, connecting the two lakes, was filled in and a macadam roadway was constructed along its route, known appropriately today as Canal Avenue. Thus ended an era of somnolence for the project, then known as Laurel Park Estates, and enthusiastic promotion of this location began with road construction along the mountain slopes designed for automotive traffic, thereby expanding the area and changing the character of the building which had taken place in the general vicinity of Laurel and Rainbow Lakes and Crystal Springs.

At this time, shortly after the removal of the Laurel Park Summer School Camp for Boys, originally located on Laurel Lake, to a more remote site at Lake Osceola, Laurel Lake boasted of a bathing beach, with bath house and diving raft, for the pleasure of those so inclined. Rowboats and canoes were also available

for rent, and a pavilion with a dance floor adorned the lakeshore. Later this became the summer homes of nationally known, as well as local, dance bands. Jan Gerber's well-known orchestra got its start at Laurel Lake and competed with the Hal Kemp band, which played at the Carolina Terrace in town.

Considerable residential building had taken place along and above the shore of Laurel Lake. One of the most impressive homes to adorn this area is a large frame house built in 1915 by Mr. W. A. Smith, whose effort to develop Laurel Park had by then borne considerable success. The home is now owned by Dr. Omar W. Taylor, who resides at this pleasant location.

Apparently there had been four hotels located within Laurel Park's corporate limits. Perhaps the first was the Laurel Park inn on Laurel Lake. This was an outgrowth of the main building of the Laurel Park Summer School Camp for Boys. With its additions and refinements, it operated successfully for many years. With the changing patterns for vacations, however, its clientele became less sedentary due to the automobile's influence, and the establishment was razed in the summer of 1977. It is now the site of a large condominium development.

Echo inn was built in the early 1920's and is located on a high elevation overlooking the eastern mountains and giving a bird's eye view of Hendersonville itself. Originally this was a tea room and for a few years was the location of "Camp Happiness." Since those days, the original building has an added wing which contains additional living accommodations and a swimming pool and tennis courts also have been constructed for the guest's enjoyment. Because of the cooler summer weather at this height it has proved to be an attractive summer residence for many

Floridians who find pleasure in the mountain climate of this area.

Mrs. Ames' hotel was located only a half mile above White Pine on Laurel Park Highway. This flourished for some years as a summer vacation spot for visitors to this area. Today, it has been converted into apartments and is now occupied by permanent residents and is known as Laurel Park Apartments.

The only other accommodations for guests is the Lakeshore Apartments near Laurel Lake where some rooms for transient guests are available, as well as apartments for seasonal visitors who wish to benefit from a longer stay in Laurel Park.

The several boarding houses which had their heyday a generation ago are now only memories among the older generations who once enjoyed their many pleasures.

Even though Messrs. Smith and Pace had purchased 10,000 acres on Jump Off Mountain in 1888, Laurel Park Estates as such seems to have been officially conceived on September 30, 1904, when the Henderson County commissioners granted a franchise to the energetic W. A. Smith who, with others, had (to quote the words of the franchise) "opened up at great expense a beautiful area known as Laurel Park."

Before the franchise was granted, some development of the property had begun in a most embryonic fashion in the vicinity of Rainbow Lake and Crystal Springs. The original roads were fit for use only by pedestrians and the horse-drawn vehicles of that day as they curled among the convolutions of the rough and scenic terrain. In those days the journey to town, even though only two or three miles, was not a trip to be embarked upon without a good reason. Shopping needs were

planned well in advance, as an item overlooked, instead of being only moments away, as is the case today, was then the better part of a half day's jaunt.

The actual incorporation of Laurel Park Estates took place on July 25, 1924, but the first town meeting was held at the home of H. Walter Fuller at 4 p.m. on June 25, 1924, and the original town council members were Messrs. Fuller, Stanley K. Wright, and Reginald Wilcocks. These councilmen were sworn into office by Justice of the Peace B.F. Hood, and subsequently Mr. Fuller was chosen the first mayor and Mr. Wilcocks, secretary. The town name was changed to Laurel Park when it was incorporated on April 10, 1933, although much the same political organization vu continued.

The continuation of Fifth Avenue, known as Laurel Park Highway once it crosses White Pine, was paved part way up the mountain at this time. Some of the other roads at the lower levels were also macadamized so that the still rather sparse auto traffic could have better access to Jump Off Rock and Laurel Park subdivision.

