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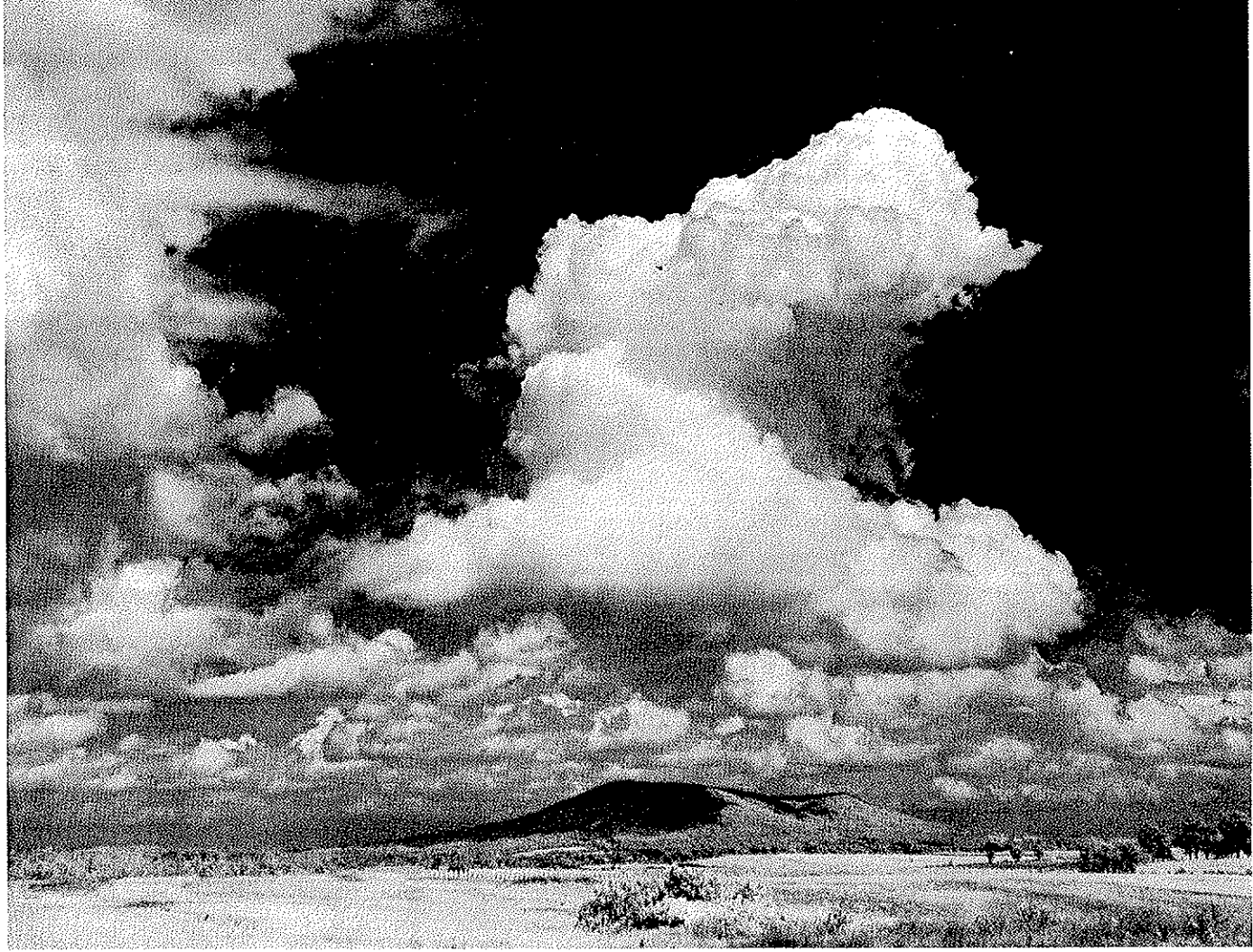
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Dwarfed by a hovering thunderhead, Mount Nittany continues to ride out the storms.

— Robert Beese photo

KINGS OF THE HILL

*A tale wherein the Beast of Progress
aspiring to the summit of Nittany
is laid low by a swat of the Lion's Paw.*

by Terry Dunkle '74

This is a tale of men with a faith strong enough to move mountains, only in this case they used it to make one stay put.

A cold fall morning in 1945: Bill Ulerich '31 is sitting at his desk scanning today's edition of the *Centre Daily Times*. His office smells of ink and hot type. He blue-pencils a few errors in a story about Harry Truman and atom bombs, then flips inside to have a look at the legal ads. Suddenly he grabs for the phone.

