

N O R T H C A R O L I N A ' S

High Country

M A G A Z I N E FREE

Volume 12 • Issue 6
July 2017



ECRS

Brings The 21ST Century To Boone

GREENE CONSTRUCTION – 70 YEARS OF BUILDING OUR TOWN

Helping with Meals | Two Local Artists | Golf Course Upgrade



Pete Catoe

THE Raptor

Pete Catoe, ECRS Founder & CEO, stands beside the proprietary RAPTOR Accelerated Checkout solution.



The top of ECRS Headquarters is where research and development combine to create powerful retail technology.

ECR Software HOMEGROWN TECH STARTUP

Story by Jason Reagan | Photography by Scott Pearson

When it comes to things to see and do in downtown Boone, High Country visitors are quite familiar with “must-see” locations like Mast General Store, the whimsical Doc Watson statue and the iconic Appalachian Theatre. However, few who amble down King and Howard Streets realize that one of the most innovative tech companies in the state is literally steps away.

Housed in what was once the historic downtown Ford dealership, ECR Software Corporation (ECRS) has emerged as an industry leader in the growing arena of retail automation, bringing together “retail software, hardware, and services to create the only truly holistic, unified retail automation platform on the market,” according to a company

statement. For example, ECRS develops turnkey automated point of sale solutions (i.e. that nice self-checkout robot lady who rings up your groceries), as well as all other aspects that retailers rely on for business operations. Things like inventory management, loyalty programs, e-commerce, and decision support tools are all built into the main ECRS retail automation suite: CATAPULT®.

The downtown Boone-based firm has over 5,000 checkout lanes across North America and the Caribbean, working with independent grocers, health-food retailers, beer and wine stores, nutritional supplement distributors, gas stations, convenience stores, and health-care systems.

In 2016, the RIS Software Leaderboard, an established industry scorecard

based on retailer evaluations, named ECRS the #1 Grocery Vendor Leader. The company has been noted as one of Silicon Review’s “50 Most Admired Companies of the Year,” and Inc. Magazine has ranked the Boone-based company among 5,000 of America’s Fastest Growing Private Companies for the last two years.

Serendipity and Desperation

Despite the company’s meteoric ride, ECRS’ story began like so many tech-startup tales, peppered with an equal mix of desperation, serendipity and hope – not to mention a \$7,000 question mark.

In 1989, Pete’s first business – launched while still an Appalachian State University student – “died with a whimper.” He and his high-school and college sweetheart had recently married (Kim is both ECRS co-founder and Executive VP) and were facing a \$7,000 note due soon (about \$13,000 in 2017 bucks).

As the due date drew near on the note, Pete was pursuing

retail customers, Pete found the Cash Register Dealers Association (ICRDA) in an industry directory (those were these paper books that existed before Google, kids).

“At that moment, it occurred to me that connecting a personal computer (PC) to a cash register might be a more reliable and less expensive way to bring PC automation into retail stores,” Pete said in a recent essay.

“I thought ‘what the heck’ and called the number to find out more about what was known then as an ECR (Electronic Cash Register).”

And that fateful phone call led him to Curt Kennington. The owner of Cash Register Systems of

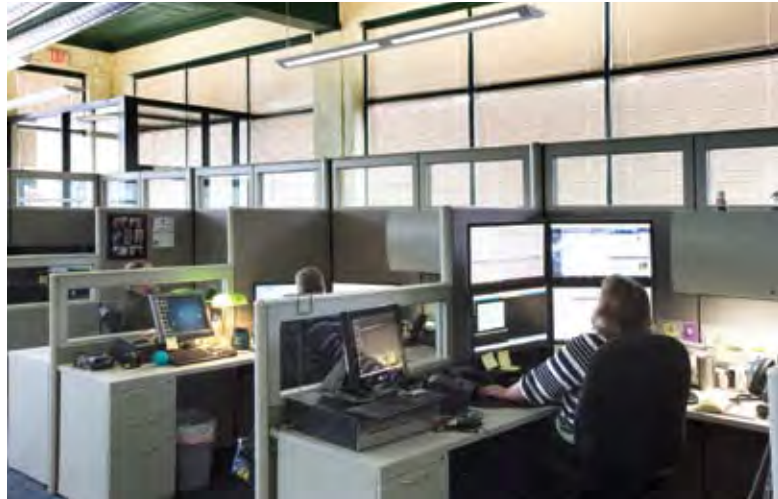
Charlotte, Kennington served as the ICRDA secretary in 1989. Recognizing a golden opportunity, Pete shared his vision with Kennington. Appreciating the opportunity to be found in re-



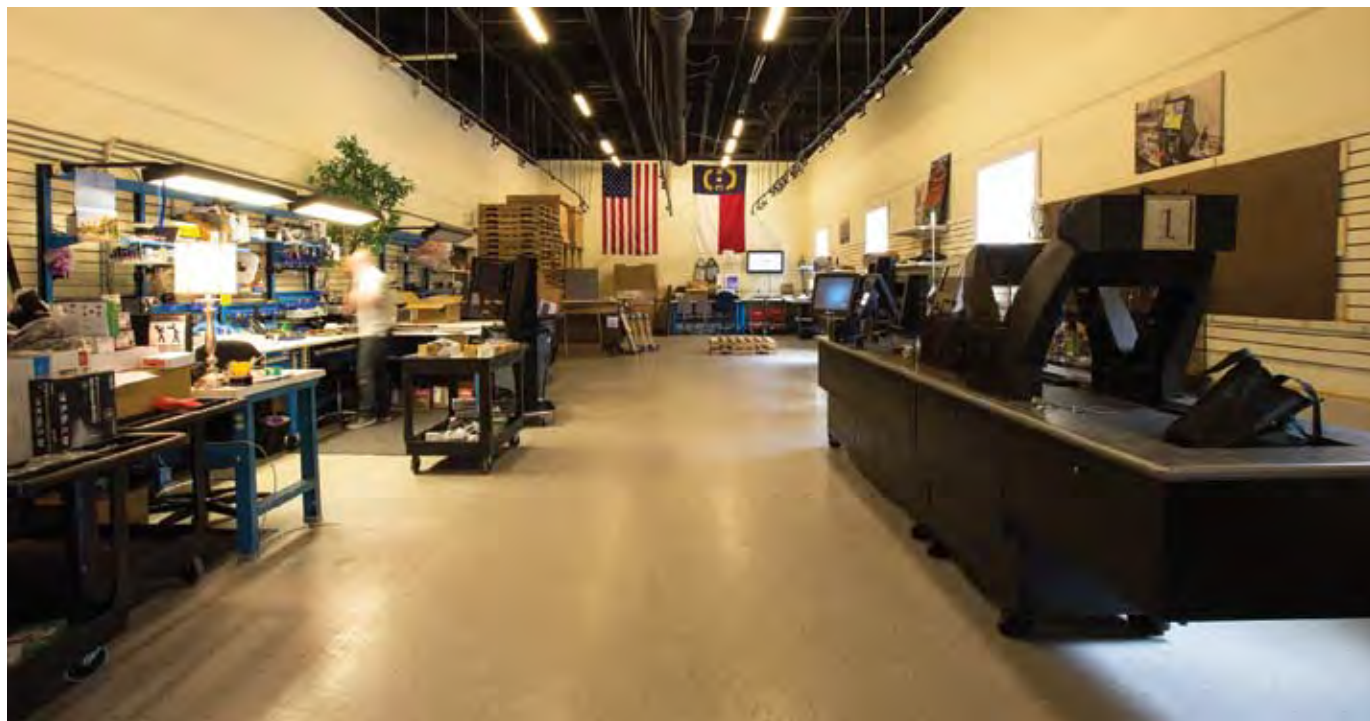
Located behind Footsloggers, ECRS Headquarters at 277 Howard Street in Downtown Boone.



Justin Hodges, POS Configuration Specialist, prepares a point of sale before it is shipped to one of over 5,000 retail customers



ECRS support department employees are ranked among the top in the industry



tail software, Kennington agreed to pay Pete's \$7,000 debt and, in exchange for guidance, contacts, and a few introductions, accepted a 50 percent stake in the newly-formed ECRS.

The rest is startup history.

"Between his wisdom and my ambition, we built ECRS from the ground up, completely self-funded, as it remains to this day," Pete says in a recent tribute following Kennington's death. Many years after his investment, as ECRS had begun to grow by leaps and bounds, Kennington would sell back all of his shares to Pete. Pete nostalgically reflected, "Though he was known as the toughest of negotiators, he took my first offer with a smile."

"I will never be able to repay him for believing in me, at the very moment when I doubted myself most," he added.

A Community Leader

Over the decades, ECRS grew into not only an industry-leading tech company, but also a powerful presence in the local economy. Eventually moving into the company's current headquarters on Howard Street, ECRS now maintains a manufacturing and shipping facility on State Farm Road and recently acquired their third location, which houses their showroom, sales and administration teams, near New Market Center.

The Catoes have never forgotten the University's importance in growing their success and recognized their strong ties in 2015 by establishing the ECRS Computer Science Innovation and Entrepreneurship

The ECRS Deployment and SCO Teams reside at the State Farm location where hardware is built and shipped to their over 5000 retail customers.

The Early Years - Top Center: Developer, Steve Smith, looks on as CATAPULT is being created. Bottom Left: Founders Kim and Pete Catoe hold up a panel of the first-ever RAPTOR that is signed by the entire ECRS team. Bottom Right: COO David Sprague (who has been with the company since it's inception) hard at work in the mid-90's.



Scholarship – a \$90,000 scholarship fund awarded over a four-year term to freshmen who intend to major in computer science.

But it doesn't end with the founder. ECRS employees are involved in many local projects and often incorporate ECRS into their community involvement. Employees raise money for youth charities of their choice selling parking spaces at the Howard St office during ASU football games. They also join in on several successful habitat for humanity projects throughout the year, sponsoring foster children each Christmas, and take turns participating in Meals on Wheels.

The company annually sponsors the famous Hospitality House Turkey Trot and



The strength of the ECRS team is built upon its 9 core values harnessing the creative energy of all its employees.



All Work and Some Play! ECRS team members may seem like they are working around the clock but they also enjoy plenty of fun times together. Whether joining in on the monthly “beer Friday” company gathering or taking part in a free afternoon yoga class in the brand new in-office yoga studio, team members find plenty of ways to unwind and recharge.



ECRS loves to be involved around town, from local fundraising to community events, like the Howard Street Block Party



Back 2 School Festival, and has recently gotten involved with the Boone Film Festival (“Boonff”).

Recognizing the company’s quiet but steady contribution to the region’s success, the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce awarded ECRS as the Business of the Year in 2013.

“ECRS is deeply committed to the High Country and to our hometown of Boone,” Pete said in accepting the award. He noted that many prominent, local clients had helped build the company’s solid foundation over the decades -- Ben Henderson of Bare Essentials, John Stacy of Boone Drug, Peabody’s Wine and Beer Merchants, Moretz family of Appalachian Ski Mountain and Hanes Boren, former owner of Footsloggers.

Abundant Creativity

“ECRS has always been about making our customers’ lives better, but we are also intent on making our work environment better,” Pete emphasizes. “To ensure that we have excellent products, services and client relations, we must have outstanding employees. To attract and retain outstanding employees, we must reward them and create an environment where they can innovate, learn, grow and enjoy their careers immensely.”

There are 9 primary values at ECRS, consistent with one another and fully integrated. The company’s focus on these values grows from the belief that ideas matter and that an individual’s character is of critical significance to a corporation’s overall character and ability to achieve its mission.

Among these values are empowering independence, rejecting negativity, recognizing and rewarding, reducing friction, mea-

ECRS Team participating in one of several annual Habitat for Humanity Saturday builds

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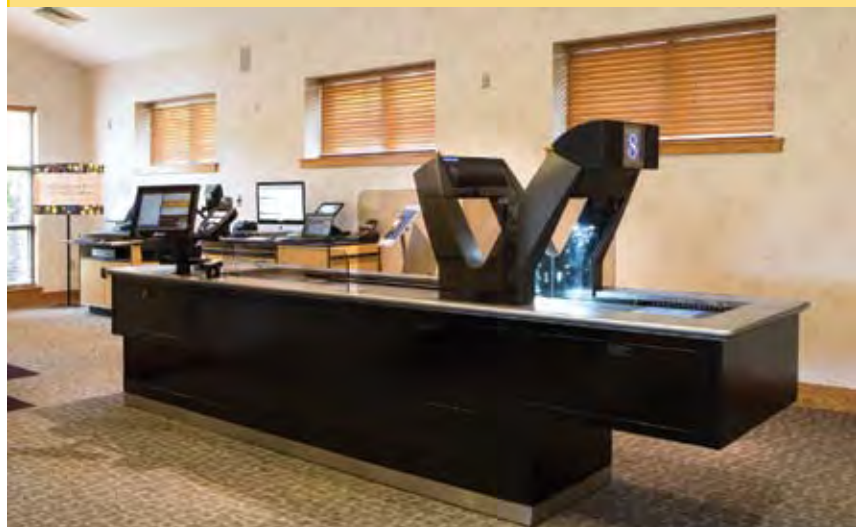


ECRS is making a significant dent in the self-checkout market with solutions including the RAPTOR, Flex Market, and Super Market product lines.