The 1920's dawned with an optimistic outlook, and the summer bands at Laurel Lake Pavilion and in Hendersonville itself brought with them an enthusiasm and verve which helped color the judgment of visitors and natives alike. Florida land speculators appeared on the scene very early, and they, with tales of fabulous profits in Florida land development, infected the normally more conservative local residents with their optimism.

Until the "Twenties," Hendersonville and the Flat Rock area had prospered from two divergent interests. Hendersonville, of course, was the county seat, and consequently was the commercial and

business hub of the district. The agricultural production from the lush bottom lands of the French Broad and Mills Rivers, accompanied by the increasing prosperity of the apple orchards to the east of town, provided a firm base for commerce. To the growing reputation of the pleasant summer climate on the Hendersonville Plateau was added the ever-increasing number of seasonal residents who fled Florida's blistering Summer temperatures, as well as guests from the Tidewater who came to Henderson County to escape the debilitating and unhealthy summer climate among the swamps of the low-lying sea coast. Hotels and pleasant boarding houses multiplied and provided comfortable accommodations for the visitors. This seasonal harvest added to the euphoria so skillfully encouraged by the real estate speculators of those carefree times.

By 1924 the Florida real estate boom had become superheated, and the purchase of local real estate seemed a sure way to wealth; even though most of the land and buildings were bought on the narrowest of margins. Paper millionaires multiplied and the future seemed to lead only onward and upward. Property along Main Street, as well as in the suburbs, changed hands almost daily, with prices constantly increasing. Credit provided nearly all the money for these inflationary transactions, and the paper profits built a false prosperity the natives and visitors alike thought would never end.

In 1924, the same year that Laurel Park Estates had been incorporated, according to Mr. J. T. Fain in his informative account of the formal establishment of the town contained in his Times-News supplement, called "Henderson County - the Past 137 Years," the actual incorporation of the sponsoring group were L. Roy Sargent, A. Y. Arledge,

H. Walter Fuller, and Robert R. Reynolds. By this time, apparently control of the area had passed from the hands of Messrs. Smith and Pace and all of those associates except Mr. Arledge, a local attorney, were residents of Florida.

The article by Mr. Fain goes on to say that 50,000 shares of preferred stock were issued, valued at \$10 per share. Another 20,000 shares of common stock of no-par value were also issued and it appears that the largest single investment was made by Mr. Sargent who held 3,750 shares of the preferred and 1,875 shares of the common stock.

Although Mr. Sargent was the largest stockholder upon the incorporation of Laurel Park Estates, Mr. Fuller became president, A. O. Greynolds, vice-president, and A. Y. Arledge, secretary-treasurer. Mr. T. E. Throwes was named sales manager. Once this organization was completed, Mr. Sargent returned to Florida to capitalize further upon the real estate activity in that state.

The real stimulus to the development of Laurel Park and the construction of the concrete road to Jump Off Rock occurred in July of 1925 when Commodore J. Perry Stoltz arrived on the scene from Florida with extravagant plans for a guest hotel on the topmost part of Jump Off Mountain. Wishing to profit from Florida land sales as a winter resort and Western North Carolina property as a summer vacation paradise, he ignited the Laurel Park real estate explosion by announcing plans to build on the topmost part of Jump Off Mountain a 15 story hotel and convention center to rival his Fleetwood Hotel in Miami Beach.

The Commodore, whose title reportedly derived from his past presidency of the New York Yacht Club, had built the Miami Beach Fleetwood, regarded at that

time to be the most expensive hotel in the world. Indicative of those profligate days is the story that, in spite of the extravagant rates the hotel charged during the "Season," management was forced daily to turn away as many as 200 prospective guests due to lack of room. On top of his Miami hostelry the Commodore operated radio station W.M.B.F. (The Wonderful Miami Beach Fleetwood), from which eminence plugs for the money-making possibilities in Florida real estate, and most particularly in his own Miami Beach development emanated.