"Operator, get me State College four-five-seven-one."

The operator patches him into the office of Russell Clark '19, chief scribe and stamp-licker for the alumni of Lion's

Paw, a secret Penn State honor society to which Bill belongs.

"Russ," says Bill, "something big's come up. How much money do we have in the treasury?"

"Couple of hundred; why?"

"I noticed an ad here offering to sell Mount Nittany."

"Mount Nittany?"

"Yes."

"My God! where would we hold initiations?"

"It's worse than that, Russ. They're offering timber rights, too."

There was a moment of silence.

"How much?" Russ finally asked.

"They don't give a price. Maybe you should ring up Army Armstrong. Wasn't he one of the owners?"

"Yes. I'll check right away."

Next morning Elliott M. "Army" Armstrong of Penn State's industrial engineering department and his partners in the Nittany Outing Club, J. Stanley Cobb '43 and Earl Grove, told Russell it was a good thing he'd called as soon as he had; lumber crews from West Virginia Pulp and Paper were moving in tomorrow morning. Army didn't want to see "The Mountain" spoiled any more than Russell did, but let's face it, he said, the Nittany Outing Club couldn't live on sen-

timent. They figured Lion's Paw was a perfect buyer, and all they wanted for their 517 acres was \$2,000 — not a bad price for a piece of land twice the size of Penn State's main campus.

"We don't have that kind of money and you know it," Russell said.

"Well, then," said Army, "be sure to listen for the chain saws tomorrow morning."

There was silence for a moment. Finally, Russell said, "I guess you fellows have us cornered. Have you got a pen?"

Russell hastily drew up, in his own name, an option to buy the mountain, and drafted a Lion's Paw check for \$300 to seal the bargain. It was some minutes later, in Bill Ulerich's office, that the full import of what he'd done came clear to him. He got Bill to agree that if they had any trouble selling the idea to Lion's Paw alumni, they would complete the purchase themselves.

Today Bill Ulerich, president of Penn State's Board of Trustees, owns several newspapers and radio stations, but in those days he was earning less than \$100 a week at the CDT, and "two thousand seemed like a lot of money," as he recalls. Russell Clark was in no better straits. To those who didn't understand Mount Nittany's significance to this area, the two brothers of the Paw had gone out on a limb just to save a few scraggly trees.

Mount Nittany occupies the prow of an 80-mile ridge jutting into the Centre Region from the Susquehanna near Lewisburg. Nearly everyone affiliated with Penn State or State College lives and works in her shadow. Part of her charm is that wherever we travel in the region she shows us a different face.

"If you wanted to," a visitor once told Lion's Paw alumnus Ross Lehman '42, "you couldn't have placed that mountain in a better spot. It's just like God put it there."

Among local folks, feelings about Mount Nittany run deep, but outsiders sometimes scoff. Years ago, a few smart alecks who'd been to the Rockies came here and dubbed our august hill "Not-any Mountain." It's true that Mount Nittany refuses to tower over us, although with a little work some of us have managed to make it loom. A billion years ago, when the Rockies were only a gleam in the Creator's eye, Mount Nittany quite possibly scraped higher clouds than McKinley or Everest do today, but water and ice have scoured it down to 2,077 feet above sea level, or only 1,050 feet above the valley floor.

We can at least brag about the variety of trees on our mountain, whose forests include maple, oak, chestnut, butternut, wild cherry, aspen, walnut, and black birch. The cherry alone might have been worth the \$2,000 except that the mountain had been stripped of timber about

forty years earlier, and most of the trees were still only of pole girth.

Here and there on the mountain the new owners found signs of ancient farms, most of them abandoned generations earlier. The mountain had passed through many hands during the 200 years since the first claims were filed with the commonwealth. Most of it was first deeded in 1794 to Ross Johnston, and by the era of the Great Depression, the mountain was acquired by Army Armstrong and the Nittany Outing Club.

Most of the owners found Mount Nittany too ornery to cultivate except as hunting land. The mineral rights still belong to the hundreds of heirs of Christian Dale, wherever they are, but the rights are of little value unless someone finds a wondrous new use for sandstone.

That's the geologist's point of view — informative, but hardly inspiring. To the Indians, and to the poets and myth-makers of early Penn State, Mount Nittany was born not of a seismic belch but of the love of an Indian princess and the miracles of a benevolent God. Here's how the 1916 *LaVie* recounts the story:

Down in the valley lived an old warrior and his squaw . . . Frequently it happened that just when the maize they had planted was ready to reap, the north wind came . . . and wrested it from them, so that in the long winter there was little to eat. . . .

