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Mountain
Heritage Center

“Explore. Connect. Preserve.”



The Mountain Heritage Center's Newsletter

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A Letter From Our Director



Pam Meister, Director | Mountain Heritage Center

Late Fall has special resonance for me.

Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday, and November 1 also marks my anniversary with the Mountain Heritage Center, where I officially started work in 2010. I originally came to WCU because I wanted a job with a major focus on training the next generation of museum professionals. That wish was certainly fulfilled, but my life and work has been enriched in many other ways as well.

I'm thankful for Western Carolina University's desire to study, preserve, and celebrate our region's distinctive cultural heritage and to support the Mountain Heritage Center's work for nearly 50 years. I'm thankful for the extraordinary indigenous identity and culture of this special place, the ancestral homelands of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and for the generosity of community members in sharing their knowledge, skills, stories, and objects that are part of the MHC's nationally known museum collections.

I'm thankful for the many WCU faculty, staff, and students who collaborate with the MHC on multiple projects, and for the community partners who extend our work throughout the region. I'm particularly thankful for my talented and dedicated MHC colleagues and student workers, a true "dream team" that produced an extraordinary body of work over the past eighteen months. And most of all, I'm thankful for you—the people who visit our exhibits, attend our programs, and utilize our services.

I invite you to visit the Mountain Heritage Center to experience our current exhibit, “River Cane Renaissance,” which will be on view through December 10, before embarking on a two and a half year regional tour. We’ll be featuring two new exhibits in Spring 2022, “Ann Miller Woodford: The Artist as Storyteller” in January and February, followed by an exhibit of quilts from the MHC’s collections, on view March through August. If you can’t join us in person, you can experience many of our exhibits and programs virtually through the MHC’s YouTube channel.

Best wishes for a happy and healthy holiday season!

-Pam

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Upcoming Exhibits

“Ann Miller Woodford”

On display starting 1/11/2022.

A native of Cherokee county, acclaimed artist Ann Miller Woodford brings her unique experiences and passions to life through a multitude of mediums, from art to the printed word. This exhibit will proudly showcase some of Ann Woodford’s paintings and art pieces starting in January 2022.

There is also a virtual exhibit available now. Ann Miller Woodford: Artist as Storyteller is an episodic exhibit showcasing Woodford’s artwork with additional insights and stories. Produced by the Mountain Heritage Center’s Virtual Project Team, consisting of Team Coordinator Sara Stanley and MHC Interns Kyra Waitt and John Farney, this virtual exhibit is a testament to preserving family, community history, and traditions.

For more information about Ann Miller Woodford and her creations, please visit Annstree.com.



Photo provided from Annstree.com

Upcoming Exhibits

“Quilts: The Stories They Tell”

On display starting 3/2022.

Beginning in March 2022, the Mountain Heritage Center will host a quilt exhibit featuring treasured selections from our nationally known quilt collection. Showcasing the hard work and dedication of a community of women spanning multiple generations, this upcoming exhibit proudly tells stories of family, friendship, and community.

Until then, please feel free to view our collection of quilts on our quilt index.



Current Exhibits

“Discovering Appalachia”

Currently On Display.

Contrary to myths about isolated mountain settlers, western NC has been a cultural crossroads for thousands of years. Learn about the centuries of explorers and settlers who have come to this area, bringing varied skills, traditions, and beliefs to create a unique and vibrant cultural blend that is still living and changing today. Explore images and objects from the MHC’s rich collections that illustrate daily life in the mountains of western NC from the late 1800s to the present.

Currently on display on the second floor of Hunter Library.



“River Cane Renaissance”

Closed at the MHC on 12/10/2021

River Cane Renaissance just closed at the Mountain Heritage Center on December 10th, but now it is going on tour!

Highlighting the historic use of river cane in southern Appalachia, the “River Cane Renaissance” exhibit displays a wide assortment of river cane artifacts and reproductions. The exhibit also shares information about the biology of this native bamboo species and its historic decline and the current efforts to cultivate an improved habitat for the species to flourish again. As a collective representation of masterful work, resourcefulness, and community focused environmentalism, “River Cane Renaissance” brings to the forefront the multiple uses of river cane.

