

Change in the Mountains Oral History Excerpts

1. Jerry Plemmons (editorial_plemmons.mp3)

Jerry Plemmons, a lifetime resident of Madison County, works for the French Broad Electric Membership Corporation, as a consultant on energy conservation and community development. In this interview, Plemmons reflects on the effects of development, particularly road construction, on Marshall, NC. He sees roads as both positive and negative forces - bring money and new people to communities, but also inviting environmental damage and ballooning property values, which drive out longtime residents. Listen to the complete oral history here - <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/K-0506/menu.html>.

“I have been a supporter of building that road for a long time. And a big part of my interest in seeing that road built was not related to the economic value of the road. I hope it has a positive economic value, but my concern was that the road that's there now is a very, very dangerous road. With the growth of traffic it becomes more dangerous. There was a number of elderly folk killed there around the intersection of 19-23 and the Big Branch Road in Mars Hill. And it was because, putting the local people—the elderly local folk—in an environment that they hadn't been accustomed to made it difficult for them to negotiate that. I wanted to make sure that we had the safest possible road that we could get to handle the traffic that was there and the added traffic that would be there.”

2. Richard Lee Hoffman Jr. (editorial_hoffman.mp3)

Richard Lee Hoffman Jr. grew-up in Madison County, started his career in Washington, DC, and returned to Madison to work for his family's real estate agency and start a family of his own. In this interview, Hoffman, describes his response to rapid growth in the area, brought on by the construction of Interstate 26. He expresses mixed feelings towards change - longing for the undeveloped land he explored as a child, but willing to exchange it for economic development. Hoffman feels Madison County is trapped between the past and the future - longtime residents and newcomers mingle awkwardly and population growth challenges community bonds. You can listen to the entire oral history here - <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/K-0505/menu.html>.

“I mentioned earlier that I have a lot of images in my head that I'd like to get. It's those images like the dirt road or the old barn or the tobacco field. Those are the things that I see that are going to be gone. And I think they're going to be gone whether the road comes or not. It's just a matter of time. I see the road not so much as its own problem; it's just sort of a symptom of development and growth in general that was going to find Madison County sooner or later anyway. But I hope that there are parts of the county that retain that. [...]

That's the hardest part of it, in my mind. Is seeing a way of life—it wasn't really my way of life—but seeing the mountain culture be whittled away a little bit more, a little bit more, a little bit more until it's something in a museum.”

3. Taylor Barnhill (editorial_barnhill.mp3)

As a child Taylor Barnhill spent his summers in a rural North Carolina community and as an adult he has devoted himself to environmental activism hoping to preserve rural North Carolina wilderness and communities. As a member of the Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition, he works to rally communities around conservation issues, not only for the sake of the state's natural resources, but also to give local residents a renewed sense of place. In this oral history interview, which took place in November 2000, he expresses his frustrations at road building - in particular those projects related to the construction of Interstate 26 in Madison County, NC. You can listen to the entire oral history here - <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/K-0245/menu.html>.

“Because of the scale of this road and the amount of traffic that it will bring, more than ever it becomes the big cultural blender. It blends the people and the activities into this homogenous soup that looks just like every other place in North America, and the world for that matter. The icons of transportation nodes are the chain businesses and gas stations, and they're all the same all over the world now. So you have this homogenous stuff that is created, and the uniqueness of place and culture disappears [...]

So there's a question of whether you fight to maintain traditions or whether you work to do kind of damage control in accepting change. I don't know the answer. I'm frustrated every day that I get out of bed about it. Every time I walk back on the ridge behind my house, which is a mile from the four-lane that goes by Mars Hill, all I can hear is the drone of traffic in the distance. This is a place where eight years ago you couldn't hear any traffic because there wasn't enough traffic to make any noise. I could go up there and feel like I was a hundred miles away from everything, and I no longer can do that because there's interstate noise. Even though the interstate is not completed, it's already there. So I don't know what the answer is.”

4. Mayor Raymond Rapp (editorial_rapp.mp3)

Mayor of Mars Hill, Raymond Rapp, has a vision for planned development in Mars Hill and Madison County that would create balance - between a desirable small-town feel and a prosperous big-town economy; between the needs of transportation development and environmental protection; and between the closeness of a small community and the benefits of bring in new residents. The interview provides a unique look at the way a community leader approaches growth and responsible expansion. By making Mars Hill attractive, Rapp hopes that by making Mars Hill attractive it will lure new businesses and residents while maintaining an atmosphere that encourages community solidarity and small-town values. The interview emphasizes the importance of urban planning is in protecting towns against undesirable development. Listen to the complete oral history here - <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/K-0253/menu.html>.

“In '93 and '94 when they turned the first shovelful of dirt down here just to build the interchange, not to extend the road but to finally build the interchange, I think people snapped to attention and said, ‘Wait a minute. This is really going to happen, and if it's going to happen what are we going to do to plan for that so that we can control that change?’ There's some of us that didn't want us to become another gas station stop on I-26, or find a number of businesses in the community that were incompatible with the lifestyle we've grown used to. That's where we really moved into the strategic planning process which I think the whole town got behind, which was interesting because that shovel full of dirt when they turned it, people were saying, ‘Wait a minute. Change is about to occur, big change is about to occur.’ As you say, in dimensions that had not been experienced in most people's lifetime here. So they started that. When we sent out, we got the planning board together, the town board together in '94. [...]

People sat down and wrote essays. They told us about the things that they liked about this community and the things that had been special and the things that needed to be preserved. You had on one hand some that wanted to preserve the small town community, but we'd sure like a Wal-Mart down here would be a lot more convenient. We had to sift through some of that. There were some themes that emerged on that. Those themes were first and foremost to preserve the small town character of the community.”