WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY NEWS

Office of News Services: Bill Studenc, Director; Randall Holcombe; John Kenyon; Teresa Killian (828) 227-7327 or 227-7122

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CONTACT: Randall Holcombe
Office: (828) 227-7327
Home: (828) 631-3197

WCU'S MOUNTAIN HERITAGE AWARD PRESENTED TO JACKSON COUNTY'S MUSICAL DEITZ FAMILY

CULLOWHEE – Western Carolina University presented its Mountain Heritage Award for 2006 on Saturday (Sept. 30) to a family whose roots run deep into the musical heritage of Jackson County and Western North Carolina.

WCU Provost Kyle Carter presented the award to the Deitz Family of the Tatham's Creek community during an awards presentation ceremony at the university's 32nd annual Mountain Heritage Day.

Members of the Deitz Family have been performing string band music across Western North Carolina for more than 30 years, keeping alive the traditional fiddle and banjo tunes passed down to them by renowned Jackson County musician Harry Cagle, who had learned the songs from Samantha Bumgarner, the legendary Jackson County folk musician who made some of the first recorded country music.

The Dietz Family band is composed of brothers Joe and Bill Deitz; Bill's wife, Delores; and the couple's daughter, Chrystal. They share a family lineage that dates back to some of the earliest settlers of Jackson County's Tatham's Creek area.

Raised in a musical family, Joe and Bill Deitz grew up listening to their parents, David and Ruby Cabe Deitz, sing and play gospel songs by the kerosene lamp in their Tatham's Creek home. In 1972, Bill Deitz joined Cagle in the reformation of a group called Harry Cagle and the Country Cousins.

From 1972 through 1990, Harry Cagle and the Country Cousins performed all across Western North Carolina. Over the years, the group grew as Joe, Delores and Chrystal Deitz joined Cagle, Bill Deitz and Phil Stovall on stage.

The Deitzes have performed as a family since 1990. Some of their performances have been given as a group, but family members also have made appearances as duo or solo acts.

"WCU's Mountain Heritage Center has often hosted Bill and Joe for youth programs that particularly

needed their educational skills, musical ability and charm," said Suzanne McDowell, center curator.

The family once performed almost every weekend, but in recent years the group has reduced its shows as elder members near retirement age. The youngest member, Chrystal Deitz, who plays banjo, bass, mandolin and fiddle, began performing at age 9. She has moved to Tennessee, but still returns to Jackson County occasionally to pick and sing with the family band.

The Deitz Family's relationship with WCU's Mountain Heritage Day goes back to the festival's origins. WCU held a "Founders Day" celebration on the last Saturday in September in 1974, and one of the music groups performing at that event was a trio that included Cagle, Bill Deitz and Joe Butkovich, a resident of Jackson County's East Fork community. That event became Mountain Heritage Day the following year, and Harry Cagle and the Country Cousins, including members of the Deitz Family, performed at every edition of the festival from 1975 through 1990. The family has appeared at every Mountain Heritage Day since then.

The Deitzes also have taken the stage at the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, Asheville's Shindig on the Green, and at the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville, Tenn. Many performances have been in the Jackson/Macon areas at benefits, family reunions, nursing homes and school festivals.

"The Deitz Family makes mountain music in the best sense of the term," said Philip Coyle, associate professor in WCU's department of anthropology and sociology, and editor of the North Carolina Folklore Journal. "It is the music that gets us off of our couches and down to our church or community center, where we once again come face-to-face with the people who make this place special."

The family's music "flows easily from bluegrass to country to old-time fiddle tunes," Coyle said. "It is rooted in the good taste of generations of musicians who have been more interested in making the kinds of music that suited them than in sticking to one particular style or tradition."

The Deitz Family is the 31st recipient of Western'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.

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