In any event, the hypnotic Commodore was in turn hypnotized by the Hendersonville area on his first visit, and declared it should become (God forbid) a second Miami Beech without an ocean and that he would duplicate his Miami Beech edifice on a location where his guests could enjoy a 360° view of the surrounding mountains. Here, too, he would install another powerful radio station on its topmost floor from which to broadcast the wonders of Western Carolina mountain vistas and, not incidentally, the wonders of the newly established Laurel Park Estates and his new hotel as well. The station call letters were to be W.F.H.H., standing for the Wonderful Fleetwood Hotel Hendersonville. To prove that Stoltz was not a man without imagination, I quote from Mr. James H. Tom's "The Fleetwood Story," published by the Western Carolina Tribune In 1953, as follows:

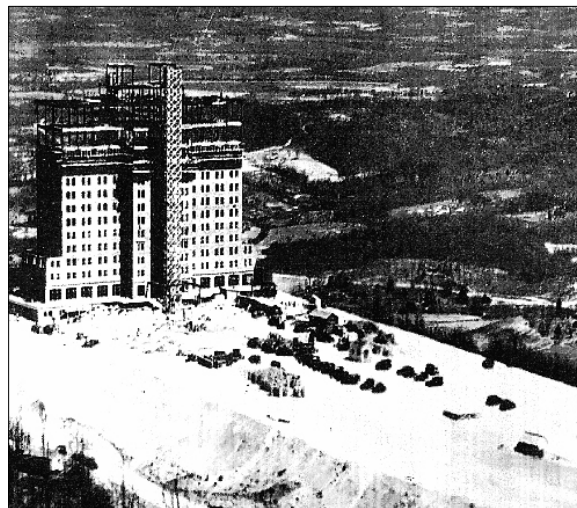
"It is my intention to break away from old traditions and make this a different hotel... I will erect a broadcasting station 3600 feet above sea level where transmitting conditions are perfect. There the greatest talent in the world will perform close to the blue clouds that drift by this picturesque slope of the Appalachian Range and the glories of Western North Carolina, Hendersonville and Laurel Park Estates will be broadcast to the world."

Need one doubt that with such a skilled promoter, ground was broken on September 9, 1925, at the end of a new concrete highway leading up the mountain to the site of the new Fleetwood, and especially built for access to the hotel? The Laurel Park orchestra provided music, and catering facilities were arranged to serve a barbecue dinner to 3,000 persons. Thus, amid music, food, and speeches from visiting dignitaries (including John W. Masters, then governor of Florida), the first shovelful of dirt was turned and permanent prosperity was guaranteed for investors in the project and for the community.

As the summer season ended, most of the real estate promotion was transferred to Florida to take advantage of the winter season there. This was not the case, however, for the boosters of Laurel Park Estates. It would appear that they had learned their lessons well, and among other promised programs were included free lectures, tennis, archery, croquet, a gun club, a riding academy, an 18-hole golf course and country club, and regular dances with music provided by nationally known dance bands. This effort to make Hendersonville and Laurel Park Estates a year round playground—was based upon the reality of the rising steel skeleton of the Fleetwood Hotel, which provided visible proof of the predictions made by some of Miami's most stable citizens about the unquestioned continuous development of Western North Carolina, where "every foot of land would continue to increase in value."

Reinforcing this local enthusiasm was the fact that many of the major newspapers in adjoining states, as well as North Carolina, printed glowing reports of the Fleetwood development. The Atlanta radio station W.S.B. carried an entire evening program featuring the Laurel Park orchestra, and talks about the progress of

the Fleetwood Hotel as a worthy rival to the famous Grove Park Inn at Asheville, and the bright future of the whole area.



All this publicity, joined by an energetic sales force, increased land sales in Laurel Park to a remarkable degree. The section of Laurel Park, now known as Fleetwood, adjacent to the hotel structure, was opened for sales on November 16, 1925, and total sales for that first day amounted to \$131,000 for sixteen lots, and by the end of the first week, 28 lots were sold for \$310,000. In fact, the Commodore, who profited from the sale of these Fleetwood lots, made an offer to repurchase within one year any lot, after the last payment had been made, for the original price, plus 6% interest. This would make one believe that Stoltz was as optimistic as the most naive investor. The Hendersonville "News" reported that in the preceding twelve months, total sales in Laurel Park Estates had exceeded \$2,500,000, and these sales had acted as the bellwether for the whole Hendersonville area in real estate activity. In fact, the Laurel Park Estates sales force was so enthusiastic that it set a sales goal for 1926 of \$7,000,000.

As may be imagined, the entire area became infected by tales of real estate

profits which had been made in Florida and the coming of the Commodore with his grandiose plans for his hotel further stimulated the local speculative fever. For example, one small lot on Fourth Avenue and Church Street, which had sold for \$5,000, less than three years later sold for \$81,000. In the interim, the lot had been bought and sold several times at an ever-increasing price. This incident was repeated in the immediate area time after time. Paper wealth became commonplace and the local banks were overloaded with extravagant mortgages which amounted to much more than the property was worth on what, in retrospect, seemed any realistic value.

