Mountain Heritage Award goes To Mary Cornwell
John Parris: Roaming The Mountains

CULLOWHEE- Mary Cornwell of Waynesville a legend in her own time who created the North Carolina State Fair's Village of Yesteryear and founded the Museum of North Carolina handicrafts, received the 1989 Mountain Heritage Award from Western Carolina University here Saturday.

The Award, presented during the university's 15th annual Mountain Heritage Day, is given to individuals dedicated to preserving the history and culture of western Carolina. "Few people have influenced the preservation and exhibition of mountain crafts as profoundly as Mary Cornwell," WCU Chancellor Myron L. Coulter said in presenting the award, "and few have carried on such an extensive activity while seeking neither acclaim nor reward.

"Because of her works, thousands upon thousands of visitors from throughout the world have come to know the handicrafts of Western North Carolina and neighboring regions of the Southern Appalachians."

And because of her interest and assistance, Coulter said, craftspeople have "kept alive the treasures that come only from their quick minds and nimble hands."

Cornwell's background in craft comes from a 34-year career with the North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service in Cherokee and Haywood counties from 1942 to 1976 a time in which she was one of the agents in North Carolina.

"Velma Beam Moore of Clay County was the first," she said. "I was the second. Velma and I went in about the same time. And there was one in Graham County and one in Swain County."

During the '40s she helped relocate families displaced by the Tennessee Valley dam projects Fontana and Appalachia.

And it was in Cherokee County that she met homemaker and crafts-woman Laura Warner, sister of Penland School of Crafts founder Lucy Morgon, and learned about crafts through her and the John C. Campbell Folk School at Brasstown.

"Mrs. Warner called me the first day I was there," Miss Cornwell said. "And she said, 'What do you about crafts?' I said 'I don't know a thing, but I want to learn.' She said, 'God bless you, I'm on my way to see you.'

"And here she came driving a T-Model Ford. She walked in the office and gave me a bunch of necklaces with pewter crosses. And it created my interest."

In 1949 she moved to Waynesville as Haywood County Home Demonstration agent, and two years later was asked by State Fair Director J.S. Dorton to create the Village of Yesteryear, which would be devoted to mountain handicrafts and craftspeople demonstrating the old crafts.

The Village of Yesteryear, Mary Cornwell recalled, began with 14 craftspeople from Cherokee, Haywood, Yancey, and Watauga counties in a small slab building 14 feet by 20 feet with two tables. Today more than 100 craftspeople demonstrate and explain their work in a permanent spacious brick structure.

She is still in charge of the Village of Yesteryear, still has the responsibility of selecting craftspeople to bring it alive, and the 1989 State Fair (Oct. 13-22) will be her 39th. She has seen 700 to 800 craftspeople participate in the village of Yesteryear.

Some of her original crafts demonstrators include Herman Estes, the famed woodworker of Brasstown; Edd Presnell, the master dulcimer-maker of Banner Elk; Bertha Cook of Boone, a rare practitioner of Colonial Knotting; Nancy Conseen, a renowned Cherokee Indian basket weaver; and Dewey Owl, the Cherokee wood carver. Their donations, as well as those from others suck as wrought-iron artist Bea Hensley of Spruce Pine, fill the Museum of North Carolina handicrafts in Waynesville.

The museum is an outgrowth of the Village of Yesteryear. Opened in 1980 and housed in the historic Sites, it is a repository for outstanding examples of crafts from artists in more than half the state's 100 counties.

"The idea for a handicrafts museum," Cornwell said, "was suggested by the craftspeople I took to the fair for the Village of Yesteryear. One of the first ones to mention it was Mrs. Ray Boone of Canton, who teaches wood braiding at Haywood Technical College. And through the years others kept mentioning it."

Charles Ray, a Waynesville businessman and civil leader, offered use of the Shelton House, which they accepted and with $50,000 the club women had raised and funds from the state legislature the museum became a reality.

Museum memberships and admission cover operations.

Mary Cornwell, the founder and director, works as a volunteer.

The museum features a comprehensive exhibit of handicrafts made by artisans who have participated in the educational demonstrations of heritage Crafts at the Village of Yesteryear since 1951 coverlets, quilts, needle work, Colonial knotting, woodcarving, marquetry, pottery, dulcimers, pewter ware, a handmade miniature farmstead and Laura Warner's pewter crosses that starts Mary Cornwell on her extensive work with crafts and craftspeople.

A native of Hartsville, Tenn., she graduated from Maryville College and the University of Tennessee with a degree in home economics.