

Carolyn L. Higgins – Contributing Writer for Macon County News
October 4, 2018

Western Carolina University bestowed its esteemed Mountain Heritage Award to a business for the first time since the award's commencement 42 years ago. This much-anticipated event was established in 1976 as part of WCU's Mountain Heritage Day to "recognize outstanding contributions to the preservation of our mountain culture, history and tradition. In 1979, the statement was revised to read "in recognition of outstanding contributions to the preservation or interpretation of the history and culture of Southern Appalachia; or in recognition of outstanding contributions to research in, or interpretation of, Southern Appalachian issues."

Past recipients have been individuals, performing groups, historical societies, educational institutions and museums. In 2007, the institution expanded the award to include organizations as well as individuals, noting the complexity of making direct comparisons between the two categories.

Franklin-based Penland Contracting, Inc. made history, becoming the first business to receive the Mountain Heritage Award for Organizations. Established in 1965 by President R. Lewis Penland (Lewis Sr.), the company was selected based on their long-standing history of ecologically sound grading techniques and recent accolades in the field of stream restoration.

Awards Criteria

Mountain Heritage Day Director Pam Meister noted the importance of the selection, fueled by their personal concern for the region's environment.

"The Awards Committee felt that this nomination was extremely timely because Penland Contracting is a wonderful example of a family-owned firm with deep roots in Macon County that serves as a model for 'doing well by doing good.' The Southeastern Stream Conference recently listed what they considered to be three near-perfect examples of stream restoration – and two of the three were done by Penland Contracting. I'm told that they are particularly pleased about a project on Wayah Creek in Macon County, where six generations of the Penland family have farmed, fished, and hunted."

Vice Presidents Lewis Penland (Lewis Jr.) and Larry Penland accepted the commemorative plaque presented by WCU Provost Dr. Carol Burton.

"We recognize this local, family-owned and operated company for their work and their stewardship of natural resources in our region for over half a century," said Burton. "Since 2005, Penland Contracting has become the foremost stream restoration company in the Southeast. For those of us who enjoy nature and especially those of us who enjoy fishing, this is very important."

WCU also acknowledged Penland's stewardship of regional resources, by applying careful soil erosion and contamination prevention techniques and striving to maintain healthy aquatic ecosystems.

Award-winning regional author and historian Bob Plott submitted the entry for the company. The Penland family expressed gratitude for the recognition and the regional and campus committee's affirmation by vote.

"We were honored and very surprised to receive the recognition," said Lewis Jr. "We are glad our father's traditional mountain values are able to carry to the next generation. We take to heart the work we do. In our region we are the headwaters for a lot of people downstream from us, and anything we do here has a great impact on our neighbors downstream. The more we can keep the water clean, the better it can be for the neighbors, the municipalities, and the drinking water. When we improve our waters, it is beneficial to all."

An excerpt from Plott's submission letter shows camaraderie shared by two venerable families:

"During the school week, Lewis Penland (Jr.) worked hard on his studies in Asheville. But weekends, school holidays, and summer vacations were devoted to working on the family farm in Macon County and various projects for Penland Contracting, or for E.J. Whitmire.

"The elder Penland had worked full and part-time for the iconic Whitmire on his Ridgefield Farm in nearby Brasstown, N.C., for almost two decades. Once his sons were old enough, Lewis and Larry joined their father working part-time for Whitmire.

"The Whitmire and Penland clans had much in common. Both had family roots deep in the southern mountains dating back to the 18th century, both were fiercely protective of their heritage and their land. And both were passionate advocates of education and ecology."

With no plans for slowing down [not that project demand would allow them], Lewis Jr. says there are more stream projects, storm water projects and golf course projects under way.

Then and Now

No respecter of status and size, Penland literally helped lay a foundation for the region by working on the Blue Ridge Parkway and I-26 corridor, but also donating time to work with ecologically-minded private citizens, municipalities, civic organizations, businesses and schools. They have contributed to numerous United States Army Corps of Engineers projects throughout the southern United States and a large-scale power line project in Panthertown Valley for Duke Energy.

Notable projects also include work with Mainspring Conservation Trust, the United States Forest Service, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians, the WNC Stream Initiative, and STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) projects with Macon County Schools – among

others. Penland Contracting has also constructed more than 40 golf courses throughout the southeast, including The Cliff's Club at Walnut Cove – a Jack Nicklaus signature course.

The website lists current or recent projects that include: constructing 6,000 linear feet of new offline channel utilizing natural channel design as well as creating an 11-acre wetland for a large stream mitigation project in Fletcher, NC on Weston Creek; stream repair work on the Oklawaha Greenway in Hendersonville, N.C.; relocation of a channel on a Macon County river; and completion of 2,100 linear feet of stream restoration on Peachtree Creek in Cherokee County.

Family Legacy

While adapting to a dynamic environment and marketplace, Penland epitomizes perpetuating family legacy. This admirable trait of mountain folks has sustained this family tradition from before the Revolutionary War well into the 21st century. Today, all three Penland men continue to play integral roles in the organization, with Lewis Sr. still actively involved.

The awards committee considered the collegiate legacy of the Penland family as well. Lewis Jr. and Larry are WCU alumni and have children who have graduated from WCU. As good community stewards, they also give back by employing WCU interns on local projects. The university feels it is important that the family has adopted the values of their father, has encouraged their children to attend, and has used their education from WCU to support the community.

“The Penland family’s deep connections with WCU and the wider regional community exemplify the vision and values that have guided our university since its beginnings in a one-room schoolhouse in 1889 – to educate our students so that their success becomes the foundation for the greater good of our region and state, and equips them to dynamically engage in a vibrant, complex, and culturally diverse world,” said Meister.

Father knows best

Lewis Sr. is well known throughout Macon County for his philanthropy in his support of recreational facilities, and agriculture-related youth activities such as Future Farmers of America. He imparted much to his sons, but also pushed them under the wings of mentors.

Part of Lewis Jr.’s passion was derived by necessity. Whitmire, one of his early mentors, saw to it that Lewis Jr. learned from the “school of hard knocks.” Plott shed some light with this nomination letter excerpt:

“Upon graduation from WCU, Lewis Jr. was offered a job with a textile giant in Georgia. Lewis Jr. accepted the job offer and drove sadly back to the hills resigned to his career fate in cotton mill hell. But when he arrived home he found that his mentor E.J. Whitmire had given him an unexpected graduation gift. Whitmire left his protégé a one-way airplane ticket to Ketchikan,

Alaska with a handwritten message on the back of the envelope. The personal inscription succinctly read: "Get home the best damn way you can—no round trip."

The experience proved life changing for Lewis Jr. who spent nine months working at a logging camp. When winter set in, Penland headed back home to North Carolina, "rejuvenated from the Alaskan experience and . . . more determined than ever to spend his life working outdoors. Penland pursued that objective like a man possessed and immediately resumed working for his father's contracting company, as well as for E.J. Whitmire."

Penland Contracting remains energetic about clean water, conservation of farms and of wildlife habitat. They are committed to preventing soil erosion and contamination of watersheds and strive to establish and maintain healthy aquatic ecosystems to ensure that all resources are enjoyed for future generations.

Their award and an exhibit will be displayed for a year on the first floor of the Robinson Administration Building on the WCU Cullowhee campus, along with that of individual winner, historian, author and community activist, Ann Miller Woodford.