Even though work continued on the hotel, filling in the skeleton with clay tile, inner walls, pouring concrete floors, and delivering marble trim and face brick for the exterior decor, sales of lots in Laurel Park Estates were not approaching the quotas set for 1926. Thus, additional promotional schemes had to be concocted. Certainly one cannot fault the ambition of the Laurel Park promoters as exemplified by the pint-sized A. L. McWhirter who had the vision of a P. T. Barnum. Despite his diminutive physical stature, McWhirter was equipped with king-sized promotional skills and imagination.

His "Think Big" approach to Laurel Park's development included arrangements with Jack Kearns, manager of the popular Jack Dempsey, then heavyweight champion of the world, to train for a month at the Laurel Lake Casino and Indian Cave at Hebron Lodge, now only a pile of rotting lumber, for the next defense of his title. The training ring and gymnastic equipment necessary for the fighter's conditioning was established at the Casino, a two-story, open-air pavilion which extended partially over the lake in front of the edifice used for many years as the Laurel Park Inn. The pavilion had

previously been used for some years for entertainment and had held popular summer dances for residents and visitors when nationally known bands played in the structure. The financial arrangements included a payment of \$35,000 and "other considerations" later said by Mr. Dempsey to have amounted to an additional \$25,000, a sizeable sum even in those halcyon days.

The invitation to Dempsey and his retinue included the beautiful screen star, Estelle Taylor, who was a divorcee at the time she became Dempsey's wife. Hospitality was not extended by everyone in the area, and elements as diverse as the Ku Klux Klan and the Reverend M. T. Smathers thundered against it from Klavern and pulpit alike. The congregation of the First Methodist Church adopted a resolution and appointed a committee condemning the invitation to this sporting element as detrimental to the God-fearing character of this community. The Klan, no doubt, based their indignation on the possibility of Dempsey signing for a title fight with the black challenger, Harry Wills. It is likely that once the champion drew the "color line" that the Klan relaxed and enjoyed the visit. Such an impression is easy to come by when one views the pictures of Dempsey's stay showing him with many local admirers fortunate enough to have their presence with the Dempseys recorded by the camera for the Baker-Barber collection of current life as it existed here in those heady days.

Nevertheless, the contract was signed and the Dempseys and entourage arrived in Hendersonville on April 24, 1926, where they checked into the Kentucky Home Hotel, which was then located on the southeast portion of the present Dogwood Municipal Parking Lot.

Altogether there were three sites for his month's training activities; the Casino

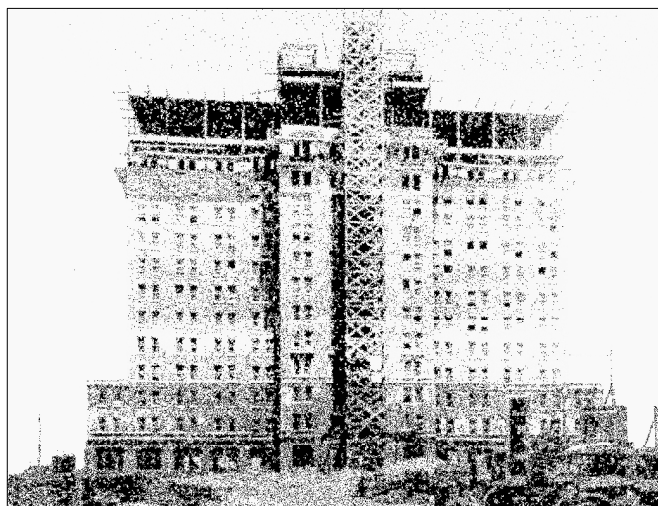
on Laurel Lake for training during wet weather, a location at Indian Cave for windy weather, and a spot at the top of Jump Off Mountain at the site of the then building Fleetwood Hotel--the raison d'être for Jack's use of Laurel Park as a training site.

Termination of the month's training ended with an informal farewell dance given on May 26 by the Dempseys for their new friends in Hendersonville and Laurel Park at Hebron Lodge Inn Indian Cave. The training camp was abandoned, and the next day Jack left for Memphis, there to meet the legendary promoter, Tex Rickard, to make final plans for his title defense on September 23 when, in Philadelphia, his title passed to Gene Tunney in their first championship fight.