Are You Curious About “Accelerated Checkout?”

ECRS has developed a retail automation solution called RAPTOR, which stands for Retail Application Prototype Testing of Operational Robotics - whew! RAPTOR™ is not self-checkout and it's not traditional point of sale. It is a new technology that's changing the game of grocery retail. RAPTOR automatically scans each item robotically using an advanced, high-performance 360-degree tunnel scanning technology, dramatically speeding up the checkout process.

“The role of the cashier has changed. They're no longer spending 99 percent of their time scanning the items,” says Pete Catoe. “They're spending their time bagging the items... correctly and enhancing the overall consumer experience. You've probably experienced times where your meat products were bagged with household chemicals. That won't happen with our system.”



surging up, and making your job meaningful. By incorporating a “Good Guys Finish First” philosophy, ECRS strives to create strong and lasting relationships with its teammates and customers.

One of the most important of these values is to “Be Creative. Be Bold.” ECRS believes that great ideas can only come to fruition when the work environment offers the trust and freedom to fully explore them. As such, ECRS aspires to create a space where the status-quo is questioned, an open dialogue is promoted, and all ideas are given fair consideration. Harnessing the creative energy of all employees and promoting the spirit of fun fosters their continued ability to not only do something different, but to focus on doing something much better.

ECRS' employee values clear the path for the company to proudly hire a lion's share of ASU graduates to fill the many tech-heavy positions required to fuel their success.

“Check Out” Their Success

Fast forward to 2017 – ECRS has traveled far beyond the bounds of the “Electronic Cash Register.” The company holds a solid standing among larger businesses now leads the field in solutions that empower small businesses, from the receiving dock to the front door -- automated point of sale transactions, product data, inventory management, loyalty programs, bookkeeping, customer interactions, in-store marketing and more.

Perhaps as a lasting reminder of how ECRS has launched and risen through the tumultu-

It's very exciting and heart-warming for an old tech entrepreneur, such as myself, to see so many young entrepreneurs coming together within our community, and being excited about building great products and great companies.”

Pete Catoe

ous retail software battlefield, the company's keystone software system is known as CATAPULT.

The revolutionary point of sale platform allows retailers to automate multiple tasks across all commerce channels - web, traditional checkout, self-checkout, mobile POS, and accelerated checkout. The system also allows store owners to seamlessly manage loyalty, rewards and membership programs; build universal product databases, track inventory in real time, implement promotion programs and handle several types of secure payment options.

Most important for ECRS customers is that the CATAPULT suite empowers them, as retailers, to take a step back from the mountains of data, produced by thousands of daily transactions, and capture important insights that allow them to compete in an ever-crowded marketplace.

Looking Ahead

Even as ECRS continues to climb new peaks of success across the North American retail landscape, the company takes its per-



ECRS' patent-pending Secure OneTouch technology, currently available at BE Natural in Boone, allows retail consumers to checkout and pay with the touch of a finger.

Doe Ridge Pottery

Doe Ridge Pottery, in Boone, North Carolina is owned and operated by Bob Meier, who specializes in functional & decorative stoneware, dinnerware, commissions and interior decor.

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ception as a regional role model for other tech startups seriously – young dreamers fresh from college carrying the same load of debt, despair and enthusiasm Pete experienced back in the day.

As such, the company provides resources and feedback to Startup High Country, a hybrid incubator, startup accelerator and consultancy group located just down the street from ECRS in the Greenhouse. SHC provides mentorship, software and web development services, physical space, and, in some cases, seed investments to local entrepreneurs who have a startup concept, a dream and a plan. The group’s goal is to establish the High Country as “Silicon Hollar” (website: siliconhollar.org).

“When I was first approached by the core team at SHC, I was struck by their level of energy, optimism, passion and entrepreneurial vision they have for our community,” Pete said. “In addition, I’ve also really enjoyed observing the Silicon Hollar meetings. It’s very exciting and heart-warming for an old tech entrepreneur, such as myself, to see so many young entrepreneurs coming together within our community, and being excited about building great products and great companies,” he added.

ECRS helps sponsor SHC events such as monthly socials and outreach programs for young programmers. “When you put it all together you can see that SHC is filling a void that was present, because free enterprise can only be transformative within a community when entrepreneurship is valued and, most of all, nurtured,” Pete said.

Taking a metaphor from the retail space that ECRS inhabits: when you tag, scan and bag what it means to be ECRS, the company can boil it all down to one thing – investing back into the community that helped create it. ♦



Industry Awards & Recognition 2013 – 2017

RIS Software LeaderBoard #1 Overall Category and Top 20 LeaderBoard

#1 Leaders in Quality of Support

#1 Leaders in Customer Satisfaction by Grocery Retailers

#1 Overall Leaders in Grocery

#1 Mid-Size Vendor Leaders

#1 Broad Suite Vendor Leaders

#1 Leaders in Quality of Support by Tier One & Mid-Size Retailers

Watauga County Business of the Year

Top 20 Most Promising Retail Technology Solution

“Vity” Award Winner for Best Computerized Point of Sale System (Vitamin Retailer Magazine) – 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014

Progressive Grocer Tech Award Winner for Rollin’ Oats implementation of automated inventory & replenishment

Inc. 5000 recipient - an exclusive ranking of the nation’s 5000 fastest - growing private companies - 2015, 2016

RIS Software LeaderBoard - #1 Leader in Grocery Vendor - 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016

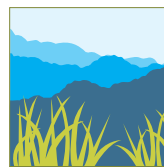
Watauga County Business of the Year - 2013

Silicon Review - Top 50 Most Admired Companies of the Year - 2016

“Vity” Award Winner for Best Computerized Point of Sale System (Vitamin Retailer Magazine) - 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017



The ribbon-cutting for ECRS’ new showroom and training facility, located behind New Market Center in Boone, was held on June 30th.



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Meet Startup High Country



STORY BY JASON REAGAN

When James Bance and Sam Glover gaze out over the High Country from Howard's Knob, they see what we all see – downtown Boone arrayed before them; Grandfather Mountain's stolid profile and the gorgeous "hollars," hills and peaks that have captured the hearts of so many.

But James and Sam see something else – an opportunity to transform the region from solely a thriving tourist/university area into the next huge success story sweeping smaller cities across the nation such as Burlington, Vermont; Dublin, Ohio; and Boulder, Colo. It's a success story that begins with smaller, tech-oriented startup companies and continues with the transformation of the local economy to a new elevation in better jobs and business opportunities.

Meet Startup High Country

James and Sam form the core of Startup High Country. The nascent partnership is a hybrid incubator, startup accelerator and consultancy group. Wait. What does that mean?

"What that means is we provide mentorship, software and web development services, physical space and, in some cases, we'll be providing seed investments to local entrepreneurs who have an existing company or a new business idea," James said.

The duo teamed up with Chris Grasinger and Jeffery Scott, two longtime High Country residents and advocates for local entrepreneurship and, together, the group hopes to blaze a new trail with the vision of building a technology and entrepreneurial ecosystem to support quality jobs and provide investment opportunities for everyone in the High Country.

"In the High Country we have a fantastic variety of entrepreneurs in the area, we have a thriving university and high speed internet infrastructure," Grasinger said. "We created a title and an organization to help brand and organize the efforts of connecting and accelerating these elements."

"I can remember growing up and people always talked about distribution and sales going off the mountain, but the beauty of technology is that neither one of those is an issue," Sam said.



Startup High Country co-founder James Bance operates out of the group's headquarters in the Greenhouse Building on Depot Street in Boone. Over the past 15 years, he has built a solid résumé in the tech and investment worlds, occupying roles in leadership, sales, marketing, and business development.

"The world becomes your market and there's no need for overhead, shipping and warehouses."

"[Sam and I] had been blessed in that we've worked for amazing companies, like Google and Shoeboxed," James said, adding that the duo "recognized that many of the residents here hadn't felt the financial benefits of the 21st century. So, we set out with this completely audacious goal."

The SHC Difference

That all sounds great, right? Better jobs, a higher quality lifestyle, access to better technology. But can it really work here? Local residents have heard this before – the blossoming of a new startup and venture-capital paradise nestled in the Appalachian Mountains has to some extent been only a dream in the High Country for years.

The Startup High Country difference? It boils down to experience. The four-person team has tons of experience as startup entrepreneurs – you might say they've climbed this tech mountain many times.

"We've all experienced the successes and

the scar tissue that comes with the territory of starting a company," James added. "We want to short-circuit a lot of the inevitable early mistakes that first-time entrepreneurs will make and then put them on a track to ramp up faster." In fact, Startup High



Country has already started mentoring and providing services for four companies.

It's Business and It's Personal

For James, the startup culture has been part of his DNA for most of his life. He co-founded his first tech company at 21 after moving to the Bay Area from his native Wisconsin. Over the past 15 years, he has built a solid resume in the tech and investment world, occupying roles in leadership, sales, marketing and business development

at companies like Bazaarvoice, (a 2012 IPO), Adometry (which was acquired by Google 2014), AOL/Verizon and John Hancock. He knows his stuff.

However, James' High Country journey started in Deep Gap. He and his wife, Sharla – along with their children, Blake and Mila, – moved to Blowing Rock from Austin (another American startup success) four years ago to be closer to Sharla's parents, Deep Gap residents John and Vicki Unmack.

"They're amazing people and have a heart for serving others so they've built deep relationships here. My wife and I decided to make the move to be closer to them."

As happens so often with new residents, James and his family immediately fell in love with the outdoor life of the area from skiing to cycling. But the Great Outdoors will only take you so far when the siren song of Entrepreneurship calls.

A High Country native, Sam attended UNC-Chapel Hill and is known throughout the region as an innovative entrepreneur and growth leader. Over the past

six years, he's worked with several NC-based startups. Sam helps them define core metrics, accelerate growth and scale product development. He recently launched and sold his first company, Zip-Services -- a technology platform aimed at disrupting the commercial laundry and linen business. Currently, he's VP of Operations for Shoeboxed, Inc. Like James, he lives in Blowing Rock with his wife and dog.

Silicon Hollar

While the High Country may never match the startup tech horsepower of Silicon Valley, Startup High Country believes the region can brand an appropriate moniker – Silicon Hollar. The name arose after a conversation with local entrepreneur James Bauler, referring to the deep, rich valleys (hollows or hollar as we say ‘round here). Because SHC is already working with the Appalachian Regional Commission to attract angel-fund investors, the Hollar metaphor resonated immediately.

“Silicon Hollar is simply an idea, a concept to rally around, a place and a metaphor for the tech ecosystem here - much like Silicon Valley in California or Silicon Prairie in Nebraska,” James said, adding “it’s not an attempt to become, or to be thought of as another Silicon Valley, we don’t want that.”

Using a strong and memorable branding metaphor like Silicon Hollar has the potential to highlight the uniqueness of the High Country and leverage its strengths, along with technology, to set the standard as a beacon in rural Appalachia and to demonstrate what a successful tech community can look like.

“What I love about the [Silicon Hollar] metaphor is that it gives people in the area something to rally around and be proud of,” Sam said. “It’s a network of people interested in bettering the High Country through entrepreneurship and technology.”

“Most people have now heard of Silicon Valley, so the name will usually make some sense to individuals,” Chris said. “The truth is our Silicon Hollar will have its own unique personality - similar to the valley, we aim to be a hotbed for high growth entrepreneurship, but we also value adventure, outdoors, and the beautiful environment in which we live.”

It Takes a Community to Raise a Startup

Setting a vision like Silicon Hollar and offering start-up resources is all well and good, but to really succeed, Startup High Country will need community buy-in.

Fortunately, the High Country has already blazed a small-scale trail in both tech and other startups, thanks to a few local pioneers. A prime case study is ECR Software (ECRS) Corporation, a startup icon founded and headquartered in downtown Boone.