An Indian maid came down from her hilltop in the night and built a shield for them against the north wind. The old people saw with wonder the thing that she had done, and called her Nittany, which means "wind-breaker."

Then a great sickness came upon her, and she died, and the old warrior and his squaw mourned her, and they built a mound over the place where she lay. . . .

Then in the night came the Great Spirit with thunderings and lightnings; the earth shook, great trees came crashing down, and the people were sore afraid. . . .

When the dawn came, the people came forth and marveled; for in the place where they had builded the mound now rose a great mountain. And they called it Nittany, in honor of her who was called pious and good.

Then the yearbook editors added a significant twist to the famous legend:

In this valley there rose the Great Mother, not of men but of the minds of men. To her came the young men from many miles, and she taught them the wisdom of times past, taught them the use of tools, taught them the arts of working. . . . And her sons went out into the world and worked with the arts she had taught them and brought back to her honor and glory.

Mount Nittany occupied a special, matronly place in the hearts of thousands of youths who left their families and came up here from Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and other distant towns to learn farming. If the professors of the 1860s were hard taskmasters, the bosom of Nittany seemed all the softer. She was a wise and gentle instructor who understood that boys are not quite men and that work must be rewarded with play. She taught each stu-

dent the unassailable truth that to climb a mountain he must walk uphill. Then, at the summit, she bid him lie down on the mossy earth and sleep.

Many an old grad, recalling the Sunday outings of his youth, will tell you the best part of a Penn State football game is looking out through the open end of Beaver Stadium (it was built that way on purpose) and watching Mount Nittany light up gold in the afternoon sun.

An exchange student from the University of Cologne was so inspired that in 1965 he named his newborn daughter Bettina Frederike Nittany Nurnberg, and promised she would study at Penn State when she reached college age. And in 1954, during an abortive movement to change the name of State College, the Committee of Fifty selected "Mount Nittany" as the most fitting label for the town.

Time has wedded the Nittany name to all sorts of institutions expressing the local spirit. We have a Mount Nittany church, a Nittany Mountain Summer, a Mountain View Hospital, a Nittany Lion Inn and the Penn State Nittany Lions. Many local businesses have appropriated the name. On foggy mornings, when Nittany hides her face from passing motorists, the signs along the road keep echoing her name.

Lion's Paw began its intimate acquaintance with Mount Nittany long before its 1945 purchase. Members are loath to reveal their secrets, but sneaky outsiders claim that every spring since 1908, alumni have hiked up Nittany's steep side after dark, leading a troupe of blindfolded seniors to an open spot near the summit. There, after a few secret incantations, the students' eyes are opened upon a breathtaking view of the lights of village and campus flashing beneath their feet like jewels on a rumpled army blanket. It is a sight not easy to forget.

Each year Lion's Paw initiates a dozen or so senior men — and lately, women — who have made their marks in student government, on the college newspaper, or through some other display of leadership. Not surprisingly, many have gone on to earn fame in the world at large, among them Bill Ulerich and three other current trustees; several former trustee presidents; Senator Richard Schweiker '50; former Harvard football coach Dick Harlow '12; David Dodds Henry '26, president emeritus of the University of Illinois; Herbert Longenecker '33, president emeritus of Tulane University; Pittsburgh industrialist Robert Ostermayer Sr. '17; and Donald W. Davis '42, president of the giant Stanley Works tool company.

Others gained renown right here at the foot of the mountain: Bob Higgins '18, former Penn State All-American

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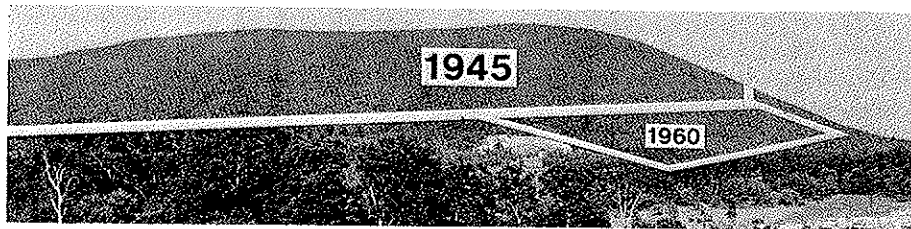
and football coach; Ross Lehman and the late Ridge Riley '32, executive directors of the Alumni Association; Dutch Herman '12, historian and first Penn State basketball coach; local attorney Wayland Dunaway '33; John Brutzman '35, former managing editor of the *Centre Daily Times*; Bill Engel '40, associate director of Penn State's Office of Gifts and Endowments; and local physician and one-time champion Lion wrestler Jack Light '36, to name just a few.

