THE STORY OF
WILDACRES
RETREAT
“Thou hast a voice, great Mountain. . .
Not understood by all, but which the wise and great and good interpret, or make felt.”

—Perry Bysshe Shelley
Some places have a life about them. A spirit that is intangible, yet deeply felt. A sense of “being” so real it causes one to pause and wonder.

For many, Wildacres is such a place. High atop Pompey’s Knob, where the Blue Ridge Mountains meet a clear blue sky, Wildacres lives and breathes. Some swear it speaks. In the rustling of the leaves, in the song of the birds, on a gentle breeze it finds voice. And for those inclined to listen, Wildacres has many stories to tell.
Located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, some sixty miles from Dixon’s hometown of Shelby, Wildacres was truly a paradise. Rhododendron and mountain laurel grew in riotous profusion amidst forests containing over one hundred thirty-six varieties of trees. Countless species of wildflowers dotted the hillsides and the banks of streams. There were ravines and waterfalls, three mountain ridges and all manner of wildlife.

Wildacres was, indeed, a place of “supreme beauty.” And Thomas Dixon had supreme plans for it.

Dixon had purchased Wildacres with film royalties earned from “The Birth of a Nation,” a controversial Hollywood epic based on his novel, “The Clansman,” at a period when his life seemed mired in professional difficulty and personal sadness.

Dixon was disenchanted with the censorship he’d found in the film industry and despondent following the death of his brothers. With his career and popularity also on the wane, Dixon realized he needed new purpose in his life, and so began to search for a project into which he could funnel the creative energies that had served him so well in the past.

In 1926, Thomas Dixon, North Carolina statesman, author and preacher, gave public notice of his intentions for a large tract of timberland known as Wildacres.
Dixon took to roaming the area around Mount Mitchell, allowing the clean mountain air to rejuvenate his spirit.

As he pondered what course of action he might follow, Dixon took to roaming the area around Mount Mitchell, allowing the clean mountain air to rejuvenate his spirit and lift his melancholy thoughts. The rapid development and land boom taking place in Florida excited Dixon and as he walked the wooded hills and verdant coves, it occurred to him that similar expansion could be possible in the beautiful mountains of the Old North State.

He began investigating real estate values, discussed various concepts with his peers, all the while elaborating on a plan taking shape in his mind: to create a cultural resort the likes of which the country had never seen. It would serve as a haven for authors, artists, musicians, actors, the greatest minds of the day. It would be a place where artisans might perfect their craft and philosophers might expand their thinking.
The first time I saw it I stood transfixed. I lifted my head and breathed deeply. I felt myself a part of God’s world. My soul began once more to breathe.”

—Thomas Dixon

The Mt. Mitchell Association of Arts and Sciences was chartered to organize in this primeval forest of supreme beauty the nucleus of a refuge for creative thinkers.

The Association will build on the central mountain peak of Wildacres an Auditorium in which will be established a forum for free discussion of the problems of Art, Science, Philosophy, Religion and Politics.
“Its deal will be renewal of life through the inspiration of nature.”

—Thomas Dixon
Dixon acted quickly. By the time he acquired Wildacres, he already had an advisory board in place, the Mount Mitchell Association of Arts and Sciences, which consisted of several notable individuals, including the presidents of nearly every institution of higher learning in the state.

Plans were made to build a large hotel, tennis courts, stables, golf course, and swimming pools. In his dreams, Dixon envisioned Wildacres as more than a cultural center. It would serve as a resort as well, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

By 1926 construction was well underway, with several of the larger buildings completed and equipped with running water and electricity. In addition, several hundred lots
were ready for development. Dixon’s enthusiasm grew by leaps and bounds.

Sadly, the nation’s economy did not. By 1929, Thomas Dixon had invested a small fortune in Wildacres. What money he had left was lost when the market crashed in October, shattering his dreams and throwing the country into the Great Depression.

The land boom was over. Dixon was bankrupt. The buildings on the summit of Pompey’s Knob stood dark and empty.

The paradise that was Wildacres seemed fated to be lost.
“God wanted something done on that mountain and I was selected as his servant.”

