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Mining gap now a park

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Georgia's Bell Mountain is the mountain with the cut in it. It can be seen from many vantage points as you drive and hike in Towns County. There's an unsettling aspect to this peak; it has a pit carved out of the top of it. This brazen excavation stands out in the midst of otherwise splendid mountain and Lake Chatuge scenery.

Something's been done about it. I watched Jan. 4 as Towns County Commissioner Bill Kendall signed an ordinance designating the 18-acre

summit as a county park and historical site.

"This protects Bell Mountain from the scars of commercial or private development and preserves it for all and future generations to enjoy," Kendall said.

A Towns County Historical Society study describes how Bell Mountain got its cut.

"Grover C. Mauney, Walter Mauney and Dr. William A. Hoover, all of Murphy, N.C., organized the Hiawassee Stone Co. for the purpose of mining quartzite," write Jerry Taylor and Jason Lee Edwards. (They date this "about 1960." The Georgia Secretary of State corporation-search website, meanwhile, says Hiawassee Stone Co. formed in May 1963 and dissolved in January 2001.)

The Towns Historical Society writers continue: "Under Grover C. Mauney's direction, the top of Bell Mountain was blasted and the quartzite was hauled down the mountain to a crusher/washer/ grader and then shipped to the nearest railhead at Murphy."

Things turned rocky. "The white quartzite was not as deep as had been suspected and other colors began to appear," according to the writers. "This, coupled with the increasing cost of extraction and transportation, caused the venture to fail. The cost of producing a ton of product was \$35 while the going rate for a ton was only \$30."

Georgia state government subsequently made studies proving the mining wasn't economically feasible, but the damage was done to 3,420-foot Bell Mountain.

What's its recent deed history? In 1952, owners Jesse H. Gibson and his wife, Esta Russell Gibson, willed it to Georgia Baptist Foundation Inc. with instructions to "invest and reinvest" in order to build up a student-loan fund at Truett-McConnell College in Cleveland, Ga.

Esta died in 1957 and Jesse in 1960. So given the timing, it's fair to say the Murphy Miners Three gained access to mine a mountaintop from a religious organization. I said to Commissioner Kendall: "The mining investors must have leased from the Baptist foundation."

"Yes, that must be right," the commissioner replied.

In 1971, Baptists got out of invest-and-reinvesting at Towns County Land Lot 71, deeds show, and sold to Atlanta ad agency executive (and Young Harris, Ga., resident) Hal Herrin and E.N. Dowdy for \$60,000. Herrin died at 87 in 2009. It's his children who have donated the topmost 18 acres to Towns County government.

"We're just glad the Top of the Bell is going to be preserved," Anna Herrin, a daughter, said. "Daddy didn't want to see it ever blasted again."

'There's money in the ground'

Mayor Bill Hughes of Murphy recalled last week how Druggist Walter McComb Mauney, who owned Mauney's Drug Store here, had an interest in minerals. Mayor Hughes said: "His son Walter told me, 'Dad always felt like there's money in the ground.'"

A Grover Cleveland Mauney (1892-1977) was the N.C. Highway Commission road maintenance supervisor for six western counties, according to "Heritage of Cherokee County, N.C." volume 1. Walter F. Mauney (1938-1973) was in his 20s during Hiwassee Stone Co. mining and may or may not have had his M.D. then, but sources prove he was a physician in North Carolina, Tennessee and Alabama.

I said to Murphy Mayor Bill Hughes that the Mauneys may have sought out Dr. William A. Hoover (1905-1978) to come in with them as a fellow investor. "I think you're right," Mayor Hughes replied.

The beloved World War II and postwar eras' surgeon and obstetrician for Cherokee, Clay and Graham counties in North Carolina and Union and Fannin counties in Georgia found time to serve on the N.C. Highway Commission, Cherokee County Commission, Cherokee County Board of Education, Town Council and First Baptist Church Board of Deacons as chairman. The Dr. William A. Hoover Bridge over the Hiwassee River in Murphy was named for him in 1990, according to N.C. Department of Transportation records.

Bell Mountain remains in danger as recreational four-wheelers maul the dirt path to the top. I know it's been gated near the crest at least since 2008.

"That doesn't stop them, they just go around," Commissioner Kendall told me. "They bring chain saws with them and cut trees to go around the gate."

This column about our environment – the mountains, rivers, creeks and air – runs every two weeks. Tom Bennett is a retired newsman. Email him at farblumtn07@gmail.com.

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