MOUNTAIN DANCE AND FOLK FESTIVAL RECEIVES
WCU'S MOUNTAIN HERITAGE AWARD FOR 2002

CULLOWHEE – The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, Asheville's annual showcase of Southern Appalachian culture and the nation's oldest continuously running folk festival, is the recipient of Western Carolina University's Mountain Heritage Award for 2002.

Joe Holbert, chairman of the 15-member Folk Heritage Committee, the organization that oversees the festival, accepted the award on the festival's behalf at the 28th annual Mountain Heritage Day, held Saturday (Sept. 28) at WCU. The award was presented by Richard Collings, Western's Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

This year's Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, held at Pack Place in Asheville Aug. 1-3, was the 75th anniversary of the event. Before the music started, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill honoring the festival and its founder, folk historian and Western North Carolina native Bascom Lamar Lunsford.

From an early age, Lunsford developed a passion for the ballads, folk songs and dances of the southern Appalachian Mountains. As a young boy, he began playing the banjo and the fiddle and learned many songs from his neighbors.

Lunsford was educated as a lawyer, but also worked for a time as a fruit tree salesman, teacher and traveling beekeeper. Lunsford was himself a recorded musician, and during the 1920s he began inviting neighbors to play music and dance on the front porch of his house on South Turkey Creek, just outside of Asheville.

In 1928, the Asheville Chamber of Commerce planned to stage the Rhododendron Festival to call attention to the Asheville area. Chamber officials asked Lunsford to arrange a folk song and dance program as part of the Rhododendron Festival. Lunsford recruited five square dance clubs to compete for prizes and invited ballad singers, fiddlers, banjo pickers and string bands to entertain on Pack Square in Asheville. Prize money was given to the best dance group and the best band.

Two years later, the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival separated into its own entity and moved

to Asheville's historic McCormick Field baseball park, and then moved again to the old Asheville City Auditorium.

Festival attendance varied over the years with societal trends, but the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival received a boost in the 1960s when the folk music boom revived interest in traditional music and dance. In 1974, the festival moved to the current Asheville Civic Center, and then to a remodeled Thomas Wolfe Auditorium. The event moved outside and was held in July in 1998, but returned to Pack Place and its traditional August date the following year.

The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, a catalyst for many similar events held across the country, continues to cater to sold-out shows through its 75th year.

The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival is the 27th recipient of WCU's Mountain Heritage Award. The award is given 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 on, or interpretation of, Southern Appalachian issues. Award winners are chosen by a special committee.