

CHAPTER I

A Centennial Celebration

The evening was clear and cool, and the pale hues of the late September sunset hinted at the glorious display of mountain color soon to arrive. William Amherst Vanderbilt Cecil had worried about the impending weather, since rain had prevailed for days before the centennial celebration at Biltmore Estate. To his delight, the clouds moved on, and this evening on the cusp of fall in 1995 was truly magical. As the concluding fireworks burst overhead, Cecil heard a child say she now knew how the “stars are born.”

On this night, Cecil was surrounded by his extended Biltmore family much as his grandfather, George Vanderbilt, had been on Christmas Day in 1895, the occasion marked as the official opening of his new home in North Carolina. It was then—as it was a hundred years later—the largest private residence in the United States.

Cecil had planned this celebration especially for current and retired Biltmore employees and their families. Some of them measured their length of service in decades, even generations, including one old hand who had been a driver for George Vanderbilt’s wife,

Edith. The Vanderbilts had annually welcomed those who worked and lived on their estate to a Christmas party complete with presents all around. This gathering was considerably larger; the swarm of guests numbered more than eighteen hundred.

Following a dinner of Carolina barbecue on the South Terrace, all had settled into chairs on the front lawn for a concert by the Asheville Symphony Orchestra. Before the orchestra began its presentation of a selection of mostly twentieth-century tunes, Cecil stepped to the front of a long stage. He was beaming with excitement and pride. Wearing a burgundy blazer familiar to his Biltmore family that he accented with a tie in a lively plaid, he was a hard man to miss. As he began, it was clear his purpose was sincere.

“I only wish my grandparents could see all of you gathered here together,” he said, “and see how many of us it takes to keep their dream a reality. I think they would be amazed.”¹

He spoke of the mystique of Biltmore as well as the enduring connection between its people and the house and land. “It has been thirty-five years since I first came home to Asheville and decided to rebuild what my grandfather had built with great determination in the late 1800s,” Cecil said in a voice that still carried evidence of his continental schooling. “I intended to do my utmost to bring back the dignity of Biltmore House so she could once again be the grand lady on the hill.

“It has taken diligence, effort, ingenuity, and a strong stubborn streak to bring her back to her glory. Today, in our centennial year, Biltmore Estate is, I believe, as my grandfather had envisioned her to be.”²

The orchestra’s finale of Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, accented by the thunder of a cannon and the boom of the star-creating fireworks, rebounded off the front of the house, rattling the windows and stirring the soul. Finally, all made their way to their cars accompanied by a tattoo from Scottish pipers.



Eighteen hundred current and retired employees and their families turned out for a centennial celebration of barbecue dinner on the South Terrace, a concert by the Asheville Symphony Orchestra, and a fireworks display that lit the sky over the esplanade.



The following night, four hundred guests—mostly family and friends from the United States and abroad—dined and danced at a party that spread throughout the first floor of the château. A midnight buffet was served in the Banquet Hall, and Biltmore wines flowed freely as Cecil's guests filled the grand rooms of the first floor, from the Winter Garden to the Tapestry Gallery, where a dance band was installed. Cecil and his wife, Mimi, circulated until the early hours, when the pipers returned for another salute. "By dawn," Cecil wrote a British friend unable to attend, "the Cinderella Ball was over and the daily shuffle of visitors was back to normal, no trace of anything out of the ordinary left."³

Biltmore's centennial was more than a birthday party. It was a celebration of the success of Cecil's extraordinary career. During his thirty-five years on the estate in Asheville, North Carolina, he had accomplished what everyone said could not be done. He had taken a down-at-the-heels Gilded Age mansion that was a drain on the family business and turned it into the most successful privately preserved historic site in the United States, perhaps the world. With creativity and an innate feel for promotion, reinforced by grit and determination, Cecil had seen to it that Biltmore Estate would remain for future generations to enjoy.

The estate had become a travel destination with more visitors each year than Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, George Washington's Mount Vernon, and Elvis's Graceland. With more than eight hundred thousand guests in 1995, it would soon surpass even Colonial Williamsburg in paid attendance.

Such a record was never assured. On at least four occasions—before and after Cecil came home to tend to his patrimony—the distinctive château designed by Richard Morris Hunt could have ended on the auction block. Such an end would have drawn little more than a whimper from twentieth-century preservationists whose tastes ran more toward patriotic venues, such as the home of Paul

Revere, rather than the opulence of the Gilded Age. The fate for the exquisite landscaping of Frederick Law Olmsted could have been just as severe had the land been subdivided into building lots. In the 1950s, as Cecil pondered his own future, the directors of the family-owned Biltmore Company regarded the estate as little more than a real estate holding company. Partitioning the estate's twelve thousand acres for residential housing or commercial development was a very real option.

