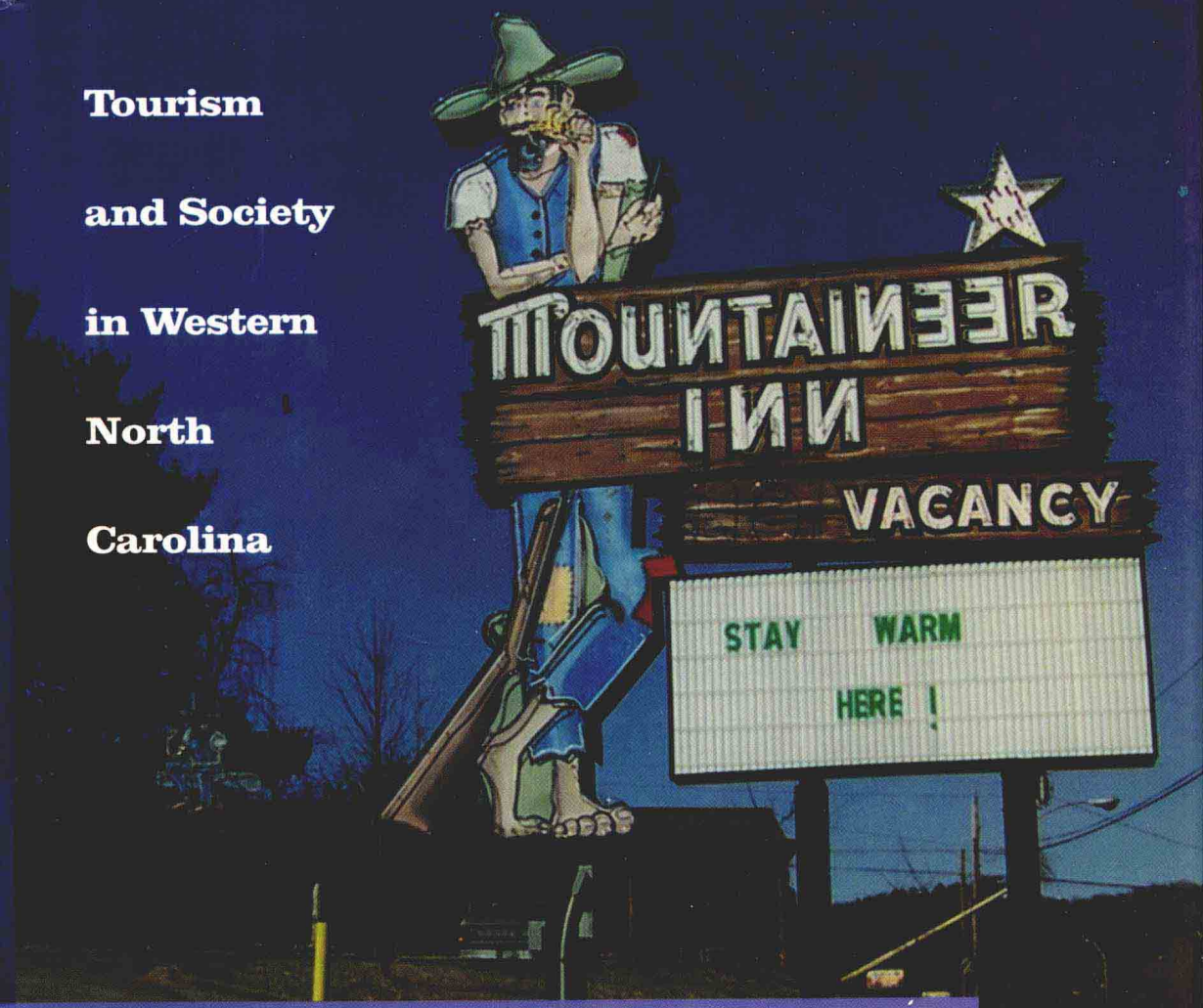
Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina



CREATING THE *Land of the Sky*

RICHARD D. STARNES

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Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina

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In the early 19th century, planter families from South Carolina, Georgia, and eastern North Carolina left their low-country estates during the summer to visit vacation homes in the mountains of western North Carolina. Those unable to afford the expense of a second home relaxed at the hotels that emerged to meet their needs. This early tourist activity set the stage for tourism to become the area's New South industry. After 1865, the development of railroads and the burgeoning consumer culture led to the expansion of tourism across the whole region.