—I.D. Blumenthal
I.D. BLUMENTHAL

The story of how I. D. Blumenthal acquired Wildacres has been recounted literally thousands of times. He himself told the tale over and over: to toddlers he bounced on his knee; to family, friends and business associates; to each and every group he welcomed to Wildacres. I. D. passed the story on to his younger brother, Herman, and today, Herman’s son Philip continues to relate the story of Wildacres.

A deeply religious man, I. D. Blumenthal was a firm believer in divine guidance. According to I. D., it was divine guidance that led him to Charlotte, North Carolina, a city he would come to love and never leave. Divine guidance that prompted him to peddle a little-known powder called Solder Seal, which would become the cornerstone of Radiator Specialty, a company owned and operated by the Blumenthal family.

Divine guidance was at work that summer’s day in 1936 when I. D. sat talking with Jinks Harrell, but he was unaware of it. Harrell had news of a piece of real estate in the western part of the state, a tract of mountain property known as Wildacres.

He said there were 1200 acres of land all covered with trees and two large buildings. It had its own light plant, its own water system and its own sanitary system. The buildings were furnished, and the kitchen was equipped. All this could be bought for $6,500.

At the time, I. D. didn’t have any use for a mountain, so Harrell’s tip didn’t make much of an impression.

However, the following weekend, while attending a meeting of the National Conference of Christians and Jews in the Blue Ridge, I. D. recalled Harrell’s words.

He still had no interest in mountain real estate, still had no inkling that Providence might once again appear in his life. But since he was in the vicinity of Wildacres, he reasoned, perhaps he should take a look at it.

One look was sufficient. Despite the toll seven years had taken on the two buildings Dixon had built, I. D. was thoroughly charmed by the place.

It was a story I. D. Blumenthal loved to tell. All his life, he considered Wildacres a divine gift, a gift shared with him, a gift he in turn shared with others.
The views from Pompey’s Knob were enough to steal his breath away, and the air was sweet with the fragrance of summer.
The views from the top of Pompey’s Knob were enough to steal his breath away, and the air was sweet with the fragrance of summer.

He returned to Charlotte and, without delay, phoned Jinks Harrell to inquire once again on the price.

“Sixty-five hundred,” the real estate man said.

I. D. recalled the towering forests he’d seen surrounding Wildacres. Why, the timber alone was worth more that that. “You mean sixty-five thousand,” he said.

“No,” Harrell repeated.

“Sixty-five hundred.”

I. D. replied, “You had better come over here and let’s talk some more about it.”

Some days later, on the steps of a courthouse in Austin, Texas, the Wildacres property went on the auction block, and the only man to make an offer for it was a representative sent on I. D.’s behalf. The bid for $6,500 was the only bid received.

However, Wildacres still did not belong to I. D. After Thomas Dixon filed for bankruptcy, the property had been held by a bank until it closed in 1932, a casualty of the Great Depression. Though the bank never reopened, there were papers stating it had loaned $200,000 on Wildacres. With a balance of $190,000 still on the books, the Court Judge simply could not honor a bid of $6,500 until he’d sent a Clerk of Court to inspect the property.

I. D. assumed that once the clerk saw Wildacres the bid would undoubtedly be rejected.

Nonetheless, he drove to Asheville, met the man’s train, and together the two made the hour-long drive to Pompey’s Knob.
As the car ascended the gravel road that circled the mountain, the weather changed abruptly.
It was a beautiful day. The sun streamed through the treetops, dappling the forest floor with splashes of burnished gold. The birds serenaded the passing automobile with their summer song, and the breeze blowing in through the car window was heavy with a pungent scent of lush mountain foliage. I. D.’s heart sank. No one in their right mind would accept $6,500 for this.

Then, as the car ascended the gravel road that circled the mountain, the weather changed abruptly. Storm clouds moved in shrouding the scenery in a thickening mist. By the time I. D. and the clerk reached the summit, the fog was so thick neither man could see so much as his hand in front of his face. I. D. led the clerk through the buildings, but because the electricity had not been turned on and the windows were boarded up, they moved in total darkness.

They waited an hour for the weather to clear, but the cloud continued to embrace the mountain. The Texas clerk never saw the panoramic vistas Wildacres offered. He didn’t see the ravines and the waterfalls, the brooks or the flowers blooming in wild abundance. He didn’t see the cerulean flash of a bluebird taking wing, or the vast timberlands.