See if you can catch at it at these locations in 2022!

January – March:

Western North Carolina Historical Association/ Smith-McDowell House,
Asheville, NC

April – June:

Swannanoa Valley Museum, Black Mountain, NC

July – September:

Mountain Gateway Museum, Old Fort NC

October – December:

Museum of the Southeast American Indian, Pembroke, NC

Additional information about the biology, revitalization, and how river cane is used in basket weaving can be seen in companion videos created by Communications major Sara Stanley during the Spring 2021 semester.

Thank you for your support of this exhibit!

New Artifacts in MHC Collections

Photos Taken by MHC Intern Sara Stanley

These handcrafted dolls by Cherokee artist Laura Walkingstick illustrate attention to detail and skilled craftsmanship while honoring long-standing traditions. From the handmade metal jewelry to the bead work, from the clothing details to the fine weaving of the river cane, Laura's dolls are a treasured addition to MHC's collection. They were acquired with a grant from the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Partnership



These handcrafted river cane flutes, made by Hawk Hurst, are representative of Choctaw and other Southeastern styles. Hawk, a craftsman of Native American-style flutes and drums with over 30 years of experience, shows a beautiful attention to detail with his dedication to honor and tradition.



Profile: Suzanne McDowell

Two-Time MHC Curator and Quilt Expert

Suzanne McDowell is the former two-time curator of the Mountain Heritage Center, and is also a renowned quilt expert. She is now happily retired and working on her own business, StoryThreads, while enjoying her retirement sharing her knowledge and love of quilts and textiles.

It's nice to talk with you today! Do you mind sharing what your name is and your current occupation for everyone?

My name is Suzanne McDowell and my current occupation is retired. As a state employee, I do still do some quilt and coverlet IDs. Identification and research.

Is that a part of your work with your business, StoryThreads?

It is, yes! I chose that name because I like to use the vehicle of textile objects to find and tell the stories – usually about the women who created them. Sometimes it's about the men, but so far most of my stories have been about the women. And so often their stories disappear because they are known as “Mrs. John Smith” or something, you know, so. It's fun to dig into those stories.

What was your first experience with work as someone who is a curator?

I think my first experience was when I went to go work at the Mountain Heritage Center in 1981 or so. Because I had not really ever visited many museums before that, you know, and the first curator experience I had was when I went to work there. To see what they were doing. I'd been to museums just as a visitor but I'd never really focused on what the roles were.

How did you start working with the Mountain Heritage Center?

Well, this is kinda funny, but I knew – I was neighbors with one of the employees who worked there. And he let me know – they had some grant money, soft money, for a while, and he let me know there was a position that was open. He asked if I wanted to interview for that, and that was just – it was just, basically, office work, but connected with a grant they had. So that's how I first went to work there. And then I just, kinda, worked my way in, poking my head in and going, "Oh, you need some help with that?" – to the curator, and they did. It was a small staff and they were doing a lot of things, and I kept weaseling my way into different avenues to see what it was about because I was very interested in all they were doing.

What are some tasks that you did while working with the Mountain Heritage Center?

I did, I believe, just about every job there was to do there at the museum! [laughs] Because I started from the ground up and then, then I was the head of education curator position that had opened. I applied for that, I took that, and then I left for a few number of years when my children were rather small. And, um, and I missed it! And so, I realized I needed – if I wanted to ever work in a museum again, I probably needed a master's degree. Because all I had at that time was a Bachelors. So I went back to Western and got a master's degree in American History, and as luck would have it, as soon as I finished that, the curator left. I applied for that position and got that role. That was the main role I had for a number of years. I served as an interim director when the director left, and there was a period of time where they didn't have anybody because of the funding that came through to the museum was kind of split through to different departments. So I did that for a while. I pretty much did everything there except clean the bathrooms!