The company has not only transformed the way we shop, but has also helped lead a renaissance in “Main Street” development. Housed in a former auto dealership building, ECRS was founded in 1989 by Peter Catoe, who was a marketing student at Appalachian State at the time.

The software/hardware company holds the exclusive rights to their self-checkout register software– systems that allow consumers to easily scan, bag and pay for their



Sam Glover grew up in the High Country and remembers people talking about distribution and sales going off the mountain. "But the beauty of technology is that neither one of those is an issue today," he said.



Dale Yarborough is pictured collecting information for his company, Gidoo. The business aims to provide transparency and accountability in the charitable donations industry.



Zak Ammar from Vixster is pictured with his crew. Vixster.com facilitates a peer-to-peer removal service for trash and recycling, pairing up drivers with customers for lots of options.



THE MEETING SPACE

Dale Yarborough from Gidoo, videographer Jeff Bud, James Bance and Vixster's Zak Ammar are pictured above sharing ideas from SHC's downtown Boone office. James is part of a team at Startup High Country that mentors local entrepreneurs, "We provide mentorship, software and web development services and physical space," said Bance.



Miah Zimmerman and Emily Scarborough, with Jeff, Dale, and Zak

groceries at thousands of retail outlets across the country.

According to the company’s website (ecrs.com,) the local business offers a plethora of retails systems “from front-store systems including point-of-sale and self-checkout, to comprehensive back of-fice, warehouse, and inventory management solutions. Clients include grocers in San Francisco, Montana, Toronto, as well as beverage companies, breweries, health-product distributors, fuel suppliers and

healthcare systems.”

"When I was first approached by the core team at SHC, I was struck by their level of energy, optimism, passion and entrepreneurial vision they have for our community," Catoe said. "In addition, I've also really enjoyed observing the Silicon Hollar meetings. It's very exciting and heart-warming for an old tech entrepreneur, such as myself, to see so many young entrepreneurs coming together within our community, and being excited about build-

ing great products and great companies," he added.

Watauga County has also transformed the startup environment by becoming a Certified Entrepreneurial Community. In partnership with AdvantageWest Economic Development Group, the county launched a strategy in 2007 to create “overall business climate, policies, regulations, and opportunities to learn and grow [that] are simple to find and available.”

“When you put it all together you can



THE GREENHOUSE

The historic Greenhouse building, located at 164 Depot St. in downtown Boone, was remodeled in 2007 by John Mena as a multi-use office space. Tenants have access to a shared lobby and meeting space, making it a perfect fit for the team behind Startup High Country.



see that SHC is filling a void that was present, because free enterprise can only be transformative within a community when entrepreneurship is valued and most of all, nurtured," Catoe added.

James says a key component to Startup High Country's success lies in the already available resources at Appalachian State University. Local university contacts like Dr. James Wilkes, Sara Beth Hopton, Erich Schlenker and Ged Moody have helped pave the way by linking SHC with students and faculty who have a vision and drive to start new companies locally.

Other community resources include Mike Quinto from Pulsara, James Bauler from Cruxolve, and Dave Walker from Ascent. "They have been integral in creating the momentum behind Silicon Hollar and we couldn't have moved the needle without them," James said.

ASU's Transportation Insight Center for Entrepreneurship has also launched a unique enthusiasm for startups both among students and local community leaders. Directed by Schlenker, the center's staff empowers those with new startup ideas and partners with them to research and crunch

numbers to determine if there's a market and viable business model. "Entrepreneurs can use the center's office space and other on-campus facilities while center staff connect them with professional services, funding and mentors," notes a recent report in ExitEvent.com

"It's easy to be excited about ideas and opportunities, but the difference between having success and not having it is being willing to start," Erich said.

Real Results

As SHC's Silicon Hollar concept gains

The Lodges at Eagles Nest

Banner Elk, NC

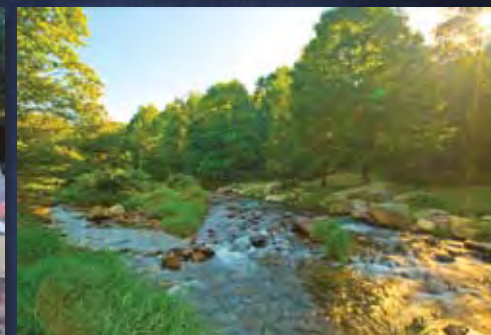
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Local Tech Startup Makes Trash, Recycling Convenient

App State grad student Zak Ammar, who has networked with Startup High Country, likes to call the rural trash and recycling convenience stations outside of the city limits “inconvenient” when pitching his new tech startup, Vixster.

Vixster.com pairs a network of screened drivers to residential and commercial customers who would prefer to pay for trash, recycling and hazardous household waste removal services rather than drive across town to the dump or to a more regional “convenience” center. Customers have the option of scheduling a regular pickup time or enlisting a one-time pickup within 12 hours of signing up online.

Raised in Houston, Texas, Ammar received his undergraduate degree at Texas State and is currently completing his MBA at Appalachian State University, where he created the idea for Vixster at a social entrepreneurship competition.

“I thought it was ridiculous you have to haul your own trash



Zak Ammar, Founder of Vixster.com

and recycling to the dump,” Ammar said. “I figured there had to be a better way.”

Ammar noted that two-thirds of the population in Watauga County resides outside of the city limits and that the rural population of surrounding counties faces a similar fate. Vixster currently operates in Watauga County and its surrounding counties. Development of the company started in the winter and sales began in March. A mobile app is planned for release this summer.

With recyclables filling up landfills across the country, sustainability is a core principle in Vixster’s mission. Ammar said that 5 percent of revenue will go towards sustainability issues in the community.

“We are actively seeking ways to invest back into the community and leverage our resources to help out,” Ammar said.

For more information, click to www.vixster.com or contact Ammar at 1-802-587-2740 or zak@vixster.com.

traction, the group is seeing new success stories blossom across the board.

“We’re really focused on job and investment opportunities, and by getting several startups off the ground and funded within the next 12-18 months, they will quickly make a really positive impact in job creation,” James said.

Promising young entrepreneurs, like Zak Ammar from Vixster and Dale Yarborough from Gidoa (pronounced Gi-Dough), stand out as success stories for SHC. Vixster, for example, is a trash and recycling service company that facilitates a peer-to-peer removal service for commercial and residential customers. Think of it as Uber for trash service. By using a digital, GPS platform, users can create an account, request an on-demand pickup – pay for it online, and Vixster will match them with a driver in the same vicinity to pick it up. Gidoa aims to provide transparency and accountability in the charitable donations industry. Both are finalists for the recent 2016 Pitch Your Idea Competition at ASU.

“We’ve had a really nice response from the community to what we’re doing,” James said.

Startup: The Next Generation

A tech-oriented community will wither on the vine quickly without a fresh infusion of talent and software experience. To

GET INVOLVED WITH SILICON HOLLAR

“I tell everyone, this is challenging work, but it’s good work. All we need is a few lighthouse companies -- those companies that shine brightly and that others can follow and avoid the rocks. With Startup High Country, we can invest in entrepreneurs ‘on the mountain’, so they don’t have to go ‘off the mountain’ to build their companies and fulfill their dreams,” Startup High Country Co-Founder James Bance says. “The easiest way to stay connected with the tech initiatives in our area is to sign up for the mailing list at siliconhollar.org and come out to the events. We help curate the site, but it’s really a public space for everyone to use; it’s a gateway to all things tech in the High Country.”

“You don’t have to be a computer programmer or work for a technology company to be involved. The beauty of a startup community is that almost anyone can get engaged. It takes many different disciplines to drive success, not just tech. Designers, photographers, executive assistants, writers, project managers and more, are all essential to the mix.”

meet that challenge, SHC plans to break new ground in software coding education.

“In order to stay competitive globally, not just locally, we need to get more of our kids exposed to software coding before they hit the post-secondary level,” James said. He is among a growing number of startup leaders who believe computer coding classes should be required in high school curricula.

“We’re really focused on coding education,” Sam said. “We’re hosting a summer camp - High Country Coding Corps - with App State’s Gear Up program, teaching rising 6-9th graders computer programming through something they all love - Minecraft.”

“For most of us coding is a foreign language, but kids who make coding their native language will be well equipped to snag high-paying jobs and work at amazing companies like Google and Amazon, or even locally at ECRS,” James added.

Making Headway in the Hollar

While most people can get on board with Startup High Country’s vision and enthusiasm, everyone involved also realizes the road ahead, like the region’s soil, will yield a lot of bumps, rocky obstacles and steep climbs.

Although the High Country offers many advantages for startup incubation and recruitment -- Outside magazine has named Boone

“In order to stay competitive globally, not just locally, we need to get more of our kids exposed to software coding before they hit the post-secondary level.”

– JAMES BANCE

one of the “10 Best Small Towns in the U.S. – job creation has always suffered due to a variety of factors, including cost of living and geography.

“It’s no secret that there’s a serious lack of quality, high-paying career opportunities in the High Country,” James said. “It’s not an indictment on anyone here, it’s just a reality.”

And the future for the High Country may grow bleaker if economic strategies fail to adapt. According to the N.C. State Institute for Emerging Issues’ Future Work Job Disruption index, Watauga County outranks all other counties in North Carolina in potential job losses due to technology automation.

“I see SHC as an opportunity for our community to get ahead of the forecasts and take control of our future, to push back against that prediction,” James said.

“Let’s use what we know: creation, innovation, and technology to rewrite our community’s economic story.” ♦

“For most of us coding is a foreign language, but kids who make coding their native language will be well equipped to snag high-paying jobs and work at amazing companies like Google and Amazon, or even locally at ECRS.”

– JAMES BANCE

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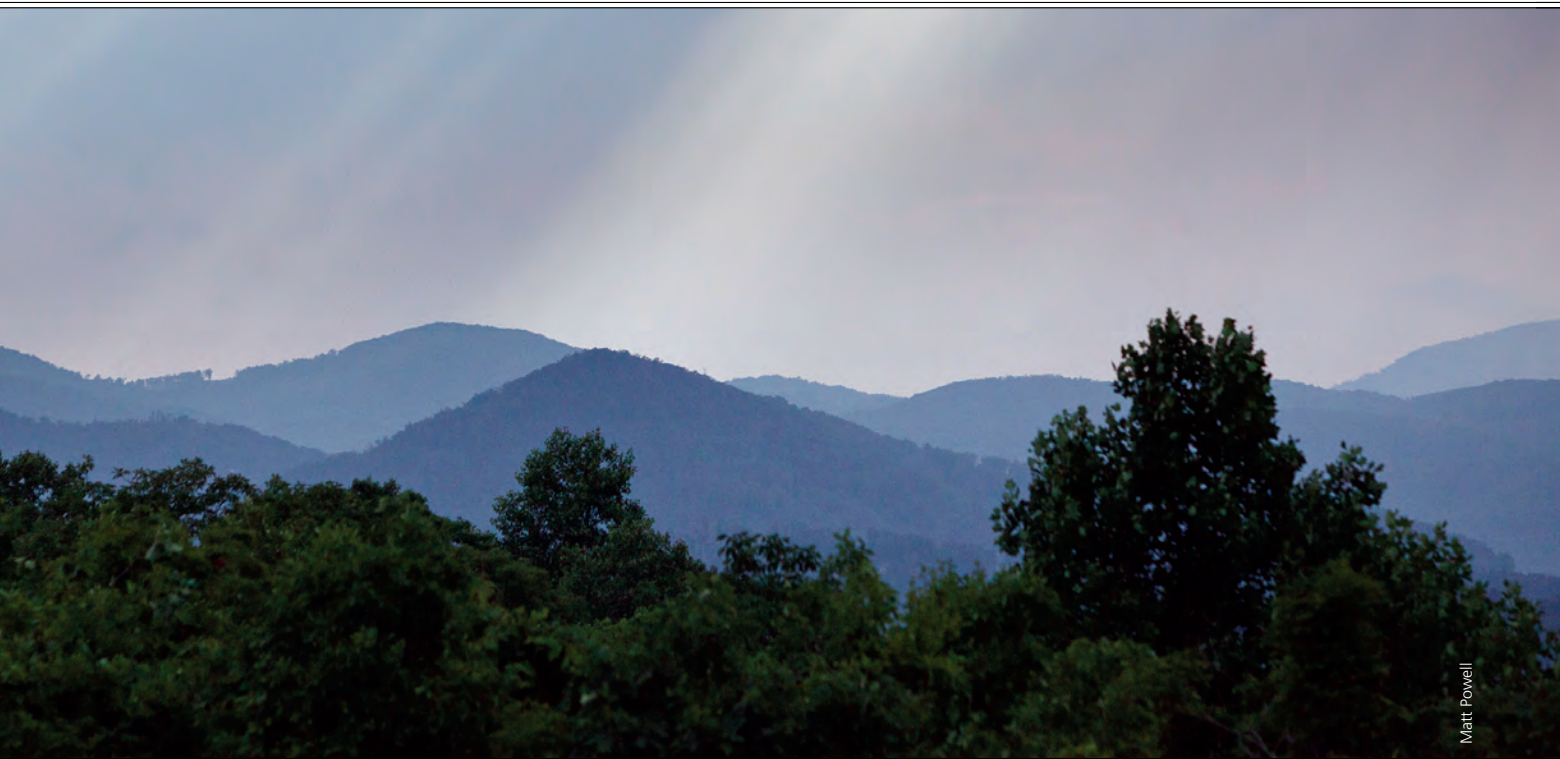
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Matt Powell

HIGH AND MIGHTY

Watauga County's quality of life and entrepreneurial spirit make it one of the state's strongest economies.