Lion's Paw — which was almost called the "Keystone Senior Society" until someone thought up a better name — was founded in 1908 by six students, John Barnes, Bud Furst, Jimmy Acheson, "Posty" Postlethwaite, Frank Simon and Dick Pennock. Their original aim was to foster better behavior among students, especially during annual class customs.

In the early years of this century, student scraps were so loud and violent that townspeople began calling the period of customs "hell week." Upperclassmen hooted and hollered through the town each night, tearing up sidewalks and plastering shop windows with hazing posters, often to a rousing racket of gunfire.

By 1945, however, two world wars had sobered even the most fractious of youths, and Lion's Paw members were left with no specific mission beyond debating the issues of the day and entertaining one another. Their meetings were held in "the lair," a big room on the fourth floor of Old Main outfitted with two davenport, a chess table, bookcases, and two cuspidors. A typical agenda read: "Good fellowship; bull session; pretzels; fresh (?), sweet (?), snappy cider; plenty of smokes; and a general good time!"

After two decades of shooting the breeze, Lion's Paw was more than ripe for a cause. Ulerich and Clark needed no slick talk to persuade its directors to take the mountain off their hands. Ridge



Although much of Mount Nittany belongs to Lion's Paw — 517 acres purchased for \$2,000 in 1945 and an additional 20-acre plot purchased for \$3,000 in 1960 — in a larger sense the landmark belongs to us all.

Riley, always the devil's advocate, apparently chided Bill and Russell for their rashness, but it was all in fun, and when Jim Coogan '30, Dutch Hermann and Lou Bell '29 heard the idea they offered nothing but praise.

The matter was put to a vote at the next annual meeting of alumni. According to Russell's minutes, after Hap Frank '24 moved to keep the property, "so many seconded the motion that it was impossible to record the original second — there was no discussion — Dutch put the question and there was a veritable roar of 'ayes.'"

And so, on the evening of November 13, 1945, news of the sale of Mount Nittany went out to the rest of the world. In New York, readers of the *Daily News* snapped open their papers to a short item reading like this:

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. (UP) — Legendary Mount Nittany, one of the mountains that tower over the campus of Pennsylvania State College, was spared the woodsman's ax today, and just in the nick of time. A student alumni organization, Lion's Paw, bought the summit for \$2,000 just as a pulpwood crew prepared to begin stripping operations.

Similar stories showed up in the *Omaha World Herald*, the *Covington (Ky.) Post*, the *Birmingham (Ala.) News*, the *Worcester (Mass.) Gazette*, and in dozens of newspapers elsewhere.

A good many barrels of ink had been spilled over an event not quite so complete as the newspapers implied. For one thing, the mountain hadn't been bought by Lion's Paw alumni at all, but by their secretary, Russell Clark. So far, only \$300 had changed hands, and no one could be certain the members would chip in the rest.

The newspapers purveyed yet another, even bigger error, which has been kept secret until now: The story about the woodcutters was a hoax dreamed up by members of the Nittany Outing Club to assure quick sale of their land.

"We thought it would help if we scared people up a bit," club member Earl Grove explained recently. Two other members, J. Stanley Cobb and G. Guy Miller, have confirmed the ruse; the fourth partner, Army Armstrong, died in 1953.

Recently we blabbed the news of the Nittany Outing Club's little white lie to B.M. "Dutch" Hermann, who was president of Lion's Paw alumni in 1945. For a

moment he was speechless. After some thought, he allowed that "they could have sold the mountain just as quickly without using a trick like that. At that price anybody would have thought it a bargain."

Bargain or not, Dutch took no chances that fall when he presented his case in a newsletter to the membership. In fact, he used a bit of bluffery himself, the old "Don't-ask-'em — tell-'em!" ploy: "YOU are now PART OWNER of the most famous geographical landmark affiliated with Penn State," his letter announced. "... P.S. Your contribution will be deductible from your income tax."