Instead, Cecil managed to preserve as well as restore the distinctive château and about eight thousand surrounding acres. Moreover, he had confounded the preservation world—as well as members of his own family—by accomplishing his mission without the support of government aid or grants from outside foundations. Cecil had realized a dream that even his grandfather had found elusive: he had made Biltmore Estate a self-supporting, working enterprise. This achievement was all the more remarkable since Vanderbilt was not bothered by the burden of modern-day taxation. In recent years, Cecil's Biltmore Company had paid more than \$10 million annually in local, state, and federal fees and taxes.

Under Cecil's hand, the estate had become one of western North Carolina's most important economic engines. A 2004 study showed that it produced about \$350 million a year in benefits to vendors, hotel owners, restaurant operators, shopkeepers, and others who served the tourist industry. At the time of the centennial, more than seven hundred people worked on the estate and in its various enterprises including the vineyards and winery—a \$20 million investment that Cecil had launched in the mid-1980s. He envisioned the winery carrying the company forward after the house tours eventually reached capacity.

Cecil had followed his own rules in creating the modern Biltmore. "There was no book," he often said. "We wrote it." He took his lessons from Madison Avenue and people-pleasers like Walt

Disney, not historical societies and Colonial Williamsburg. He promoted Biltmore as a tourist attraction and found his allies within the travel industry rather than academia. Every available dollar was invested in promotion. To make his money go further in the early days, he wrote his own advertising copy and took his own photographs, winning awards for his efforts along with lower ad rates.

Even after he began delegating work to assistants—who were mostly talented young people he promoted from within—he was in and about the house daily, shooting photographs, tending to tourists, entertaining visiting journalists, arranging rooms, and making decisions. He was a polymath who came up with a week's worth of ideas before he finished his Monday morning shave. He gave his departmental managers budgets and expected them to make the numbers work. Those who didn't, or couldn't, found work elsewhere. Those who remained formed a bond with Cecil and with Biltmore. "They get proprietary about it," said Cecil's wife, Mimi. "They want to make sure it is okay and it is done right. Around here, we do things right."

Cecil's flair for promotion earned Biltmore a reputation within the preservation community as being too commercial. His detractors complained that Biltmore's admission fees were too high and that visitors deserved more interpretation of the house, its contents, and the Gilded Age. They believed historic house museums should "teach" with docent-guided tours and signage explaining works of art or distinctive furnishings. Cecil did none of that. His guests wandered virtually at will among the rooms that were open for viewing. "Biltmore runs contrary to what we all thought we ought to do," said a person who came out of the upper echelons of Colonial Williamsburg management.⁴

Many in the preservation community simply didn't believe that an owner of a historic property who was committed to making a profit could be serious about preservation. Since most attempts at

private operation had turned into demonstrations of sleaze and profiteering, there was no place for a for-profit venture in the world of preservation. Some critics even discounted Cecil's winery, which he installed in the estate's abandoned dairy barn, saying the addition made the property even more of a theme park. In time, Biltmore's presentations of the house and the people who once lived there would exceed standards set by the American Association of Museums. The estate failed to qualify for membership because of its corporate structure, however.

There was nothing cheap or tawdry about Biltmore; the estate didn't even have a gift shop until the late 1980s. "The lady on the hill is a pretty good disciplinarian for you," Cecil often said. "She sets a very high standard."

Indeed, Cecil invested in Biltmore to his own detriment. One of his lawyers had discouraged him in 1980 from doing anything to the property since it only increased his annual tax bill. Yet in the fifteen years after he received that advice, the Biltmore Company invested \$35 million in restoration, improvements, and annual maintenance. It was profits, Cecil would say later, that allowed him to hire his first curatorial professional. "We don't preserve Biltmore to make a profit," he said. "We make a profit to preserve Biltmore."

He made no apology for Biltmore's admission price, which had been higher than every other comparable historic property. Cecil believed that Biltmore was unique, and visitors, rather than the government, should contribute to its survival. With the middle of the market crowded by so many mediocre venues, Cecil told his protégés that "there was always room at the top." And what he was asking of tourists was honest, especially when he was paying taxes on a National Historic Landmark—a designation granted the estate in 1963—and most of his government-owned or nonprofit competitors were not. "At Biltmore," Cecil said, "we believe that the visitor should be the one to help pay for the preservation of the property."