The qualities that make Watauga County stand out among North Carolina's 100 counties — its entrepreneurial spirit, dedication to higher education, breathtaking geography and respect for the environment — also make it ideal for economic development. This county of 51,000 residents offers a highly educated workforce, an established community of green-tech experts, advanced medical services and an emphasis on entrepreneurship that is backed by local, state and university resources. Those resources have helped Watauga nurture informa-

tion-technology, logistics, outdoor-equipment and green-industry companies.

Watauga is garnering recognition for its growth and quality of life. *Forbes* magazine recently ranked county seat Boone the fourth-fastest-growing small town in America. *U.S. News & World Report* also recently named Boone one of the 10 best places in the country to retire. It ranks as the sixth-healthiest county in North Carolina, according to the national County Health Rankings & Roadmaps program. *Outside* magazine named Boone one of the 10 best small towns in the U.S. in 2009.

And state travel writers and tourism officials have deemed the village of Blowing Rock the prettiest small town in North Carolina.

The county's economy is strong even during sluggish times. Watauga continues to boast one of North Carolina's lowest unemployment rates — at 8.8% it's below the state average. Higher education adds to the appeal. Appalachian State University, which offers more than 150 undergraduate and graduate majors, is in the heart of Boone, and Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute also has a campus there.

Their presence is one reason Watauga has one of the state's best-educated workforces, with a well-above-average percentage of bachelor's- and advanced-degree holders.

With all these high-elevation rankings, Watauga offers the right kind of lows for business growth as well. It has North Carolina's third-lowest county property-tax rate at 31.3 cents per \$100 valuation, as well as a crime rate nearly half the state average. The friendly business climate and strong public safety have Watauga poised to cultivate a rich soil for business success.

The spirit of past generations of rugged, resourceful mountaineers is alive and well in today's Watauga, where one only has to go as far as the local market to find homegrown business success. ECR Software Corp., based in downtown Boone, has helped lead a renaissance in Main

Street development. Housed in a former auto dealership, ECRS holds exclusive rights to at least one line of self-checkout register software, the machines that allow consumers to easily scan, bag and pay for their groceries at retail outlets across the country. Clients include grocers in San Francisco, Montana and Toronto, as well as beverage companies, breweries, health-product distributors, fuel suppliers and health-care systems.

ECR Software employs about 40 people, most of them computer-science graduates from Appalachian State. "ASU puts out great graduates," says Peter Catoe, founder and CEO. Catoe notes that the company is homegrown in Watauga. "Everything's done here. Revenue generated outside of the county stays in the county."

Similar values form the canvas used by one of Watauga's most artistic

entrepreneurs. In the 1980s, frustrated that quality art supplies for his watercolor painting were difficult to buy locally, Boone Drug pharmacist Joe Miller contacted wholesalers and began carrying a small selection at the local drug store. In 1990, his hobby turned into a business when he rented 2,500 square feet of space in the county industrial park. Today Cheap Joe's Art Stuff owns a 40,000-square-foot outlet store in that same park, as well as a thriving online business, another store in Charlotte and a 350-page catalog.

The spirit of entrepreneurship melds nicely with love of the outdoors. Finding a niche among the steady stream of nature lovers, Footsloggers Outdoor & Travel Outfitters has actually thrived in the economic downturn. As Americans reprioritized their budgets, many found it cheaper to hike or ride bikes locally than spend thousands of dollars



on faraway vacations. That provided an opening for Footsloggers to become one of the High Country's leading kayaking-, camping-, climbing- and hiking-equipment suppliers.

General Manager Jason Berry says offering a quality product to a steady customer base of students has helped the company, which has locations in Boone and Blowing Rock, overcome the seasonal

ups and downs so many outdoor retailers face. "The outdoor recreation is wonderful year-round because each season offers different recreation opportunities."

Appalachian State is the county's largest employer and one of its most important sources for research and workers, creating about 5,100 jobs across the High Country for a total economic impact of \$506 million,

according to a 2008 study. "Boone is a university town, but more than most university towns, it is dominated by the university," Todd Cherry, director of the Center for Economic Research & Policy Analysis at ASU, told *Forbes* this year. "Between 2007 and 2010, university enrollment increased by nearly 2,000 students, and [university] employment increased by about 200 people. That's a primary factor in Boone's recent growth."

Such a rapid and stable stream of students — enrollment is roughly 17,000 — means Watauga has access to an educated workforce. And because of the region's recreational resources, many of ASU's 4,000 annual graduates remain nearby. "Many graduating students want to stay here due to quality of life, so they are motivated to find gainful employment," a recent economic-development report states.

The term "green industry" has become a buzzword in economic development, but green technologies have been the linchpin of Watauga's research-and-development goals for 30 years. According to the Pew Charitable Trusts' 2009 Clean Energy Economy report, sustainable employment across North Carolina increased 15.3% from 1998 to 2007. At Appalachian State's Appalachian Energy Center, faculty, students and local business leaders collaborate in four areas of research and energy technology: energy efficiency; renewable energy; alternative fuels; and policy, markets and economic analysis. Founded in 2001, the center has helped green entrepreneurs in solar- and wind-energy production. It has also sponsored regional summits on energy policy and green technology.

The Watauga County Economic Development Commission recently launched the Watauga Green Business Plan to give entrepreneurs tools to help reduce their environmental impact, improve operational efficiency

and enhance their business reputations. Once a local business is certified green, it can see an immediate reduction in costs and enhance its marketing, promotion and community leadership.

Along with abundant access to outdoor recreation, Watauga owes much of its vigor — including its low rates of obesity and chronic disease as ranked by the Watauga County Community Health Assessment — to Appalachian Regional Healthcare System. The county's second-largest employer, it operates Watauga Medical Center, a 117-bed acute-care hospital. It offers a full-service imaging department, including a CT scanner, digital mammography and MRI, along with a full-service emergency department. It features birthing, cardiology, sleep, urgent-care and cancer centers, as well as a joint-replacement program. The system also maintains Love Your Life, an employee health-incentive program.

The environment enhances Watauga's appeal. With its convenient access to Linville Gorge, Grandfather Mountain and the Blue Ridge Parkway, it has hundreds of miles of hiking trails, mountain-bike paths, rapids and climbs to suit all skill levels. In 2012, Watauga County and the Watauga County Tourism Development Authority opened Rocky Knob, a 185-acre park in Boone. The region also sports greenways, outdoor climbing walls, zip lines and three ski resorts.

All of these factors make Watauga a pinnacle experience for outdoor enthusiasts, entrepreneurs and companies of all sizes. "The Europeans who came here had to be resourceful to survive, and we're grateful to live in a place where the entrepreneurial spirit flourishes," Miller of Cheap Joe's says. "What we've done here is far beyond anything I ever dreamed." ■

Three Minutes in the Spotlight

A Snapshot of Local Karaoke Culture

Story by Jason Reagan





This quartet of ladies, all dressed in black, enjoy singing karaoke at Galileo's in Boone to a song they carefully selected. Below, Mark Dixon, owner of Galileo's, doubles as a KJ (karaoke DJ) on Friday nights. Photos by Lonnie Webster

His name is William Reed, but to the crowd at Galileo's in Boone, he's known simply as "Reed."

His named is called on the PA system on an unseasonably chilly Friday night, and he glides up to a microphone with just the hint of a swagger. Unornamented, wearing a simple T-shirt and jeans, Reed smiles at the growing crowd as a bass-heavy torrent of country music spills across the room like a dark beer puddle skittering over a nearby table.

Without looking at a nearby screen, which begins to flow with lyrics to "Getting You Home (The Black Dress Song)" by Chris Young, Reed booms out his rendition of the titillating tune as the crowd goes wild: "Watching your baby blue eyes, dancing in the candle light glow, all I can think about, is getting you home."

Just another example of karaoke in the High Country.

From Japan to the High Country

To understand how a Japanese musical



pastime made its way into the mountains of Western North Carolina, one has to get back to the roots of karaoke. In 1971, a Kobe-based drummer, Daisuke Inoue, noticed people liked his live music act and would often ask him to record it so they could sing along. Sensing a future fad, Inoue created a coin-operated tape recorder that would play

one song. Like many Japanese exports, karaoke began to take root in 1980s American culture as bar and restaurant owners saw karaoke as a way to draw new customers, maintain a festive atmosphere and increase food and beverage sales.

In the High Country, karaoke has experienced an on-again/off-again romance with locals, often popping up in a local bar only to disappear and reappear later at another location.

Before closing in 2010, Geno's Sports Bar sported weekly karaoke that was a longtime favorite of Appalachian State students. Recently, Canyons in Blowing Rock discontinued its karaoke night, though it could return if there is demand.

Currently, karaoke can be found at Galileo's, Café Portofino, Crossroads Pub and Town Tavern in Boone, as well as at Nick's Restaurant & Pub in Banner Elk. On a typical karaoke night, these venues are packed with singers and "groupies" of all ages.

Nick's may hold the record for karaoke longevity. According to Manager Martha



A mix of locals and students gather to support each other and sing their hearts out at Galileo's and Town Tavern in Boone. Photos by Ken Ketchie

Manogue, the pub has offered would-be crooners a spotlight "off and on" for the past 20 years and has played the tunes every Friday night for the last six years. "It is also a big dance party," Manogue said. "It's just comical really—some are really good, and some are pretty bad, but once you 'marinate' them..." She breaks off laughing, leaving the sentence hanging.

Crowning a local "King of Karaoke DJs" is not very difficult: Jerry Parker reigns. The Boone-based DJ has been spinning discs at local water holes for 16 years—from Conway Twitty to Eminem. Before Parker got started in the business, "there was a guy driving up from Greenville," he recalled. The DJ "disappointed a lot of people" when he refused to travel up the mountain at the tiniest hint of snow. Along with local entrepreneur Mike Hill, Parker began to investigate options for some homegrown karaoke.

"We nicked-and-dimed it and put together a great karaoke hit," he said. But Parker's motives were not just based in a love for good music. "It was the urge to keep the party going and so we could sing and meet pretty girls," said Parker. His business, Local Vocals, has thrived as both a karaoke and DJ service. He recently began bringing trivia nights to local bars as well. Currently, Parker runs karaoke nights at the Town Tavern and Café Portofino in Boone.

For Galileo's owner Mark Dixon, adding karaoke to the lineup was a logical step.

"At the time [early 2010] there was no place to go for it. We thought it would be a unique entertainment option," he

said. Since the restaurant/bar is so close to the Appalachian State University campus, Galileo's draws a heavy Friday night crowd of students.

"It's been very successful," Dixon said.

But How Does It Work?

OK, so maybe you know the "what" and "where," but you're wondering how karaoke works.

It's really pretty simple, but be forewarned, karaoke is usually for night owls. Most bars do not start karaoke until 9:00 or 10:00 p.m., so take a nap earlier if necessary.

Although karaoke in America has long relied on special CD+G discs (which play the song and display the lyrics on a screen), most KJs (karaoke DJs) now use MP3s stored on computer drives and some can now download songs online, allowing sing-

ers thousands of song options. However, Parker says CDs still work well for him.

"It's always been about the music for me; not the technology," he said.