Sounds like it! Did you have a favorite role or job to do? A favorite task?

I think my favorite thing was interviewing people who were craft practitioners or donating objects to the museum. I just really enjoyed that interacting, learning about their lives and learning about how they

went about collecting the things they wanted to collect. You know, how they learn their craft. I think that was my favorite. My next favorite would have to be working in collections. All the different things there were fascinating to me. I know collections now is off-site, I believe. But back then, I had the luxury of it being in the backroom. For me to find something or not find it! But, uh, it's more complex now, I think.

I believe so, yeah! Loran is always at collections, it seems; he and some other interns work really hard at it, and it sure keeps him busy.

I'm sure! It's quite a responsibility to take care of that many objects and to do it responsibly.

Absolutely. So the next question, it's one that Peter was curious about and wanted me to ask. So, as someone who has worked at the center and has worked alongside it, someone who knows intimately how it works, how do you see the role of the Mountain Heritage Center within the community?

Oh, wow. Well, I think I see two different tracks. One of the main ones is they are on campus and are working with students, who might have an interest in local history or museum professions or folklore or festivals, you know, learning different aspects. That's one main thing, but I do think the role is also based more widely within the community at large. And I'm not just talking about Jackson County community but the Appalachian community. And so, kind of preserving the information of the different lifestyles and the different time periods and what they did then. I think that it is easy to lose track of, especially when we've got to so much digital information, instead of written information or recorded information, even though you could say digital information is recorded information nowadays. [laughs] And that's good, it's an avenue that the Center could develop that, their virtual exhibits. Their oral histories and everything tied in, they could have that available online.

I know throughout the pandemic, with what they've told me, throughout the recent semesters they've had virtual exhibits or educational programs, so I think they are trying to have a healthy balance of the two? Which I think would be really beneficial moving forward.

I agree, I think that would be good, too.

With what you mentioned before, with women making quilts, their stories could have been lost as easily just as with Appalachian history. But it's good that there are locations like the Center that are existing as a bridge with this information.

Absolutely, and as you know with the pandemic, so many museums have struggled to stay open and relevant, so having those options can really help people stay interested while keeping everything alive, you know?

I agree. So, this might be an overall thought, but what would you say was your most memorable experience with the Mountain Heritage Center?

Oh, let's see. While as you know, Heritage Days! Those were big opportunities to meet with practitioners who were demonstrating their skill, and those were some intense days! Lot of fun, lot of fun, but a lot of energy expended! But it did seem like it was a real community thing. A lot of times, the people who lived in the various Appalachian communities, they didn't come to campus very often. And the students didn't interact with them either. So it was an important moment for that to happen, an important building block for the museum.

I would say so! This most recent one was the first one I've been to. I wasn't sure if it was in part due to the pandemic but seeing the turn-out and the overall sense of community was really nice to see.

Yeah! Yeah, they couldn't have one in 2020. The years I worked there; it was kind of the peak of that kind of festival's popularity. Cars would be lined up because all the parking was taken inside, and people kept flooding in. I always wondered, "where did all these people come from?"

I can't quite remember what they said the turn-out was this year. 12,000 people, I think?

I think it was 12,000, yeah. Which would've been rather small for the time I was working there, but I was glad they had that kind of crowd this time. And aren't they coming up on their 50th or something now?

I believe so! I think this one was the 46th or 47th.

That's pretty incredible – and the music, the music that is shared that day. I hope it continues for a long time.

I hope so, too. Those that are working on it at the Center, they're so dedicated with working on it and getting everything set up, and all those people who still volunteer and show up just to be there. I'm not sure, I can't really see it going away anytime soon.

That's good! I hope not, because you know, there are other festivals in other communities, and there's the state festival in Raleigh that has great programming, but most people aren't going to drive five hours away. Especially not when they have one closer, and one where they can get more of the texture and feel of the area here, closer to home.

It's a very synchronous feeling?

Absolutely. Everything just fits well.