Shaken by what little he could see, deserted buildings, tree limbs, disembodied from their trunks in the swirling fog, the poor man was eager to depart the place and more than willing to recommend that the bid be honored.

That the sun broke through the clouds before the two men reached the base of the mountain mattered little. In less than two weeks, word arrived that the Texas court had accepted I. D.’s offer.
It took some time for I. D. to determine what to do with Wildacres. The buildings, vacant and exposed to the elements since 1929, required attention, but he couldn’t tend to the necessary renovations and manage the everyday affairs at Radiator Specialty simultaneously. So, when his brother, Herman, offered to paint and repair the buildings and operate Wildacres as a mountain inn, I. D. was amendable to the plan.

From 1938 through 1940, Wildacres played host to travelers. Later, it was rented to the Ringling School of Art and Design of Sarasota, Florida, which used the facility for its summer residency program until 1946. However, neither of these incarnations satisfied I. D. He was convinced that Providence had played a significant role in his acquisition of Wildacres, that the mountain was meant for a higher purpose. He prayed for guidance and eventually reached a decision he hoped would benefit people from all walks of life, one that would promote brotherhood and interfaith amity.
In the Spring of 1946
I. D. Blumenthal
dedicated Wildacres
“to the betterment of
human relations.”
There is a destiny that makes us brothers. None goes his way alone. All that we send into the lives of others comes back onto our own.”

—Edwin Markham
GROUPS AT WILDACRES

When I. D. purchased Wildacres, he had no idea how many lives it would touch. In its infancy, the conference center was used primarily by church and interfaith groups, like the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the North Carolina B’nai B’rith Institute (which was founded at Wildacres and has returned every summer since 1948).

Civic organizations, such as Civitan youth groups, were also among the first to avail themselves of the facilities. It wasn’t long, however, before other organizations discovered the retreat.

In the Spring of ’46 I. D. dedicated Wildacres “to the betterment of human relations.” That summer nonprofit groups began using Wildacres as a conference center and retreat for the first time.
“The artist is nothing without the gift, but the gift is nothing without work.”

—Emile Zola
Musicians, artists and writers find the breathtaking scenery a perfect backdrop for creative expression.

Gem and mineral societies hone their skills in the Lapidary Workshop, while potters practice their craft in the adjacent studio.
“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

—Eleanor Roosevelt
Wildacres hosts a wide range of musical groups from African Drum and Dance, Appalachian folk music, to song writing workshops in addition to masterclasses in flute, saxophone, bassoon and oboe that attract professional musicians from all over the world. Local residents are invited to attend the many concerts that are held throughout the season.

Wildacres has blended “the graces of modern life with the beauty of the wilderness” for thousands of guests.
“Destiny is no matter of chance. It is a matter of choice: It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.”

—William Jennings Bryan
Groups concerned with the natural sciences find Wildacres ideal for meetings and field trips. Naturalists and environmentalists alike conduct workshops in the meeting rooms, on the grounds themselves, and in the mountains that surround Wildacres. Universities and hospitals sponsor symposiums focusing on higher education and medical issues. Civic programs address issues that impact the state and the nation. Senior citizens and youth, religious leaders and lay persons all have found common ground at Wildacres as they discuss, create or simply pause in their daily work to reflect on the human experience.

As the roster of groups expanded, so did the facilities. Accommodations in the two main lodges are a far cry from the buildings Dixon originally built. The bedrooms in the lodges are double occupancy and have private baths. Inside a spacious dining hall, paintings and craft displays showcase the talents of many who have stayed at Wildacres.

To blend the graces of modern life with the beauty of the wilderness.

The Auditorium, completed in 1987, lends itself beautifully to lectures and musical performances. The Library allows guests to do research or simply keep company with a good book.

An amphitheater provides groups with an outdoor facility for lectures, musical performances and a campfire setting.
From April through October, Wildacres hosts nonprofit groups annually.

Some stay for a weekend, others book week-long retreats. And while each group plans its own program, the ideals must complement the Wildacres spirit, a spirit that is embodied in the words hewn into a wooden sign that hangs above the fireplace in the meeting room of the North Lodge.

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.”