The first step is, of course, to pick out a song. Most KJs distribute huge binders cross-referencing songs and artists. So, if you want to sing "that Grateful Dead song" but can't remember the title, just look up the Dead, write down the song, artist (and sometimes a reference number) and submit it to the KJ. Some KJs with Internet access may offer a laptop for singers to look up and request songs. Depending on the popularity of the nightspot, the wait to get your call to the mic should be from 20 to 40 minutes. Once onstage and depending on one's familiarity with the song, singers can use a screen displaying both the lyrics and tempo as a guide.



Karaoke Dos and Don'ts

1. DO make it a group event. Nothing is sadder than a singer with no entourage. Karaoke is a great excuse to get together with cubicle mates or potential drinking buddies.

2. DON'T take it too seriously. This is local karaoke. It's not "American Idol," and Paula Abdul is not going to stroll into Joe's Watering Hole and discover you as America's next Taylor Swift. So, have fun. Don't worry about screwing up, because with the typical noise of a bar, the occasional on-screen lyric error and occasionally bad PA systems, everybody screws up. Whatever your idea may be of the worst-case scenario has already happened to some lost crooner and probably won't happen to you. And, of course, there is always the forgiveness that comes from

any night out ("You tripped over the mike? Man, I don't even remember last night!").

3. DON'T fall for an overdone tune—find your own special song (but not too obscure) and make it your own. Agreed-upon karaoke clichés include: "Don't Stop Believing" (Journey), "Piano Man" (Billy Joel—although this writer enjoys singing it), "Baby Got Back" (Sir Mix-a-Lot), "Margaritaville" (Jimmy Buffett), and... you get the picture.

4. DO keep it up-tempo. People come out to karaoke night for frivolity and fun. Save "Dust in the Wind" or "True Colors" for your morning commute. Look for songs that are well known and easy to sing along.

5. DON'T cross genres. In other words, if every singer before you is doing a country song, your rousing rendition of Lady Gaga's "Poker Face" is going to go over as well as a mechanical bull at, well, a Lady Gaga concert. Karaoke is an interactive "sport," and no one wins if you have to sing to a sullen crowd. It might be time to brush up on your Garth Brooks in that scenario. After all, everybody's got "Friends in Low Places" (but see above about clichés).

6. DO have fun. Yeah, this is kind of a repeat, but karaoke is all about celebrating both the talented and untalented. This is not "Evening at the Improv," and hecklers are not welcome. Be gracious to first-timers, appreciative to well-heeled veterans and don't forget to tip your KJ.



Photo Credit: Lynn Goldsmith

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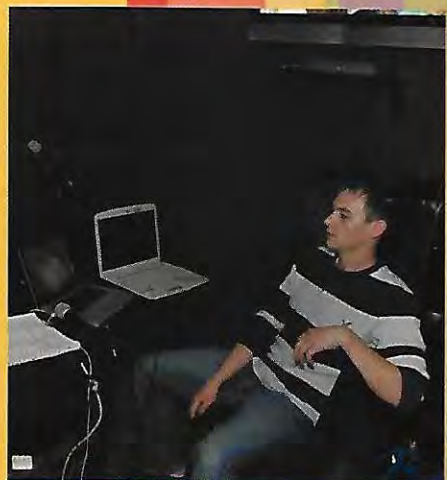
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Jerry Parker (left) has been the karaoke king of the High Country for 16 years. Keith Richardson (middle) of Sound Technique has been in the karaoke business for more than 20 years and runs the karaoke show at Nick's in Banner Elk and Crossroads Pub in Boone. Richardson remembers when only five discs of karaoke songs were available anywhere. Galileo's (right) has a more modern setup, with songs selected through an internet database.

The Lure of the Stage

But, readers may ask, beyond a little too much alcohol, what could possibly motivate someone to put themselves out there in the glare of a mini-spotlight with such high-wire, high-risk possibilities of stage fright or flubbed lyrics?

Some come to highlight their genuine


talent, while others (to badly paraphrase Cyndi Lauper) "just wanna have fun."

"I think deep down, everybody wants to be a star," Dixon said. Spending time on any karaoke night, a careful observer comes away with two undeniable truths: there are hundreds of amazing singers in the High Country alone, and there are

just as many people who couldn't carry a tune and couldn't care less.

"About 10 percent of them are really good singers," Parker said. "The other 90 percent are drunk."

A definite 10-percenter is Newland resident Jacinda Jones. She's been singing all her life, but the karaoke scene is a new



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experience. "You get to hang out with all your friends and have fun," she said. "My parents got me singing in church when I was 2 or 3, and this is only the second night I've ever sung karaoke" she said of her stage time at Galileo's on a Friday night. Her renditions of classic country tunes brought the crowd to their feet.

"It's your 15 minutes of fame," Parker added. "You're guaranteed to get a good response even if you don't get all the words right. If you pick the right song, the crowd will be with you." And, karaoke is economical—generally, the cost of a few beverages. "They want to take part in something and that's kind of fun," said Justin Davis, manager of the Town Tavern. "It's a cheap way to get some excitement."

Possibly due to differing clientele, Parker and Galileo's owner Dixon have heard two different songs requested the most.

"'Friends in Low Places.' Definitely," Parker says of the Garth Brooks classic. Dixon? "'Bohemian Rhapsody,'" he quickly states, referring to Queen's epic rock opera.

The Dream Goes On

And for those whose dreams of idol status go beyond the High Country, there is, indeed, an "Olympics" of karaoke.

The Karaoke World Championships is an international karaoke competition and includes about 30 countries worldwide. The 2011 World Championships will take place September 8 to 10 in Killarney, Ireland. For more information, click to kwcusa.net. ♦

Karaoke Nights

These High Country restaurants currently offer karaoke weekly.

Café Portofino

Wednesdays, 10:00 p.m.
970 Rivers Street, Boone
828-264-7772

Crossroads Pub

Saturdays, 9:00 p.m.
125 Graduate Lane, Boone
828-266-9190

Galileo's Bar and Café

Fridays, 10:00 p.m.
1087 West King Street, Boone
828-355-9591

Nick's Restaurant & Pub

Fridays, 10:00 p.m.
4527 Tynecastle Highway
Banner Elk
828-898-9613

The Town Tavern

Fridays, 10:00 p.m.
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Hound Ears Club 50 YEARS

BY JASON REAGAN
PHOTOS BY TODD BUSH



Reprinted from
*High Country
Magazine,*
June 2014



Building on a tradition of success as western North Carolina's epitome of mountain living, Hound Ears Club continues to enchant visitors and residents alike after 50 years.

This year, Hound Ears Club is celebrating its Golden Anniversary – 50 years as one of the state's top rated private mountain communities. The Club will celebrate this Golden Anniversary with a variety of events that truly express the Club's unique position as one of the region's most celebrated "escapes" from the hectic pace of modern life.

Envisioned in 1964 as a refuge for those seeking a gentle, yet playful, lifestyle, Hound Ears Club will look back at its heritage even as it looks forward to a healthy future as the premier mountain experience.

FROM MILL TOWN TO PRIVATE RESORT

The 1960s were a time of vast changes for the Boone

region. Tourists had begun to discover the delights of cool summers coupled with accessible ski resorts in the winter. Three brothers – Grover, Harry and Spencer Robbins – were no strangers to this trend.

The Robbins family had been instrumental in starting such tourism meccas as nearby Tweetsie Railroad and, later, Beech Mountain Ski Resort and Elk River Club in nearby Banner Elk.

The history of the Club is intertwined with the history of the resort and lifestyle community development in the High Country. The Robbins brothers believed that a Bavarian style resort that included both a golf course and a ski slope would find a successful niche in the growing High Country tourism industry.



Golf at Hound Ears is a special experience as mountain vistas surround every hole.

The journey from vacant farmland to world-class club started back in 1962 on the site of the now-defunct lumber town of Shulls Mill – just south of Boone and just north of Foscoe.

In decades past, Shulls Mill had been the largest town in Watauga County and was a railroad hub for the ET & WNC line, also known as Tweetsie.

In that year, Grover and Harry Robbins stood on a hill overlooking farmland owned by the Shore family where parts of Shulls Mill used to stand (in fact, before the #4 hole could be built, workers had to remove an old saw mill and remnants of railroad tracks can still be found on the golf course).

The brothers bought 750 acres from Claude Shore for \$274,000 (an average of about \$360 per acre) and in January of 1964 opened Hound Ears Golf and Ski Club.

The brothers had a vision – that they could transform that property into a world-class private club featuring a golf course, ski slope, fine dining and a lodge – in short – a touch of elegance combined

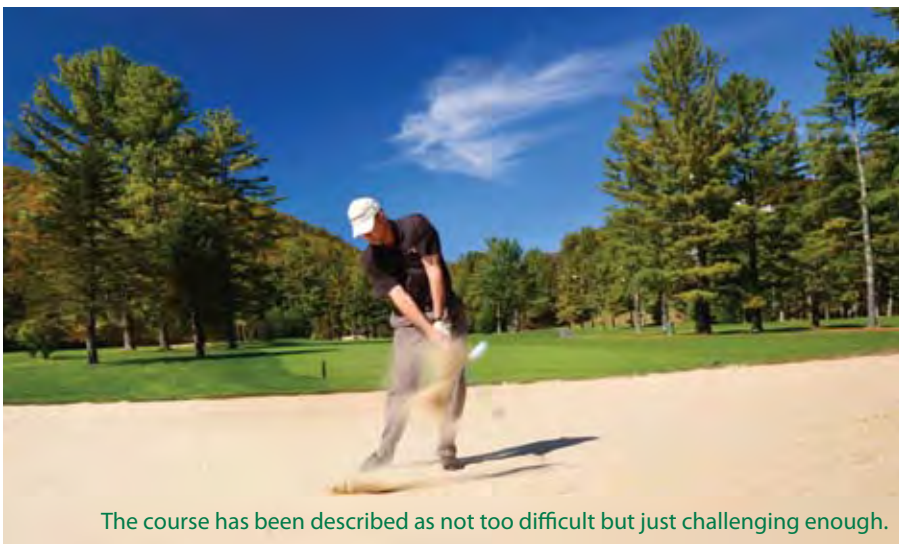
with a whole lot of mountain charm.

Ironically, it was Mr. Shore who inspired the name of the Club. As the Robbins brothers were negotiating with the farmer, he pointed at some of the rock formations and said “You surely can see the Hound Ears rocks today.” And the name stuck.

Not only were the Robbins brothers

seeking a lucrative return on investment with Hound Ears, but Grover Robbins had another motivation.

In June of 1964, he told the Charlotte Observer that he had grown frustrated with crowding at the Blowing Rock Country Club. One day while playing with brother Harry, he yelled: “This area needs another golf course.”



The course has been described as not too difficult but just challenging enough.



Clockwise from top left: Carrie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds visited Hound Ears in the 1970s. Many young golfers learned their game on the course during the same decade. Tennis became a significant amenity in the 1970s and continues today. Southern Living featured a Claus Moberg home for its January 1967 cover. Skiers await a course run in the shadow of the Bavarian clubhouse in the 1960s and enjoy a fireside party in the Lodge.



Today, Hound Ears Club offers a plethora of amenities including tennis, golf, fine dining, as well as a state-of-the-art fitness center and pool which attract a multi-generational clientele.



Bill Hensley, former N.C. Director of Travel and Tourism and noted golf writer, recalls many fond memories as he helped the Robbins brothers market the nascent Club from the beginning.

"In 1965, I was Director of Travel and Tourism for the state and living in Raleigh. Early that summer I got a call from Grover Robbins at Hound Ears who I knew by reputation but had never met. He invited me to come up for a week end and bring my family. He was anxious for us to see what he had created in the beautiful valley alongside the Watauga River," Hensley said.

As he did with many guests, Grover Robbins took Hensley up in his short takeoff and landing (STOL) aircraft which took off and landed on the 18th hole of the golf course. "A bird's eye view of the area was an unforgettable experience," Hensley said.

"I'm delighted that Grover conceived the idea to create a resort/club on a whim because a golf course he was playing in the area was crowded and slow. He



The late Harry Robbins co-founded Hound Ears Club in 1964 along with his brothers Spencer and Grover.

gave me a lifetime of precious memories," Hensley said.

And to build that course, the Robbins turned to George Cobb, one of the 20th century's most prolific golf course designers. Cobb created the Par-3 Course at Augusta National Golf Club as well as designing or renovating more than one hundred courses including Sea Pines at Hilton Head.

Bob Toski, who had joined the PGA Tour in 1949 and was the leading money winner in 1954, was hired as the first golf pro. He was replaced a few years later by Bob Kepler, the former golf coach at Ohio State. Tom Adams, who now operates Boone Golf course, also served as golf pro.