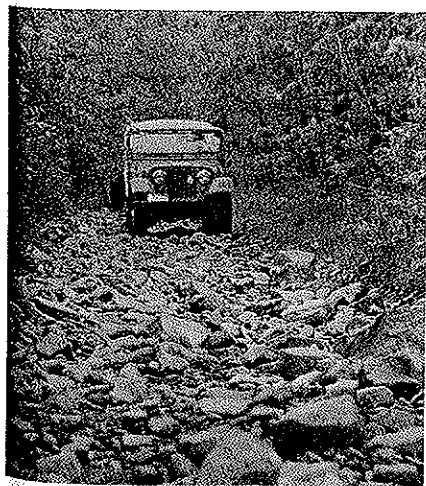
There wasn't exactly an avalanche of money. Dutch's newsletter went out two weeks before Christmas, and it was Memorial Day before the fund finally reached its \$2,000 goal. Some members grumbled that the college itself should have bought the mountain, while a few others simply pleaded poverty. Except for one \$100 contribution and a couple of \$50 checks, virtually everyone gave \$20 or less.

Mount Nittany was bought right after World War II, when the nation threw itself feverishly into the making of buildings, machines, highways, and babies. The same spirit prevailed among Lion's Paw alumni. The first question that seized them was what to do with their mountain. "Put up observation decks!" someone suggested at their plenary session in 1946. "Widen the trails!" others said. Still others chimed in, "Build a lodge!", "Benches!", "Fireplaces!", "How about picnic tables?"

Many of these pipe dreams were soon made official goals, but today, thirty years later, almost none has been completed. Just surveying the land and searching the deed (the tract was assembled from 37 different plots) have cost the group nearly \$1,000 — more than the average balance in its treasury most years.

Short of money but rich in sentiment, the new owners decided to proclaim Mount Nittany "a living monument to the dead of all wars" and to erect, at a suitable spot in the woods, a small monument bearing those words. Eventually, the monument idea was scuttled along with the picnic tables and the lodge. Since then, most members bent on "improvements" have decided it is wiser just to leave Nature alone. A park, after all, is never so holy as a forest.

It may come as a shock to some readers



Twenty-five separate trails lead to Mount Nittany's summit — many of them rough going, even for a jeep.

Mike Lynch photo

Mike Lynch photo

that fifty years ago a group of Penn Staters wanted to emblazon the face of Nittany with a colossal S, of stone or concrete, so that all who passed by might marvel at the glory of Old State. The idea caught fire in the fall of 1921 and waxed hotter and hotter until mid-February when Fred Lewis Pattee, the school's most respected man of letters, wrote this letter to *Collegian*:

The mountain is the most distinctive single object in our landscape, a dignified and impressive mass against our Shingletown and beyond . . . and it has a melodious name that more and more is becoming a unique Penn State possession. To make a huge letter on the front of it, like a hideous scar, is to turn it into a sensational object and take away much of its poetry. It becomes not the sentinel at the extreme flank of the range overlooking the magnificent valley, but is turned into a mere bill board.

Thoroughly debunked, the S-mongers decided their money might better be contributed to the building of a campus gymnasium — our present-day Rec Hall.

There are certain kinds of people who, when faced with something that "just sits there," cannot rest until they find a use for it. For them, it is easier to carve a Mount Rushmore than to let the bluffs crumble how they may, or to build a Perth Amboy, New Jersey, where mineral springs once flowed unattended except by God and gravity. No one has proposed building oil refineries on Mount Nittany, or carving busts of George Atherton and Evan Pugh thereon, but over the years Lion's Paw has had to stave off at least half a dozen other attacks from the dreadnought Progress. Some were official acts of government or business, others fly-by-night ventures, like the one recalled for us by Mike Lynch '45, now head of the group's mountain committee:

"One day in the summer of 1960," he said, showing us the mountain from his third-floor office window, "some of us got to looking over there and saw this tall, skinny thing sticking up. Bob Koser and I and Randall Mattern [a surveyor] hiked up there and discovered some fellow had put up an eighty-five-foot television tower and was running a cable-TV system for people in Lemont. You see the problem: if we forced him to take it down, his customers would just get mad at us. Fortunately, it turned out that this guy's equipment, impressive though it looked, was about to be outmoded. Some electronics people told us microwaves would be coming in and he wouldn't last long. So we just kept quiet about it. He later took it down himself."

The TV tower never did make the papers, though several prominent newspapermen were Lion's Paw alumni and must have known all about it. It's been Lion's Paw's habit to lie low in matters like these. Several years ago, they discovered that Rockview state prison authorities had unintentionally appropri-

ated six acres of their land and put a fence around it. Rather than making a fuss, the brothers of the Paw simply deeded the land to Rockview. As Mike explained it, "It would've cost a lot to prove their survey wrong and ours right, and anyway we knew the property was in good hands."