So, you've worked with the Mountain Heritage Center for so long, at two different times in your life – which is incredible dedication! Out of those many years, what would you say you are most proud of?

Probably that I lasted over twenty-seven years! I think it's unusual for people to stay in a profession for that long in one spot, and I think what that gave me – what I put into it and what I got out of it – was a great deal of appreciation for the area I grew up in and what it represents. That would have to be my proudest result, yeah.

That's really wonderful to hear. Thank you for sharing that. So this was a question inspired by Pam, since she's been working hard on an upcoming quilt exhibit. She let me know that you are passionate about quilts and textiles! What would you say inspired that?

I've wondered myself! I would say that it does relate back to my female grandmothers, and grandparents. My grandparents, the men, they were more builders, that was their kind of thing. The women were sewers, the care-takers. Although I have no family quilts! Not sure why, my cousins and I have talked about that since my grandmother made a lot of clothing, so we've wondered where all those scraps went, and we just came to the conclusion that she used every bit that she could for clothing. If she made quilts, they were given away! But I've always been fascinated with weaving, and when I moved back here in the late 70's, there was a shop in Dillsboro called "Riverwood Handweaving." And I went in there one day and she had a huge yarn loom, and it was huge and I looked at it and looked at her and asked, "Do you teach this?" She said, "Yes", so I just learned how to weave.

Now I've got looms in the house, and I'm fascinated about taking single strands of yarn and making something big out of it. And when I was introduced to coverlets due to my work at the museum, since I didn't know anything about them or seen a handwoven coverlet beforehand, so I just wanted to stay with this and learn what I can about it. That was about what kicked me off into quilts and coverlets. People don't have as many handwoven things in their family collections as they do quilts, so I kept asking people, "Do you have any coverlets?" And they'd say, "No, but I do have a stack of quilts!" And then I'd get lost looking into them and it got me lost into that avenue altogether, so that's still what I study and do today. Now I volunteer my services to small museums and that way, I get to look at their collections and hopefully they get from me more identification about what they've got.

I love that, because it reminds me a bit of my maternal grandmother. She could weave or croquet or stitch anything she put her mind to, at least when her hands were better, and so it's been interesting to see how that kind of dedication transitions throughout the years. I was looking into the quilt archive that the Mountain Heritage Center has, and Pam was showing me one quilt that was made with patches the size of a postage stamp. Apparently it's a very, very popular and sought-after quilt!

Oh, absolutely. And because I was biased towards textiles, I kept meeting people who had quilts and coverlets, and when they were ready to share them with the world, I would work with the museum

and help them do that. For them, not for myself! [laughs] I think they have a really great collection. And because of that, I kept meeting people who were like-minded and once, a couple of particular people came and would say, “Here’s what you would want to make your collection more coherent,” and that’s what has helped kicked me off into some personal avenues as a consultant.

And speaking of that, would you mind sharing a bit about StoryThreads?

[laughs] I didn’t plan this but I guess we’re weaving right into it, aren’t we?

It’ll be fine!

So StoryThreads happened, it was when I left the museum. I was only sixty when I retired, and I thought, “I liked yardwork and I don’t like housework, so what else can I do?” I felt like I had required a bit of knowledge about those things, quilts and textiles, so I wanted to share it. I’ve never created a website – I didn’t want to work that hard! I wanted to be picky and choosy about what I wanted to do. Usually it’s through knowing someone or they know their museum or the people there, and they’ll ask me to come take a look and that’s how it works. A friend in Tennessee, they’ve got an amazing collection of quilts and we made a booklet together, so it’s a type of work like that. It has led to a couple of projects that I’ve taken on, and I try to do a presentation at least once a year to stay engaged and share what I know. What’s the use of having knowledge if you don’t share a little bit of what you know?

Absolutely. What is like with those presentations, teaching individuals about textiles and quilts and quilting?

Oh, I think my favorite thing talking about quilts and coverlets is seeing people who might not have thought about those things as valuable or useful, people who might have it in their family for some reason, and they just go, “Wow, I didn’t know you could tell all that from a quilt!” or “Wow, I didn’t know you could find that out about an individual just by taking an object, a material object, by studying it to death!” That’s my favorite thing.