This marked the end of Laurel Park's involvement in prize fighting. The expensive publicity gambit arranged by McWhirter, Henry Hester representing Laurel Park Estates, and Bud Jones, sales director for the Hotel could neither solve the financial problems of the Fleetwood Hotel or Laurel Park Estates, both of which ended up with the same disappointing conclusion as did Dempsey when he lost in Philadelphia to the "Fighting Marine."

Even with the flamboyant efforts recounted above to stimulate real estate sales of Laurel Park lots, results lagged and sales became sluggish to the point of stagnation as the years advanced. The most devastating blow, however, occurred when the hotel contractors abruptly halted construction on the hotel due to lack of money. Fortunately, salvation seemed at hand when a week later work again started on the immense structure. Nonetheless, this interruption did a lot to shake local confidence in the future and the dazzling property which had seemed so close at hand suddenly became more and more remote.

By now the exorbitant costs of real estate in the whole area had reached a point where almost every sale involved maximum mortgage commitments, which were far in excess of any practical value of the property involved. Despite the considerable progress on the construction of the Fleetwood Hotel, it now seemed more like a castle in the air than a viable investment in the future.



Rumors were rife as to why the Commodore finally terminated the hotel project at Fleetwood. One of the most creditable explanations may be that his wife, who was reported to have financed the construction, cut off the money. Another valid reason could well be that since the hotel construction and ownership rested upon a corporate structure, neither the Commodore nor his wife could be personally sued for the unpaid bills. Further, since all the money from the lots sold by Laurel Park Estates in the 101-acre Fleetwood subdivision went to Stoltz's personal account in the local First Bank and Trust Company, perhaps he wished to quit while he was ahead. In view of the frequent difficulty of payment for lot sales from the Fleetwood subdivision, it is most doubtful that he salvaged anything from that account.

Numerous attempts by local investors to complete the hotel were doomed to failure. One almost succeeded and on September 19, 1926, it was announced that the trustees of the bankrupt hotel corporation would sell the property to Florida East Gulf Real Estate Company for \$1,250,000, and that they would complete construction of the building. By this time, the steel skeleton had already been enclosed to the 13th floor by a tile facing which was to be covered by a brick exterior trimmed with marble. Thousands of brick and acres of bathroom fixtures had been delivered to the contractors and remained as outdoor ornaments on the mountain top until most the bathroom fixtures disappeared. It was said of those days that most of the bathrooms in Henderson County were equipped with Fleetwood fixtures.

This last effort to complete the building was terminated with the almost simultaneous occurrence of the dreadful September 18 hurricane, which swept across most of Florida with such devastating results. This natural disaster, added to the man-made financial problems, proved to be the death knell for the Fleetwood Hotel, whose frame dominated Jump Off Mountain, plainly visible from Asheville on any clear day.

One final attempt was made early in 1929 to salvage the dream, and it seemed that success was at hand when Hendersonville city fathers agreed to issue a \$500,000 municipal bond issue to be used as collateral for a loan to revive the original plan, including the 18-hole golf course which now is the beautiful Hendersonville Country Club layout. The coup de grace for this plan which raised local citizens' spirits was the crash of October in that year, which permanently extinguished all further hope for the project.

For a time, the site of the hotel was fenced in and operated as a monument to failure and a ten-cent admission was charged to view the ruins. Obviously this could not be a profitable venture, so when an offer was made in 1937 by the W.R. Horn Salvage Company of Kingsport, Tennessee, to raze the structure, it was accepted by the bankruptcy court and within a year the great hulk was dismantled.

However, the disaster struck hard in this area even prior to the market crash in 1929. Banks had lent money to their limit and beyond to finance the speculative real estate activity on the local scene. Consequently, after struggling with small success for years to salvage something from the defaulted mortgages on vacant, as well as occupied real estate, all three local banks gave up the ghost on November 20, 1930. The domino effect tumbled the Fletcher Bank on December 12. Thus banking activities were suspended and what business was done was to a large extent conducted mostly on a barter basis.

Need one imagine what this disaster did to real estate sales? While the State Trust Company did open shop on December 4, 1930, thus providing for some monetary transactions on a limited scale, there was no money and less public interest in real estate investment. Development of Laurel Park became languished, while receivers plodded to liquidate the defaulted mortgages on Laurel Park property as best they could.