Such thinking usually left Cecil on the outside. Detractors didn't believe his numbers or they discounted his efforts. When Biltmore was losing money in the early days, the company's red ink was evidence of what others considered Cecil's bootless exercise. After Biltmore began to produce a profit, he got no credit for his creativity and was told, "Well, that's Biltmore," as if success had been a foregone conclusion.

From the day the château was first opened to the public in 1930, Biltmore was such an overwhelming experience that guests left believing they got their money's worth. Biltmore visitors experienced the Gilded Age and its lifestyle on a scale that defied common understanding. Plus, they were treated with such courtesy and hospitality that they left almost believing that George Vanderbilt himself had issued the invitation. Woe to the parking lot attendant found chewing gum or to the guard with his hands stuffed in his pockets. Indeed, visitors came to Biltmore and they kept coming back. By the 1990s, when the company began using sophisticated marketing measurements, the results of customer satisfaction reports by Biltmore visitors were comparable to those enjoyed by five-star resorts.

For years, Cecil searched for relief from an ultimate accounting of inheritance taxes that could require the dismantling of it all when his heirs settled with the government. Unfortunately for him and his heirs, U.S. tax laws weren't written to accommodate the private owner who cared for a historic property rather than leaving it to the government or sheltering it in some tax-exempt status such as a foundation. Lawmakers in Raleigh and Washington discouraged Cecil's efforts to install something similar to the British system that protected owners as long as they met certain standards and opened their homes to the public. Accommodating legislation to benefit a Vanderbilt was not the stuff of reelection.

Cecil argued that private preservation not only worked but was superior. He paid taxes and served the public good. Plus, he did it better. Bureaucrats and hired administrators brought unneeded burdens to the task and shared none of the incentive or passion for success held by a private owner. Cecil even founded the Historic House Association of America in an attempt to carry the fight for tax relief to Congress and export his message of private enterprise.

Over the years, Cecil had enjoyed advantages not available to the owners of many other historic properties. He started with a structure that was fundamentally sound although a bit run-down. The foundation and infrastructure were as solid as when Vanderbilt had been in residence. Moreover, his grandfather's collection of art and furnishings was all in place. Thus, there was no need to recover family holdings that had been given away or sold over the years—a terrible expense and aggravation for others. Cecil had fifty thousand pieces in the Biltmore collection from which to choose as he opened new rooms to the public. Most beneficial of all was Biltmore's location. When Vanderbilt created the estate in the late nineteenth century, Asheville was a remote resort town deep in Appalachia. The modern-day Biltmore sat at the intersection of interstate highways that had opened the western North Carolina mountains to millions of tourists from all compass points just when family travel was becoming most affordable.

Cecil capitalized on it all, as well as inventions of his own, to return Biltmore to its glorious past. If George Vanderbilt himself had appeared in the Banquet Hall that Saturday night in September 1995, he would have felt right at home. Before the party for hundreds, he could have joined the Cecils and sixty-four special guests at a table laid to suit a wealthy scion. The menu for the sumptuous meal reflected the bounty of the estate: tenderloin of Biltmore beef, Biltmore field greens, Carolina apple turnovers, and vintages from the winery, including champagne and claret.



William A. V. Cecil and his wife, Mimi (seated center of photo), hosted a banquet for sixty-four friends, family, and close business associates in the Banquet Hall as part of the festivities of the closing night of the centennial celebration of Biltmore Estate.

Beyond, the other rooms were aglow. The guide ropes were down, the utility mats were stored away, and fresh carpets covered the floors. A chair was for sitting, not for display. The house was to enjoy. Vanderbilt's favorite furnishings, his collection of books, Karl Bitter's sculpture, and the sixteenth-century tapestries remained where George Vanderbilt and his architect had placed them a century before. For this night at least, Biltmore was not a historic house museum. It was a home.

"We were going to have a banquet. We were going to have a dance. We were going to open the house as it was in 1895, the way it would have been," Cecil told his house manager as preparations began for the celebration.

The morning after the banquet, the magic of Biltmore was as vivid as ever, although early visitors saw no evidence of the Cinderella night that had just ended. That had all disappeared with the rising of the sun. The château, the gardens, and the winery were once again open for business.