How would someone go about learning how to read textiles?

If you're lucky enough, you'll find a group like I did who can help you! American Quilt Study Group is one group online. Through that group, you meet so many different individuals all throughout the world. They all have their own area of expertise, some are quilt-makers and some are researchers, and it just blows up from there. My first experience, and one of the people I credit with teaching me how to read a quilt, was Laurel Horton. She was doing an exhibit on quilts at the Mountain Heritage Center when I was hired for that secretarial kind of job, and she needed some help hanging them. She was the first one to introduce me to the idea that you could take a material object like that and extract information from it just by looking at it.

It's amazing that there are so many storied histories behind objects that you wouldn't think have it. Like an everyday object.

Yeah, why would someone want to know about my aunt who made this? Well, she represents more than just herself as an individual, but also what she could do and make.

It's very community focused, I think.

Absolutely.

What would you give as advice for someone wanting to be a curator, or work in a museum-related field of work?

Volunteer. [laughs] That's the best way, I think, to get your foot in the door and find out what you like, and even what you don't like. You get to be introduced to it all and decide for yourself, and there's so many places that need volunteers and could really use the help. The museum field is small and underpaid, quite often, so there are opportunities there that might not be very common, and it introduces you to many different roles available. There's so much information there, a wealth of it, and if you like research, you can go into being an archivist. And from there, there's so many options.

Western has a pretty extensive archive, I'm sure. There'd be options there.

Absolutely! They have a wonderful archive. The former head of archives there, he and I – anytime I started on a research project or anything like that, I'd go talk to George and he'd bring out one thing and I'd look at that, and then he'd just have a stack of things for me to look at. Don't ignore your archivists and librarians! They need to work together, and all those connections are so very useful.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with me today?

I hope the center keeps doing virtual things, and I know they've been adding so many stories and photos to their database. They need to keep pulling in more people to keep telling and sharing those stories, something that can inspire people two years down the line as information grows. Kind of a hook. I'm so glad they've had so many students to help and get involved. It was hard to engaged students when we were in the Administration building, and students didn't really go in there except for financial aid or something like that. Where the center is now, right on campus, it's great. I kind of leave them along since I figure I was around them enough, but Peter and Pam do let me know about some things that happen so I do show my face sometimes.

They all got excited when I told them I'd be interviewing you, so no worries there!

They may regret it! [laughs]

No, of course not! But I do appreciate your time and thank you for sharing everything today!

And I look forward to seeing the newsletter and seeing how the Center is doing.

“Where are they now?”

A look into previous MHC interns!

**Emily Baker; MA History, 2013-15
Programs & Operations Manager, Iredell Museums**

“I grew up in Asheville, NC, and went to UNC Asheville where I received a B.A. in Art History followed by a MA in American History from Western Carolina University. While there I had an assistantship at the Mountain Heritage Center, where I learned about exhibition development, museum program planning, and collections care.

A year after graduating, I became the Program Coordinator for Humanities, Medicine, and Science at Old Salem Museums and Gardens, a two year NEH grant funded position. I worked alongside several incredible historians to create The Moravian Way of Health and Healing, a permanent exhibit that highlights Moravian healthcare in North Carolina from the 1750s-1830s. Currently I am Programs and Operations Manager at Iredell Museums in downtown Statesville, NC, where we have rotating history, art, and science exhibits and educational programs for learners of all ages. The museum also has a living history site where historical interpreters teach visitors about the 18th century North Carolina back-country.

I love working in the museum field, but I miss the time I spent at Western Carolina University and the Mountain Heritage Center!”

**Paula Keeter; BS, Parks & Rec Management, 2019
Lead Visitor Use Assistant, National Park Service**

“I graduated from WCU in August 2019 during my capstone internship at Shenandoah National Park, where I am now a permanent ranger. My time spent at WCU was brief as a transfer student, but memorable. I was able to work part time as a student worker for the MHC where I was able to learn how to lead tours, utilize Adobe Suite, and make many connections that have helped me in my career. Peter Koch was an especially wonderful mentor that helped me acquire internships and experiences that have helped me in my role today.”

