Penland School Of Crafts Honored By WCU

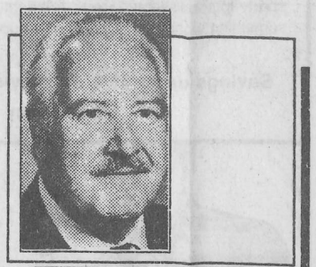
CULLOWHEE — Western Carolina University's 1985 Mountain Heritage Award went Saturday to the Penland School of Crafts, a mountain institution founded by a mountain woman for mountain women.

In a citation accompanying the presentation, WCU Chancellor Myron Coulter praised the Penland school for drawing from the mountain heritage of spontaneity and improvisation "to make itself an enduring presence in our mountains, one that reaches out to share that heritage with all the world."

"We love what we can touch and feel, what nourishes the senses along with the spirit," he said. Beautiful woven fabrics, vessels made from the earth's clay, metal shaped into form, wood that has been worked to reveal its natural beauty, and blown glass that conveys the light of the sun are gifts to us all.

"In this world of increasing technology, Penland School has cultivated the arts of the hands and spirit, the 'high touch' to balance our increasingly 'high tech' and keep our lives in touch with essential values."

The award, presented annually during the celebration of Mountain Heritage Day at Western Carolina University, was accepted by Verne Stanford, the school's director, with the founder's nephew, Ralph Morgan of Sylva, nearby.



John Parris

Roaming The Mountains

"The University," Coulter said, "takes great pride in contributing to the preservation and interpretation of the history and culture of Western North Carolina, sharing the good things of the past with the people of this region.

"Sharing the best of our heritage has special meaning for those who have spent their lives in these mountains because it reminds them of times past. It has special meaning for the young because it provides a link with their elders and their traditions, helping them appreciate what has come before."

In making these efforts, the chancellor said the university also has felt a serious obligation to recognize others who share the institution's efforts and ideals.

He pointed out that each year since 1976, WCU has recognized an individual or organization whose activities have helped to preserve and interpret aspects of our mountain heritage.

"The Mountain Heritage Award," Coulter said, "has gone to authors, to preservers of mountain folk music and dance, to artisans, to those who have helped keep alive the Indian and pioneer ways, and to the region's largest newspaper.

"This year the university takes great pride in presenting the award to another school, one that shares with us an appreciation of traditional mountain arts, a concern for mountain people, and an interest in creative approaches to the challenges that face us.

"Since its inception in 1923, the Penland School of Crafts in Mitchell County has nurtured the arts and the spirits of mountain people. Its founder, Lucy Morgan, who was born in the adjoining county of Macon, wanted to bring about a revival of hand-weaving, which in the 1920s was a dying art. She also wanted to do something for the lives of mountain women, who generally had no source of income. She did both.

"From a modest beginning with three looms, the school has grown to offer instruction in clay, metal, glass, wood, photography, stone masonry, weaving and surface design. It is nationally and even internationally known for the quality of its instruction and the special community it affords for artists."

Yet, Coulter said, "it is not an elitist school — rather it has maintained a close relationship with the people of the region and their arts and crafts. All students share in the cooperative life and work of the community, and appreciate the quiet, meditative quality of the mountain setting."

"Penland," the chancellor added, "is a place that nourishes the very

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special energies of the creative arts, a place that develops the skill of seeing, a place that fosters deeper perceptions of self and others."

A bronze tablet presented to Stanford, only the third director since the school was founded, read: "Western Carolina University Mountain Heritage Award, 1985, presented to the Penland School of Crafts in recognition of outstanding contributions to the preservation and interpretation of the heritage and culture of Western North Carolina."

Penland School of Crafts is the nation's oldest and largest crafts school. It actually began as the Penland Weavers.

The Rev. Rufus Morgan first began plans in 1913 to include a handicraft department in the Appalachian School at Penland, but they remained just plans until seven years later, when Lucy Morgan came to teach in her brother's mission school.

"I found he wanted me to revive the art of weaving in the community," she recalled years later. "I'd never woven, never worked a loom, so I went to Berea and learned and brought back three looms."

It was while at Berea that the idea of establishing an institution such as the Penland School of Crafts was born.

"There were two things I wanted very much to do," she wrote in a memoir of the school, "Gift from the Hills," published in 1958. "The first was to help bring about a revival of hand-weaving, which in our country — I'm speaking of the nation now — had become all but a dead art.

"The other thing I wanted to do was provide our neighbor mothers with means of adding to their generally meager incomes without having to leave their homes.

"Thoughts danced through my head nights and days. My mind wove fanciful visions while my tired, sore fingers were weaving tangible materials.

"I saw innumerable women in modest mountain homes, happily engrossed in weaving beautiful homespun in delightful old designs, their worries vanishing, their hopes brightening for their children's futures. I saw the education of countless mountain children, even college educations, being clacked out to become home looms in the coves and valleys and along the slopes of the Blue Ridge and the Great Smokies."

From Berea she brought back three looms. And on an eventful day in late October 1923, the first loom was taken in a wagon to the home of Mrs. Henry Willis, and Lucy Morgan rode down the rough mountain road with it to give her first instructions.

So from home to home in the mountains she carried instructions, and by the end of the year, more than a dozen women were ready to weave for the market and the Penland Weavers was established.

In no time at all the industry developed and prospered. Pottery making and pewter work were introduced. And Penland Weavers became the Penland School of Handicrafts.

Until she died four years ago, "Miss Lucy" remembered with pride what she considered the one most interesting and challenging task the Penland School has ever undertaken in the producing of a single piece of handicraft — "of a tangible character, I mean, something one can hold in his hand", she said, "a product whose texture one can feel, whose coloring he can study, whose excellence of workmanship he can feast his eyes upon."

What her weavers did was to weave on commission yards of green baize (enough for two sets) of exactly the weight and texture to duplicate the original covering on the long table in Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

But Miss Lucy felt that "our greatest achievements at Penland have not been the beautiful and useful things we have made there."

"I am quite convinced," she might have reiterated if she had been here Saturday evening to receive the Mountain Heritage Award, "that we cannot hold in our hands, we cannot run sensitive fingers over, we cannot study with discriminating eyes the textures or forms or colorings of our most beautiful and most useful Penland productions.

"I say these are the Penland intangibles, the wonderful handicrafts of the spirit, things impossible to feel in your fingers or examine under a magnifying glass but real, nevertheless, and tremendously important and of value inestimable. These are the things not made, but won, earned — received, at any rate — in the making of things."