Rash, willful damaging of Nittany's beauty is about the only thing that has prompted Lion's Paw to put up its dukes in earnest. Some years back, they received a tip that motorcyclists were ripping open the hiking trails, leaving them vulnerable to water erosion. A few days later, Mike happened to be on the mountain taking photographs when he suddenly heard a racket of trail bikes roaring up through the woods. "I hid behind a tree, and when they came along there I jumped out and took a picture," he recalled. "There were six of them. They called me every kind of a son-of-a-bitch and everything. I said, what did they think they were doing up here on our property, and they said, 'We have permission from the State College Lions Club.' 'Lions Club, hell!' I said. We scutched them out and posted the place off-limits to motor vehicles."

Although they were plenty angry, the members refused to prosecute the cyclists. Lion's Paw has never maintained regular patrols against trespassers, either, because they don't consider anyone a trespasser unless he works some kind of destruction on the place. Anyone is free to hike or camp on the mountain, they say, so long as he doesn't chop down trees, dump trash, roll boulders down the slopes, set fires, or build shanties — all of which have been done.

To prevent more serious encroachments, usually at the hands of business or government, Lion's Paw has sometimes relied on the influence of alumni. It's surprising how many industrial and governmental groups have Lion's Paw alumni sitting somewhere within reach of top management. For example: In 1959 Lion's Paw got wind of a plan to string a 122,000-volt electric line across the north face of Nittany, taking a hundred-foot-wide right-of-way by eminent domain. The first protest came from Mike Lynch. "If you try to move in there," he warned West Penn, "you're going to have the wrath of the town, the students, and everybody else come down on you." The power company refused to budge, even after alumni and conservationists made a big stink about it in the papers. Then, when nearly everyone had abandoned the fight, the electric line was mysteriously shifted farther down the slope so that it ran across private properties in Lemont. Why the sudden change of heart? "This never got out," said Mike, "but it was a couple of our alumni who hold pretty high positions at West Penn. They talked to the engineers."

Naturally, while most people in the Centre Region were pleased with the outcome, a few Lemont homeowners, forced to live under the power lines, were outraged. "Lion's Paw property is private, the same as ours," their argument went, "and nobody lives up there, anyway. Why pick on us?" Others, including many Lion's Paw alumni, argue that it was better to blight a few back yards than to scar a piece of everyone's landscape. Mount Nittany, they say, is not private property; it is public property privately owned.

Fights like that have encouraged greater solidarity among Lion's Paw alumni. Like forged iron, the more hammering they take, the stronger they become. Two years ago when their property taxes suddenly leaped from \$146 a year to \$543, the adversity "caused an instant doubling of contributions — we got a thousand dollars almost overnight," said John Black '62, now secretary to Lion's Paw alumni.

John said the tax problem has caused a few members to revive the long-standing argument that the mountain be deeded to the University, thereby making it tax-exempt, but most members won't hear of it. As the late W.G. "Bill" Edwards '14 of Penn State's forestry department put it thirty years ago:

Alumni . . . above all others, cherish the traditions and customs which have developed through the years. They are vitally interested in keeping them alive and handing them down from year to year. The college administrative personnel usually is not composed of alumni. . . . Such a body could not possibly understand the motives which prompted Lion's Paw to purchase the tract.

John predicted that whatever happens in the future, Lion's Paw alumni "will do anything in their power to keep the mountain, even at the risk of bankruptcy."

Mount Nittany isn't much good for farming, as early settlers found out, nor are her upper reaches prized yet as home sites. Selective cutting of her trees isn't likely to make anyone rich, either. Our mountain bears no oil, hides no diamonds or gold. The prospect of buying her would give goose bumps to none but the most sentimental of real estate agents. Nittany's value is not to be measured in dollars, but in the dark whisperings of the heart. She is our Plymouth Rock, our Old Faithful, our Cathedral of Rheims, our Gibraltar. "The moment we see Mount Nittany," as one old grad has said, "we know we are home."

"Kings of the Hill" was originally published in the July and August 1976 editions of *Town & Gown* magazine under the title "Who Owns Mount Nittany?" Its author, T&G editor Terry Dunkle '74, found Mount Nittany a subject close to his heart: He grew up on the side of a mountain in the beautiful Pine Creek valley east of State College. "I still feel more comfortable with moss under my feet than concrete," he says.