Thank you MHC!”

**Stephanie Velazquez May; BA Anthropology, History Minor, 2016
Director, Granville County Museum**

“I graduated from WCU in 2016 with a B.S. Degree in Anthropology and double minored in History and Art. Under the History department, I decided to complete the Public History Certification program, where I got involved with the MHC. During my internship there, I discovered that working at a museum was the path I wanted to follow after graduating; otherwise, I honestly had no idea what I would do. It’s funny how life has a way to come full circle!”

Today I am the Executive Director of the Granville County Historical Society Museum in Oxford, NC. I never imagined that a Latina like me would lead her hometown’s museum at the young age of 24.

Thinking back, I truly cherish my time at WCU because it helped me find my career path, and it’s where I met my future husband in a Latin American History class.”

Dustin Norris; MA History, 2015
Curator, Anderson County Museum
rdnorris@andersoncountysc.org

Dustin Norris achieved his undergraduate and graduate degrees in History through WCU, focusing primarily on a Public History track. Since graduating in 2014, he has been putting his education and experiences to use by serving as the curator of Anderson County Museum in Anderson, SC.

The ACM is the second largest county museum in the state with over 25,000 artifacts in its collection. Currently, they are working toward opening a state-of-the-art military exhibit entitled Andersonians in War.

Dustin is working with the exhibit team to ensure that this project will represent a balanced cross-section of Anderson County veterans with emphases on interactivity, immersion, and inclusion.

Scott Chamness; BA, Public History, 2012
Curator, Texas Parks & Wildlife

“I started with the MHC as a work-study student in the Fall of 2008, when I was a freshman majoring in History. It was my very first job and taught me a lot! Not just about different jobs in the museum field, but also about professionalism and working well with your colleagues.

After graduating in 2012, I had internships at The Missouri State Museum and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater before going to graduate school at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro for a MA in History and Museum Studies. After that I wrangled a few seasonal positions with the National Park Service before finally being offered a full time and permanent position as a Curator with Texas Parks and Wildlife, where I help manage the historical collections for an entire 90-site state park system.

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Overall I believe I've had jobs or internships with 12 or 13 different cultural/museum/archive institutions. But my first job will always have been at the Mountain Heritage Center. Working there helped me become the museum professional I am today, and I'm nothing but grateful."

On-Site and Outreach Programs

As a regional resource for education, the Mountain Heritage Center's mission of connecting people with local history and culture and building bridges between Western Carolina University and the region, is the focus of our on-site and outreach programs. The Mountain Heritage Center provides educational videos, Zoom programs for offsite groups, in-house group visits, and physical outreach programs for offsite groups. For all audiences, these programs explore how history can relate to current events alongside the many facets of western North Carolina's past, present, and future.

These programs are developed in accordance with North Carolina's Essential Standards for Social Studies, Arts Education, and English Language Arts, and are offered free of charge. A complete list of programs is available according to grade level.

For those interested, please view our website for more information.

Hours of Operations

The Mountain Heritage Center's galleries are – once again – open to the public! Amidst the ongoing pandemic, we would like everyone to be safe while enjoying the displays, so the Mountain Heritage Center is following Western Carolina University's Catamounts Care standards. Masks or approved facial coverings are required. We thank you for your cooperation and we look forward to seeing you.

The Mountain Heritage Center galleries are located at Hunter Library 161 (next to Java City) and on the second floor of Hunter Library. Regular opening hours are listed below. To confirm hours or to arrange a special tour, please contact us at (828) 227-7129, by email, or visit our Facebook page. The Mountain Heritage Center follows the university holiday calendar.

Galleries: Monday – Friday, 10:00 am – 4:00 pm

Offices: Monday – Friday, 8:00 am – 5:00 pm

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