The Robbins brothers weren't experts in architecture but they knew that they wanted a Bavarian look and feel to Hound Ears. So, they turned to renowned architect Claus Moberg. Although he had made a name for himself in Florida, Moberg already had a summer home on Shulls Mill Road so he was familiar with the Club.



The brothers had a vision – that they could transform that property into a world-class private club featuring a golf course, ski slope, fine dining and a lodge.



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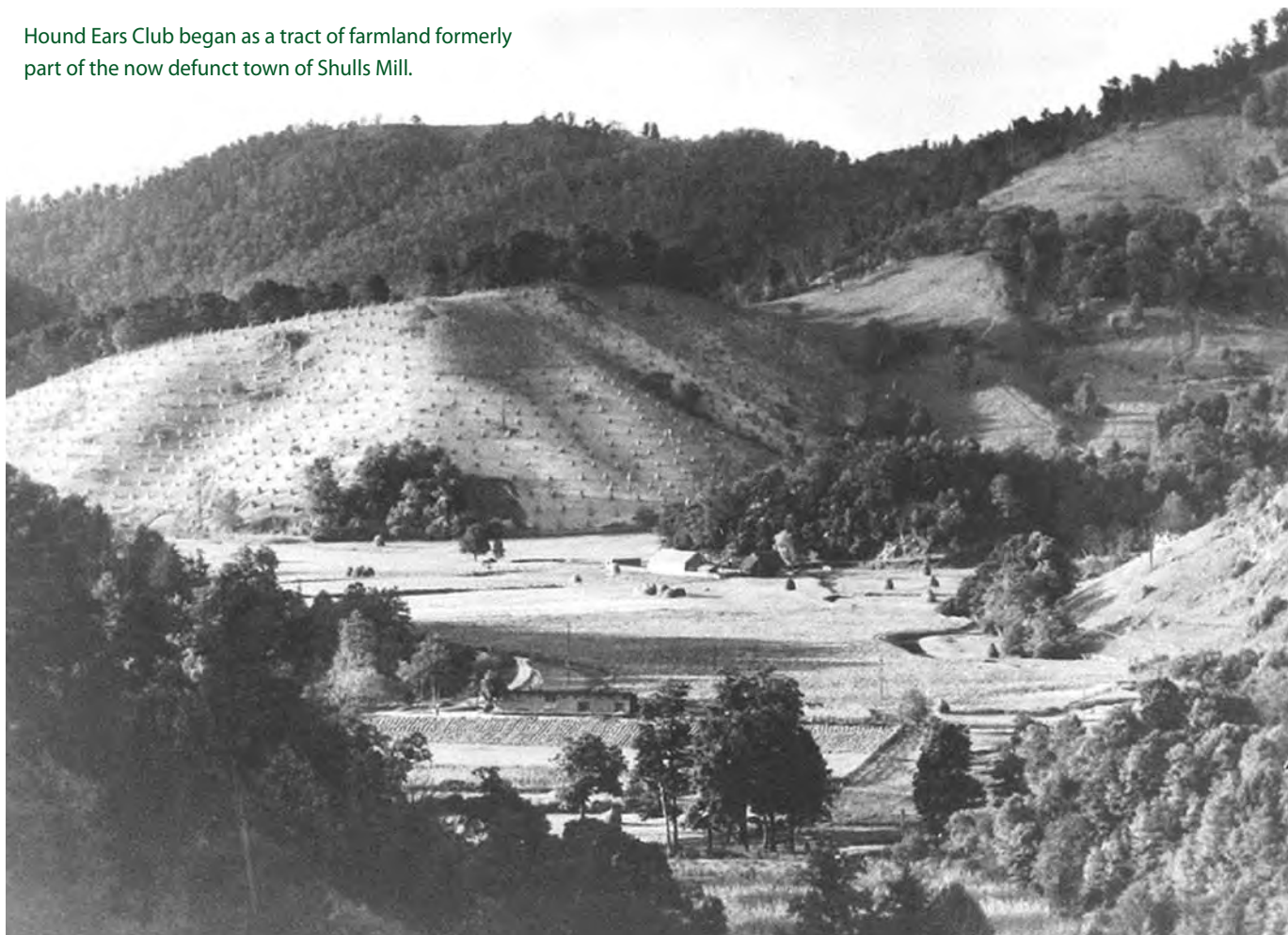
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Hound Ears Club began as a tract of farmland formerly part of the now defunct town of Shulls Mill.



“We brought a great community of involved people to our area. [The Club] has created new jobs and boosted the economy ... and has contributed significantly to [the local] tax base. I feel good about what we started.”

– Spencer Robbins

Grover Robbins (right) along with brothers Spencer and Harry bought about 750 acres from Claude Shore for \$274,000 (average of about \$360 per acre) and in January of 1964 opened Hound Ears Golf and Ski Club.





The Watauga River meanders across Hound Ears Club, creating a unique golfing experience

Moberg designed the Clubhouse, lodge, several chalets and later many of the homes within Hound Ears. The uniqueness of Hound Ears' design caught the attention of Southern Living magazine, which featured one of the Moberg homes on the front cover of the January 1967 cover.

The growth of homes on the Hound Ears property was almost an afterthought. Initially, the Robbins intended Hound Ears to be more of a private resort community with a Lodge and chalets to house golfers and skiers. The ski slope was in fact one of the key attractions for the Club until it ceased operating in 1991.

The resort included a small slope with one double lift and a rope tow on the kiddie slope. It was considered excellent for beginners and many longtime members fondly recall learning to ski there.

One such member is Freda Nicholson. She and her husband, Nick, came to Hound Ears in 1964 as one of the few couples who have been members of Hound Ears Club over the entire 50 years of the Club's history.

Freda recalls many fond memories of Club life. In the early years, the Club founders worked to maintain an image of a Bavarian ski lodge – both in the design of the Clubhouse and in the first homes. "There was special entertainment in the Clubhouse every weekend," she said, and it was not uncommon to see ski instructors "roaming the Clubhouse singing and yodeling."

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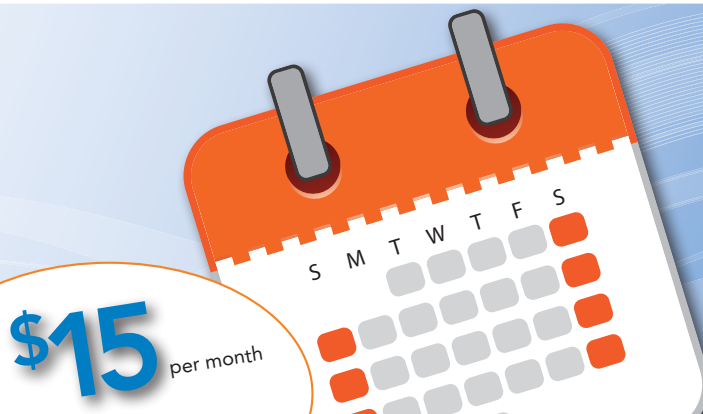
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“The tremendous support of Hound Ears Club greatly increased our ability to provide specific services such as cardiac care and cancer care for the people of our region.”

– Appalachian Regional Healthcare System president Richard Sparks



FROM RADIO ICONS TO GALACTIC PRINCESSES

The Robbins brothers were known for their marketing savvy and were well known enough to garner celebrity attention for their attractions and developments. As a result, many famous people passed through Hound Ears over the years either to stay at the Lodge or to attend other Robbins events.

Spencer Robbins recalls that one of his greatest joys in working at Hound Ears Club for so many decades was meeting the many famous people who passed through the Club gates.

Paul Harvey stayed at Hound Ears in 1973, when he served as the emcee at Tweetsie’s Old Timers Day. When Beech Mountain held a Snow Carnival in 1969, Grand Marshal Mickey Mantle stayed at – you guessed it – the Lodge at Hound Ears.

“He and I played golf in January at Hound Ears,” Spencer recalls. “He was a really good golfer.”

When Spencer began plans to develop Elk River in 1982, he looked to Arnold Palmer as a possible course designer. “I had been trading cars with Arnold Palmer for years at his Cadillac dealership in Charlotte, and he kept saying he wanted to fly up and look at the property,” he said.

However, prior engagements delayed Palmer’s visit, so Spencer and Harry decided “what the heck, we’d call Jack Nicklaus.”

“Jack said he’d heard about Hound Ears Club. If we didn’t mind, he said he’d like to bring his wife, Barbara, with him to come visit us that weekend,” he added. After his visit, Nicklaus decided to design Elk River.

Spencer’s “elbow-rubbing” with Hollywood stars increased in 1970 when the brothers opened Land of Oz in Beech Mountain. The amusement park featured costumed actors, rides built to resemble key film plot points and a museum filled with Oz memorabilia.

Before the park opened, Spencer traveled to California to bid on museum artifacts from the 1939 film. He found his top auction competitor to be acting icon Debbie Reynolds. Rather than



CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

To celebrate the half-century milestone, Hound Ears Club will partner with the Blowing Rock Art & History Museum to present a community-wide historical exhibit June 20 - September 7.

Titled "Hound Ears Community and Club: Celebrating 50 Years of Contributions to the High Country," the exhibit will coincide with the Club's 50th anniversary. The exhibit will launch on June 20 and wrap up on September 7.

The exhibit will feature a number of artifacts that weave a compelling story of the Club's history and its relationship with the High Country community created in 1964 by Spencer, Grover, and Harry Robbins, who founded the Club along with High Country attractions such as Tweetsie Railroad, the Land of Oz, Beech Mountain, and The Blowing Rock.

Dianna Loughlin, an art management graduate of Appalachian State University, is curating the exhibit. Loughlin has worked as the curator of the Looking Glass Gallery at the ASU Plemmons Student Union and as an intern at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She has organized and installed more than 20 exhibitions.

Jeanne Mercer-Ballard, Associate Professor in the Interior Design Program at Appalachian State, has also created a portion of the exhibit to detail the work of famed architect Claus Moberg, who designed several buildings and homes at

Hound Ears, including the unique Bavarian-styled Clubhouse.

Centrally located near Boone, Blowing Rock, and Banner Elk, NC, Hound Ears Club comprises 750 acres tucked into a valley near the Blue Ridge Parkway. The private community's golf course was recently named a "Top 100 Tar Heel" course by Business North Carolina for the sixth consecutive year.

BRAHM promotes visual arts and history in order to celebrate the rich heritage of the mountains. The museum, located at 159 Chestnut Street in Blowing Rock, was incorporated in January 2001 and opened to the public in October 2011.

For more information, visit the Hound Ears Club website at houndears.com or the BRAHM website at blowingrockmuseum.org.



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face a protracted, expensive bidding war for the items, Spencer convinced Reynolds to not bid on them in exchange for their use during the winter months at her museum in California (when the Land of Oz would not need them).

As part of the deal, Reynolds agreed to cut the ribbon at the Land of Oz on its opening day (which saw 20,000 visitors). She and her daughter, Carrie Fisher, stayed at Hound Ears. Yes, Hound Ears even has a connection to that “galaxy far, far away.” While many New England inns can say, “George Washington slept here,” Hound Ears can proudly proclaim “Princess Leia slept here.”

Veteran CBS journalist Bob Schieffer and his wife used to stay at the Lodge at Hound Ears in the 1980s while their two daughters attended nearby Camp Yonahlossee, which was then an all-girls camp.

Finally, Darby Hinton, who played Israel Boone with Fess Parker in the hit TV series Daniel Boone, often stayed at Hound Ears, Spencer said, and took golf lessons from noted professional Bob Kepler.

A FRIEND TO THE COMMUNITY

Since its inception, Hound Ears Club has contributed to the local community in many ways. For example, the Club holds an annual golf tournament to benefit the local hospital system. The tournament has generated hundreds of thousands of dollars to help purchase needed equipment

for the hospital.

“The tremendous support of Hound Ears Club greatly increased our ability to provide specific services such as cardiac care and cancer care for the people of our region,” said Appalachian Regional Health-care System president Richard Sparks in a recent interview.

Perhaps co-founder Spencer Robbins sums up the Hound Ears experience best: “We brought a great community of involved people to our area. [The Club] has created new jobs and boosted the economy ... and has contributed significantly to [the local] tax base. I feel good about what we started.”

