WESTERN'S MOUNTAIN HERITAGE AWARD PRESENTED
POSTHUMOUSLY TO STORYTELLER RAY HICKS

CULLOWHEE – Western Carolina University's Mountain Heritage Award for 2003 was presented posthumously Saturday (Sept. 27) to renowned Appalachian storyteller Ray Hicks, a Watauga County native who brought to life pioneer tales handed down for generations.

Western Chancellor John W. Bardo presented the award to Hicks' widow, Rosa Hicks, during a noon awards presentation ceremony, part of activities at the university's 29th annual Mountain Heritage Day.

Hicks first told stories at Mountain Heritage Day in 1985, and he performed at the 1987, 1992, 1995 and 1997 editions of the festival before his health began to deteriorate, limiting his travel, said Tyler Blethen, director of Western's Mountain Heritage Center. Hicks died April 20 at age 80.

"Ray Hicks told tales from the earliest settlers in Southern Appalachia, recounting them in the voice of those settlers themselves. His audiences at Mountain Heritage Day always were captivated and always begged for more," Blethen said.

Hicks was born in 1922 on Beech Mountain, and lived in the small community most of his life. He learned tales from his paternal grandfather, John Benjamin Hicks, which had been passed down through eight generations of his family. Ray and Rosa Hicks raised five children living off land that had been in the family since the late 1700s.

A lanky man almost 7 feet tall, Hicks was a featured bard at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tenn., almost every year after the festival started in 1973. He specialty was "Jack tales," similar to "Jack and the Beanstalk," which wove together fairy tale elements with realistic components of mountain culture, and could take almost an hour to complete. In them, a boy named Jack confronted giants, witches or the Northwest wind and could overcome the challenges through pluck.

Over the past several decades, Hicks was at the forefront of a national revitalization in the venerable art form of storytelling. He was the subject of films, audio tapes and books that captured the native oral traditions of the mountains, and won the National Heritage Fellowship Award from the

National Endowment for the Arts in 1983.

Hicks appeared in the PBS series “The Story of English” because his stories were flavored with the vocabulary, phrasing, expression and accent of earlier English and Scotch-Irish immigrants of the Southern Appalachians.

Ray Hicks is the 28th 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.