Richard Starnes argues that western North Carolina benefited from the romanticized image of Appalachia in the post–Civil War American consciousness. This image transformed the southern highlands into an exotic travel destination, a place where both climate and culture offered visitors a myriad of diversions. This depiction was further bolstered by partnerships between state and federal agencies, local boosters, and outside developers to create the attractions necessary to lure tourists to the region.

As tourism grew, so did the tension between industry leaders and local residents. The commodification of regional culture, low-wage tourism jobs, inflated land prices, and negative personal experiences bred no small degree of animosity among mountain residents toward visitors. Starnes's study provides an excellent understanding of the significant role that tourism played in shaping communities across the South.

Richard D. Starnes is Assistant Professor of History at Western Carolina University and editor of *Southern Journeys: Tourism, History, and Culture in the Modern South.*

Cover: Mountaineer Inn, Asheville, North Carolina. The owners sought to attract visitors by drawing on regional stereotypes. Photograph by Richard D. Starnes.

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Creating the Land of the Sky

the MODERN SOUTH

series editors
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For Barbara, Emily, and Nathan

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mains my best friend, confidante, and love of my life. She suffered much as I worked on this book, but she remained steadfast in her support. I couldn't ask for a better family. This one is for them.

Cullowhee, North Carolina

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• Introduction

Catastrophe struck western North Carolina in the summer of 1997. After weeks of heavy rain, tons of rock, mud, and debris plunged down cliffs along the Pigeon River gorge in the early afternoon of July 2, completely blocking Interstate 40 in both directions. Luckily, no one was injured or killed. Nevertheless, this was an economic disaster of the highest order for this predominately rural section of North Carolina. The landslide occurred at the very height of the tourist season, and the mountain counties were faced with the potential of severe financial losses. Once news of the slide spread, visitors began choosing other destinations to spend their vacation time and money. To counter this public perception, the Asheville Chamber of Commerce, the largest and most influential business organization in the region, sponsored an advertising campaign in major newspapers across the South, attempting to convince potential visitors that travel was still possible. The North Carolina Department of Commerce created similar ads, purchased radio spots, and placed information on alternative routes on the World Wide Web. These efforts met with little success. The business community pressured political leaders for action. State representatives from mountain districts toured the slide area and vocally criticized the North Carolina Department of Transportation for the slow pace of cleanup efforts. Hampered by poor weather and the potential for additional slides, state engineers pleaded for patience. The local media joined the criticism of the DOT and gave detailed coverage of the economic havoc caused by the decline in tourism for businesses large and small. Curiously, comparatively little was said concerning the problems the blocked highway caused residents moving agricultural produce to market, receiving goods shipped from other parts of the country, and merely getting from place to place

within the region. The focus was on tourists, the lifeblood of the regional economy. As the cleanup wore on, three counties qualified as economic disaster areas, and other individual businesses received state grants to help them cope with the economic losses incurred because of the rockslide. Interstate 40 was completely reopened to all traffic in December, too late to aid the regional tourist economy but in time to fuel hope of recouping losses during the next season.[1]

But tourism as a force in the region's history stretches much further back than the rockslide that caused so much disruption in 1997. Since the early nineteenth century, visitors have traveled to western North Carolina to enjoy the region's scenery, mild climate, and other attractions. After the Civil War local boosters and outside investors united to develop tourism as the cornerstone of the regional economy. This early focus on tourism had pronounced effects for the society, economy, and culture of western North Carolina (figure 1). Although tourism brought visitors, capital, and the trappings of modern life to relatively isolated mountain counties, it also threatened traditional patterns of living, restricted other forms of economic development, and placed residents under intense scrutiny from outsiders. Tourism also exacerbated tensions between classes of mountain residents, some of whom sought profit in catering to visitors, developing resort properties, and preserving the traditional landscape, and others who opposed their land and culture being appropriated to serve and entertain outsiders. As the twentieth century progressed, tourism further divided mountaineers. Residents of more rural western counties came to resent the city of Asheville, the region's primary urban center, for its self-professed progressive vision and domination of the regional tourism market. Following the Second World War, rural leaders organized to counter Asheville's economic and political power and to carve a share of the tourism profits for themselves. Others cooperated with outsiders to preserve and profit from mountain music, crafts, and culture, which were being steadily eroded in part because of the economic and social influence of tourism. Still others capitalized on bringing visitors to western North Carolina permanently, inaugurating a large second-home movement, which dramatically changed the demographics and culture of the mountain region.

Until recently, the history of American tourism received little atten-