MOVING FORWARD

Today, the member-owned Club remains a family-oriented mountain community. Hound Ears is known for its casual elegance and authentic charm and offers dining, golf, tennis, swimming, hiking, and a fitness center, as well as a full calendar of annual social events. With approximately 300 members, Hound Ears Club cultivates a small-town feeling, an echo of a simpler time, while still embracing the latest in amenities and technology. Members come from as far away as Texas or Florida and as close as Charlotte or Greensboro. Although most members own a home within the Club gates, several live in Seven Devils, Boone, Echota and Blowing Rock as residency is not a requirement for membership. ♦



I REMEMBER HOUND EARS

BY BILL F. HENSLEY

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Hound Ears Club which, since its inception, has become one of North Carolina's premier recreational communities. I can look back on forty nine of those years, having missed the first year of the reknowned mountain resort that was built on a whim.

In 1965 I was Director of Travel and Tourism for the state. Early that summer I got a call from Grover Robbins who I knew by reputation but had never met. He invited me to visit Hound Ears for a week end and bring my family. He was anxious for us to see what he had created in the beautiful valley alongside the Watauga River.

We stayed in a house overlooking the golf course and toured the scenic area from top to bottom during a two-day stay. My wife Carol and I played golf while the kids spent the day at Tweetsie Railroad, also a Robbins brothers creation.

We met Grover, Harry and Spencer Robbins for the first time and shared lunch and dinner with the creative brothers. In short order, we were discussing marketing plans for the resort and how to tell the world what awaited tourists in the NC High Country. And life-long friendships developed.

That winter the family came back for a second visit and everyone learned to ski, a skill that became a family tradition that has lasted until today. Our instructors were Kitty and Willi Falger from Austria, brought over by the Robbins' in what proved to be a highly successful public relations venture. The Falgers and their Austrian instructors quickly became a hit with members and guests.

It was during the winter weekend that Grover Robbins took me up in his STOL airplane which took off and landed on the 18th hole of the golf course. A bird's eye view of the area was an unforgettable experience.

From the beginning Hound Ears had a list of characters as members and employees. One of the most notable was Bert Shrake, a colorful and memorable bartender. He was a bald-headed, middle-aged curmudgeon whose sarcastic barbs could sting like a bee. But he could take it as well as dish it out so the repartee was hilarious. His favorite comment to me when I came in the bar was "what the hell do you want? Don't you have a home?" And the fun would begin.

After Bert left the club, he was replaced by Jay Little, a handsome professional dancer who left his duties behind the bar frequently to dance with the ladies. He became one of the club's best-known and most popular amenities and women flocked to the club to dance with Jay.

During the early days, Bob Kepler, the retired golf coach at Ohio State, became the golf professional, assisted by a popular Boone native Tom Adams. Kepler's wife Gert ran the golf shop. The golf course was designed by George Cobb and became an immediate asset as it is today. The scenic layout was often referred to "as the friendliest and most fun course in the state."

In the early days Mildred Bunting was the club manager, her husband Dick was the chef and her sister Ann Ellis ran the dining room. It was a smooth working family affair that lasted for at least a decade.

I like to think back to the many interesting members I met and played golf with. There was former governor Terry Sanford; Charlotte Observer columnist Kays Gary; Glenn Causey, who played the role of Daniel Boone in the outdoor drama "Horn In The West"; Colin Stokes, who was president of the R. J. Reynolds tobacco company;

Jim and Paul Broyhill; Ron Fallows, Blaine Lisk, Bragg McLeod, Kenneth Wilcox, Sherwood Smith, Greg Poole Jr., Roy Clogston, H.B. Crothers, Marcus Hickman and Jim Corrigan.

When Southern Living magazine began publishing in 1967, the first cover of the magazine featured a Hound Ears home on the cover. The club has been featured in the publication many times since then.

Over the years many celebrities were Hound Ears guests. I recall TV personalities Charles Kuralt and Bob Schieffer; NY Yankee great Mickey Mantle; evangelist Billy Graham; broadcaster Paul Harvey; movie star Debbie Reynolds; golfing great Jack Nicklaus; and governors Dan Moore and Jim Holshouser.

I may have played as many as a thousand rounds of golf on the great golf course, mostly with Harry and Spencer. My all time low was a 78, and I had a hole in one on the watery 7th hole. And I remember the course as it was before significant changes were made, all to the better.

In a round with Spencer Robbins once, he was even par after eight holes and hadn't made a par.

He had made four birdies and four bogeys. He finally made par on the ninth hole for a hot 36.

And the memories go on, including bringing in dozens of travel writers to promote the place; great dinner parties with Kenneth and Gerry Wilcox, Bill and Pat Beck, Ty and Pat Boyd, Betty Jane and Johnny Dillon, Lois and Ed Claughton, and the Robbins brothers and their spouses Delores, Rev and Grace.

I have taken golf lessons and written about pros Peter Rucker and Kent Shelton, praised long-time golf course superintendent John Tester, kibitzed with golf course starters Bob Breitenstein and Roby Triplett and locker room attendant Jerry Galya, enjoyed morning workouts with Debra Critcher, and was entertained by great piano music from Gene Fleri and Charlie Ellis. It always thrilled me when I walked into the dining room and Fleri began playing my favorite song. He was a master musician.

On the administrative side, manager Chuck Hyatt was a popular leader — and like Grover and Harry — died way too soon. The club has always had good leadership from managers and presidents, as veteran administrator Wanda Barrett can attest.

It was always a source of pride that the club grew year after year and provided employment for many local residents. At present there is a permanent staff of 50 plus another 75 seasonal employees, nearly all from the High Country.

I'm delighted that Grover conceived the idea to create a resort/club on a whim because a golf course he was playing in the early 60s was crowded and slow. "Let's build our own course," he fumed to Harry. And he did. His unique creation has given me a lifetime of precious memories.



**"I am in no way interested in immortality,
but only in the taste of tea"**
—Lu tung, Chinese poet

By Jason Reagan



Maybe it's time for another American revolution. Like the first one, this one will take root in the leaves of the *Camellia Sinensis* — also known as tea. Some historians blame the Boston Tea Party for America's preference for coffee as its hot beverage of choice. Tea was once associated with foreign oppression. And despite the fact that it's the second most consumed beverage in the world — topped only by water — tea has always enjoyed an "always-the-bridesmaid" status in the hearts of Americans. It's time for us to give this neglected beverage a second chance. As a certified tea geek, I'm willing to help lead the great Boone Coffee Party and help my beloved *Camellia* take its rightful place as our preferred hot beverage. Interested? Read on.

TEA TOTALS

So just what is tea and what's not? Tea leaves are divided into four main varieties, depending on how they're prepared: black, white, green and oolong. Oxygen (or a lack thereof) makes each tea what it is or isn't. Leaves processed with more oxygen are classified as black while green teas have considerably less. White tea — which has become more popular lately — is unprocessed and considered more pure.

BASIC BLACK

When most of us think of tea, we're thinking black. Currently the most popular in America, black teas were created as a necessity of international trade. To preserve their newest treasure, European importers had to oxidize the green tea they imported from faraway China and created this dark new type almost by accident. Examples include Ceylon black, Irish Breakfast and Darjeeling.

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

Tea leaves that haven't been oxidized are called green — it's the staple for millions of Asian tea drinkers and it's been used for thousands of years. Green tea has recently dominated all other hot beverages in the news because of its many health benefits.

And although, green tea does contain a high level of antioxidants — thought to fight cancer — it should be noted that all varieties of *Camellia Sinensis* contain roughly the same anti-oxidant properties. As may be expected, green tea evokes a much different taste that can best be described as — well — greener, earthier. Because so few people know how to prepare green tea, many have been turned off by a poor cup. For example, unlike black teas, greens should never be brewed with boiling water. Use slightly cooler H₂O — about 180 degrees Fahrenheit. Several scientific studies confirm that drinking tea can help lower cholesterol, promote weight loss and build immunity strength.

OOLONG

Although many tea drinkers haven't heard of oolong, they've probably inadvertently tried it. If you've ever ordered hot tea at a Chinese restaurant, chances are it was oolong. A semi-fermented tea that's neither quite

black nor green, this intriguing type is known for a slightly nutty, almost buttery taste. In Boone, Chinese restaurants China Wok and Hunan both serve oolong.

WHITE TEA: THE ROLLS ROYCE

If tea had a luxury class, it would be white. A mostly unprocessed varietal, white has gained popularity of late in the U.S. because it's been grouped with greens in terms of health benefits. Produced in limited quantities in India and China, white tea usually contains top-quality plants and yields a very mild but memorable taste. White Darjeeling and Peony are well-known examples.

UN-REALITEA

Tea drinkers take it as axiomatic that their favorite herbal blends — Celestial Seasonings Sleepy Time, chamomile, mint and a panoply of medicinal varieties — should be called "tea." But that's not the case. Technically, these various blends, while quite tasty, and even beneficial are not technically teas but are known as tisanes, a French word meaning "herbal infusion."

Although these popular beverages contain a lot of beneficial ingredients — plants, flowers, herbs and even fruits — they contain nary a trace of good ole' *Camellia*. Of course, there's no reason why we should tear down such a vaunted but harmless misconception at this juncture but true tea geeks love throwing around some leaf trivia when we can. It's what we do instead of watching "reality" shows. A discussion of un-teas shouldn't leave out the recently popular red tea. While not real tea, the leaves of the rooibos plant have also been in the health spotlight for a number of reasons and it's well worth trying out. What? You want more tea/tisane trivia. Sure — did you know red tea was "discovered" by Western drinkers in South Africa during World War II as a substitute for scarce black tea?

LEAF-LOOKING IN THE HIGH COUNTRY

The Boone area is known for many things — brisk skiing, breathtaking vistas and friendly folks. But a tea haven we are not. Like most American towns, Boone is solidly in the Coffee Clan. According to my sources (that would be the Internet), the true Mecca for tea lovers is in the Pacific Northwest in places like Seattle and Portland. For the intrepid leaf hound, however, a few oases lie tucked away here and there. In downtown Boone, several coffee houses and restaurants sell a limited but worthwhile selection of fine teas. **Espresso News** on Howard Street probably serves up the most diverse variety — like the excellent Republic of Tea brand as well as Twinings' tasty green jasmine (my personal favorite), Celestial Seasonings and Mighty Leaf.

In addition to several fine teas, Espresso exudes a congenial, urbane atmosphere, which was so recently lauded in no less than *The New York Times* and — a real plus — they use gargantuan, soup bowl-like mugs. Espresso remains the premier place to spend an idle morning or afternoon downtown for all those reasons as well as their eclectic magazine selection.

For an enjoyable "to-go" experience, visit **Grateful Grounds** located inside The Bead Box on King Street. They feature Numi-brand organic tea, which includes the enigmatic and spicy Monkey King variety.

Across the street, **Melanie's Food Fantasy** pedals a unique style of loose-



leaf tea. The leaf is placed in a nylon infusion bag and hung across the mug with a colorful swizzle stick — which comes in handy for mixing in your honey. Because Melanie's uses loose-leaf — the virtues of which are explained below — you can request a mixture of more than one tea. Their green gunpowder and jasmine blend is one of the best I've tasted from a restaurant — hands down.

Although I haven't yet sampled it, someone told me Angelica's on King Street also offers loose-leaf tea.

Further out in the land of shopping centers, **Higher Grounds** in Boone's New Market Center recently premiered a unique tea experience NAME. Served up in pyramidal bags, their teas include what appears to be quality, well cut leaves mixed with flowers and herbs. I've been pleasantly surprised with the results. Meanwhile at nearby Lia's, a kiosk at Lowe's Food, wide selections of red, black and green Numi teas are available as well as Mighty Leaf, which features an elegant and subtle green jasmine.

Speaking of grocery stores, **Earthfare** on King Street should certainly be commended for offering a hearty collection of single bags in their deli. Like Espresso News, **Conrad's** at the Shoppes at Shadowline is better known for their coffee than tea but they still bring out the good stuff by offering a selection of Republic of Tea varieties — the honey-lemon ginseng is topnotch.

LOOSE THE LEAVES

Why do we take tea in bags? It hasn't always been that way. In ancient China, tea was (and still mostly is today) enjoyed by infusing loose leaves. Thomas Sullivan, a New York tea merchant popularized bagged tea in 1908 when he wrapped his leaves in sample sacks to market to restaurants. He saw a golden opportunity when he noticed the bags were being used in the kitchens to save time.

HIS PLACE IN HISTORY WAS IN THE BAG AFTER THAT.