Millions of dollars were owed on the lots sold in Laurel Park in the form of notes, mortgages and land contracts, most of which had been financed by local banks. A Baltimore firm-Consolidated Realty Company-had the original mortgage on the Laurel Park Estates property and subsequent to foreclosure proceedings. In

1935 the receivers engaged Gus and Raymond Staton to manage their interests. In 1941 the Statons bought the remaining Consolidated Realty Company's interests and they have been responsible for most of the sale and development of the property since.

The Statons held the land for many years since "no one seemed to want it," but in 1941 they developed Sky Village and In 1945, Echo Acres. In the meantime, some of the lands, such as Fleetwood, had been sold to other realtors and some of the Fleetwood area has now been utilized as the sites for recent housing. Building in the two Staton areas did not begin until after World War II, and it was after 1950 that there was any substantial demand for homes among the higher elevations of Laurel Park.

Jump Off Pavilion was built by the local Kiwanis Club shortly after World War II as a money-making project. A concession stand was installed and square dances were held twice weekly during the summer and fall, which were popular and well attended by the local residents and the summer guests. Alonzo Brookshire had a square dance band which played for the frequent dances. He also operated the concession stand. Originally it was opened to the public at no charge and served as a pleasant picnic and cook-out destination for the dancers and others.

About 1955 the area including the Pavilion and the observation point at Jump Off Rock was fenced in and an admission charge was made obligatory, which destroyed its popularity. Soon vandals and lack of maintenance took its toll on the Pavilion and by 1975 when this writer appeared on the scene the whole area was in shambles.

This was at least partly accounted for by the fact that the property which had

been left to the Town of Laurel Park by a former resident was in a state of limbo since the gift had been contested by relatives of the donor. In 1979, the long litigation was settled in favor of Laurel Park and this recent addition to the corporate limits of the town is being considered as the site for the national headquarters of the Second Wind Hall of Fame, a national organization founded by Philip J. Kelly, a former resident of Sky Village, dedicated to retirees who have maintained an active interest in public service to their communities.

The prosperous decades of the postwar years inspired more and more interest in building sites and homes in the Hendersonville area, and Laurel Park proved to be a most attractive location based on its proximity to town and its spectacular views provided for those who chose to take advantage of the scenic opportunities.

A water system had long been a benefit for Laurel Park residents denied by most mountain developments. This system is owned and maintained by the town and thus eliminates the dependence upon private wells. Roads also have been provided by the community and are mostly macadamized and now provide access to a major part of the town. Roads are well-maintained by the town's employees, rubbish collection is also a responsibility of the city fathers, and in winter the hilly roads are generally kept clearer than are those in Hendersonville.

Today the population of Laurel Park consists mostly of persons who are permanent residents. Thus it can be seen that the town has an attraction that has provided a pleasant home and surrounding for those inclined to live on a mountain with its cool summer nights and its mostly clear winter days, which permits, from the higher elevations, the advantage of the

spectacular views of the lovely mountains
and valleys contained in this portion of
North Carolina.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"The Forging of Our Continent," Charlton Ogburn, Jr., the Smithsonian Library, 1968.

"Henderson County...the Past 137 Years," J.T. Fain, published as supplements to the Hendersonville Times-News.

"Isabel," by Isabel J. Foster, in collaboration with Nixon Smiley.

"The Fleetwood Story," James H. Tons, published in 1863 by the Western Carolina Tribune.

"The Baker-Barber Collection," photographs of the development of Henderson County, Hendersonville and Laurel Park.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

1. Mr. Jody Barber was most helpful in providing me with his personal recollections of Laurel Park during its development over the past two generations. Without the record of his photographic collection of the early days of this area, much understanding of those days would be lost to posterity. His assistance has been of great value in the development of this story and his cooperation is greatly appreciated by this writer.

2. Mr. William A. Baxter, past and present Mayor of Laurel Park, has also been most helpful in providing access to the town records referring to the original organization and incorporation of the town. Ms. Lula May Briggs has been equally generous in her help in developing information detailed herein.

3. Considerable appreciation must also be accorded to Ms. Nell Foster Jennings for her mother's reminiscences contained in "Isabel," a fascinating account of her mother's life in this area during its development.

4. Without the above help It would have been impossible to have acquired the information needed for an elaboration of the birth and growth of the Town of Laurel Park.