—Psalm 133:1
It was I. D.’s wish that Wildacres perpetually contribute toward “a world in which all people will live together happily.” To that end, Wildacres was established as a public charity in 1972. From 1936, when he purchased the property, until his death in 1978, I.D. Blumenthal devoted himself to “God’s Mountain,” as he was fond of calling it. Both he and his wife, Madolyn, share their final resting place there.
RESIDENCY PROGRAM

Wildacres Retreat offers a Residency Program which gives artists, musicians, writers, photographers, jewelry artisans, composers, scientists, potters, and others, an opportunity to create meaningful work. Residencies are offered from April through October and participants stay in one of three cozy cabins tucked into the woods ¼ of a mile from the main facility. A typical residency is one-week although several two-week sessions are also offered. Residents have the opportunity to prepare their own meals in their cabins or partake of the 3 meals offered in the dining room which enables them to interact with group participants and the staff.

The serene and beautiful setting is perfect for inspiring creativity. The solitude of the mountain lends itself to helping someone be productive and achieve their goals.

There is no charge for the program, but there is an application fee. All applications are reviewed by a selection committee that works to ensure that a diverse group of people are chosen to have an impactful experience.

CONSERVATION EASEMENT

In the spirit of the retreat, the board of Wildacres Retreat entered into a conservation easement in 2017 with The Conservation Trust of North Carolina and the Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina to protect the property in perpetuity. This will enable all who come to Wildacres to enjoy the solitude and beauty of nature forever.
To celebrate Wildacres’ 50th Anniversary, The Wildacres Leadership Initiative was established in 1995. Its mission is to broaden the scope of Wildacres’ influence on North Carolina and its citizens for years to come.

In keeping with the Wildacres vision the founders and staff of the Initiative created the William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations. Named for Bill Friday, an educator, policy maker, and philanthropist, the fellowship program endeavors to prepare leaders for the challenges of the twenty-first century. With the humanities as its focus, the Fellowship provides a forum for Fellows of differing ideologies, vocations, and ethnic backgrounds to work together.

Each Fellowship class is a group of North Carolinians who would have otherwise never met. They are deliberately brought together across distance and difference, and then embark on a two-year curriculum at Wildacres and throughout the state.

Wildacres Leadership Initiative promotes civil dialogue and collaborative leadership. The Initiative is continually developing opportunities for Fellows and all North Carolinians to apply their knowledge and creativity to projects that will benefit North Carolina and beyond.

Regularly convened local gatherings in regions across the state bring portions of the Fellowship learning to ever more communities and populations statewide. Expanding the reach and impact of the Initiative online has been a more recent addition using videos, blogs, articles and more items curated in a timeline that follows the course of the Fellowship curriculum – and these materials are available worldwide on the internet.

By incorporating the Wildacres philosophy with the powers of compassion, curiosity, and civility that were Bill Friday’s trademarks, the Wildacres Leadership Initiative works to bestow a “birthday gift” of lasting significance to future generations.
The story that is Wildacres is never-ending, for with every person who comes to the retreat, another story unfolds.

The scrapbooks in the Library are full of such stories, letters written by those who have felt the magic of “God’s Mountain,” as I. D. fondly called it.

Some have come away with new insights, others with renewed faith and personal convictions. Many tell of having profound, life-altering experiences during time spent at Wildacres. All mention the special essence of the place, the sense of peace, compassion, and brotherhood.

WILDACRES HAS A LIFE ABOUT IT. AS LONG AS THERE ARE THOSE WHO HEAR ITS VOICE AND IDENTIFY WITH ITS SPIRIT, WILDACRES WILL LIVE ON. SO WILL THE STORIES.
FAMILY & STAFF THROUGH THE YEARS

“Dedication is not what others expect of you, it is what you can give to others.”
—Unknown
FOR MORE INFORMATION
Visit our website www.wildacres.org
Dave Lovett, Resident Manager
828-756-4573
wildacres@wildacres.org

Philip Blumenthal, Director
704-688-2305
foundation@rscbrands.com

IN APPRECIATION

AUTHOR
Becky Story / Fred Story Productions

GRAPHIC DESIGNERS
Shirley Beatty / Megan Grieser

PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHERS
Jim Valentine / Jason Blumenthal

Our thanks to the late C.E. Westveer who shared his many historic photographs.

To our many friends, thank you for sharing your photographs and the Wildacres experience with us throughout the years. Special thanks to our devoted staff who has helped to make each season memorable.