Although many companies make quality-bagged teas, the best tea can only be experienced with loose leaves. Jodie Warner, natural medicine specialist at Bare Essentials Natural Market in Boone, warns that some companies use chlorine bleach to give those tea bags a clean look. This can really ruin the taste — think of warm swimming pool water. "Many of the better tea companies use non-chlorine unbleached bags," she added.

Bare Essentials sells a wide variety of loose-leaf teas and herbs. For me-

dicinal teas — which we've already learned aren't really teas — using loose material is much more cost effective since they can be purchased in bulk. The store also carries a variety of reusable cloth bags and wire mesh infuser baskets and balls.

Bags may be more convenient but tea drinkers pay in terms of diminished flavor.

"Because teas in tea bags get less leg room, the quality of flavor [diminishes]," writes Chris Cason of Adagio Teas in his company's self-published book, *A Guide to Tea*.

Cason also points out that many companies cut corners by mixing the quality stuff with cheaper and lower grades which may add color to the tea but is not as flavorful.

"Most supermarkets still offer only this bottom-of-the barrel tea product, leaving most consumers to believe that there is nothing better available," Cason adds.

Hopefully, you have become heavily steeped with enough basic information to enjoy a quality cup of (perhaps loose-leaf) hot tea. But is that all there is to the experience? Just a small container of steaming, amber liquid? Or, is there a deeper meaning in process? Noted 20th-century Zen master D.T. Suzuki has compared tea in Buddhist rituals with sacramental wine in Christianity.

"The tea ceremony would carry for Zen something akin to the sacramental intensity of the Eucharist," writes Hal French in *Zen and the Art of Everything*.

Ancient Chinese Taoists believed tea to be an elixir that could lead to immortality — and really well brewed certainly lends an eternal quality. In Japanese culture, the tea ceremony is considered the epitome of artfulness, spirituality and a paradigm for explaining the universe. Kazuko Okakura, in his landmark masterwork *The Book of Tea*, wrote the love of tea culminates in "the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence."

What could be more life affirming, more natural than a refreshing pause enjoyed without the same jitters as coffee? (Yes, tea contains less caffeine in all its forms.)

So, the next time you meet a sunny, brisk mountain morning, brew up a cup of Camellia Sinensis, look out over the beautiful mountains and contemplate how the beauty and wonder of the universe can — if we allow it — be captured one cup at a time.

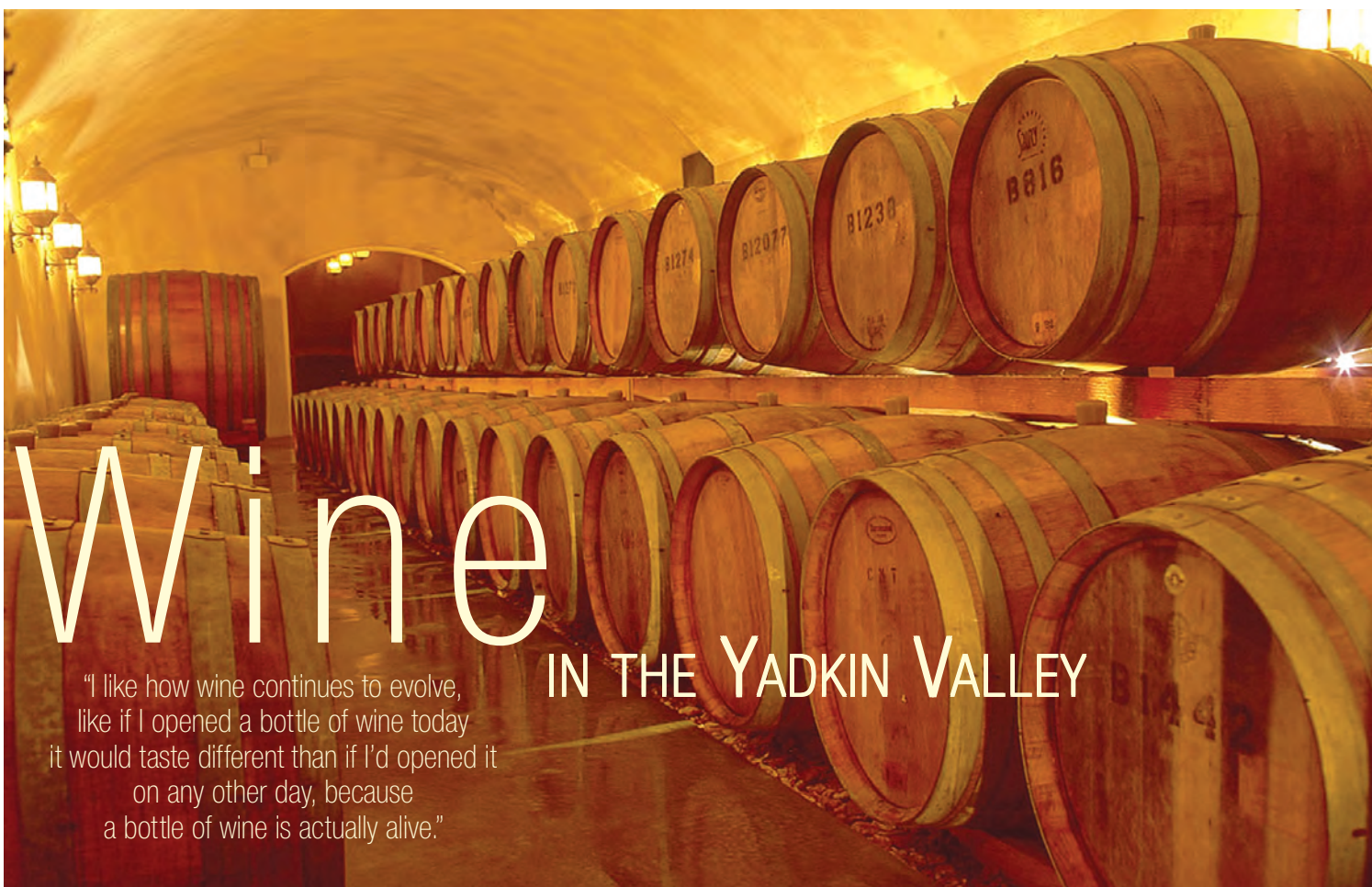
A TEA LEGEND

"In the fourth century, the Buddhist monk Bodhidharma ventured from his homeland in India to spread the teachings of the Buddha to China.

As an example to his students, Bodhidharma vowed to forgo sleep for a life of meditation and teaching. The years wore on, and one day Bodhidharma's eyelids succumbed to the inevitability of gravity and fatigue.

Frustrated by his treacherous eyelids, the monk seized a knife, cut the offending lids from his face and hurled them to the ground. There they took root and grew into the first tea plants, gifts from the Buddha to perk up his weary if lidless monk."





Wine

IN THE YADKIN VALLEY

"I like how wine continues to evolve, like if I opened a bottle of wine today it would taste different than if I'd opened it on any other day, because a bottle of wine is actually alive."

For a certain breed of daytripper, the quest for the perfect grape as portrayed in the Oscar-winning comedy "Sideways," has become a new destination sensation. And oenophiles in the High Country don't have to travel to the Napa Valley or Southern France to experience top-quality wines and to fully immerse your love of the vine — just drive down the mountain to the Yadkin Valley.

Located mostly around the triangle formed by U.S. 421 and I-77 east of Wilkesboro, the Yadkin Valley — one of the newest American Viticultural Areas — boasts 15 wineries and vineyards and a refreshing diversity of European varietals (in other words a variety of wines made from the same kind of grapes).

Travelers can uncork well-known favorites like Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot as well as some possible new friends like Viognier, Syrah and Cabernet Franc.

The quality of the Yadkin Valley's rich, clay-loam soil and year-round favorable temperatures has produced a subtle, friendly blend of conditions that historically made it a farming powerhouse and now continues to sustain the region through the grapevine.

Nine of the vineyards belong to the Yadkin Valley Winegrowers Association — a group that helps promote wine tourism and grape growing.

Because every winery offers a different flavor — much like the wine they produce — here's a tasting of three Yadkin Valley wine producers.

HANOVER PARK VINEYARD

"Most of our friends looked at us and said 'You're going to do what?'"

Such was the reaction when Michael and Amy Helton — both artists and teachers — announced they would open a winery in the Yadkin Valley in the late 1990s.

"This all got started after a honeymoon in the south of France," Amy added. The couple married in 1996 and took a month-long trip to enjoy some of the best of Europe's wine country.

"We got back and decided we were going to start a winery," Amy said.

Despite the incredulity of friends, she and Michael began looking for land

near their home in Winston-Salem.

They eventually found a weed-covered possibility in rural Yadkinville — a 19th-century farmhouse and former tobacco farm — and began Hanover Park in 1996.

Although the Heltons deeply loved wine, they knew virtually nothing about growing grapes or operating a winery so they had to learn everything from the ground up. Michael conducted hundreds of hours of research, consulted experts and friends. In 1997, the couple planted two-and-a-half acres and followed that with two more in 1998.

They renovated the ancient farmhouse, transforming it into a charming tasting room and winery in 1999.

Today, the couple divides the labor, with Michael serving as winemaker and Amy working as manager of the tasting room.

Hanover Park's most popular varietal remains Viognier, a dry white wine; which outsells their Chardonnay 2-1.

"Hanover Park Vineyard's Viognier is the best for the money anywhere," wrote Richard Leahy, East Coast editor of Vineyard and Winery Management Magazine.

The winery also offers Chardonnay (oak-aged and no-oak), Mourvedre, Chambourcin, Cabernet Sauvignon, Michael's Blend (a Bordeaux blend) and several others.

Hanover Park Vineyard is located just outside of Yadkinville at 1927 Courtney-Huntville Road.

For more information, call (336) 463-2875 or check out their Web site at www.hanoverparkwines.com.



By JASON REAGAN • PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF SHELTON VINEYARDS



RAGAPPLE LASSIE

What can you say about a winery named after a calf?

Well, you can say you shouldn't miss RagApple Lassie in Boonville if want a taste of a traditional farm combined with subtle elegance — kind of like the winery's trademark, a svelte cow wearing a black cocktail dress.

Don't let the exterior fool you. When driving past the winery, some people think they've missed it, not realizing that the stark, utilitarian, metal building is not a modernistic barn but is, in fact, the heart of the Yadkin Valley's most uniquely branded winery.

Inside, owners Frank Hobson Jr. and his wife, Lenna, offer a combination tasting room, gift shop and working winery all under one roof.

In fact, the winery, built from galvanized aluminum and concrete, was designed by architect Greg Snyder to exemplify the average farm building in Yadkin County, right down to the familiar silo.

But first, how about that name? Is it some kind of homage to produce and collies?

No, when Frank, a Yadkin County native and third-generation farmer, decided to replace his struggling family tobacco farm, he recalled how he had earlier amused his then-girlfriend, Lenna, with stories about his prize-winning, Grand Champion calf named, you guessed it, RagApple Lassie. And so, a bovine star was instantly born.

In 2000, the Hobsons planted their first vines — some red (Cabernet Sauvignon) and some white (Chardonnay).

"Almost immediately, the vineyard became a local tourist attraction," Lenna said. "[People came] by almost daily to see how the vines were doing."

Following the unspoken motto, "If the brand fits, wear it," Lenna drew on her marketing skills and added a gift shop to the winery where patrons can take home the undeniably cute logo of the voluptuous cow on T-shirts and a variety of wine gear.

In the tasting room, customers can try Chardonnay, Viognier, Merlot, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, "Boonville Blanc" and "Rockford Red."

The Hobsons expect to add Zinfandel, Cabernet Franc and several new varieties soon.

For more information about RagApple Lassie, call (866) RAGAPPLE (724-2775) or visit their Web site at www.ragapplelassie.com.

SHELTON VINEYARDS

Turning north into Surry County, the traveling oenophile can segue from RagApple's down-home, farming motif into an opulent, plantation/estate experience at Shelton Vineyards in Dobson.

A winding, entry road instantly immerses visitors into an experience reminiscent of the older, established vineyards of the Napa Valley. One is immediately greeted by rows upon rows of vines, bearing 14 varieties of grapes.

Arriving at the main building, a 33,000 square-foot structure, you get that strange feeling you're not in North Carolina any more but have been mysteriously transported to a modern chateau in France.

But in 1994, the tract upon which the vineyards sit was just some average farmland bought at auction by Charlie and Ed Shelton. The two brothers had no definite plans for the acreage but soon began to consider the possibility of growing grapes here.

"We saw the impact these vineyards—and others in the area—could have 20 to 30 years down the road," Charlie said. "With tobacco farming on the decline, we saw it as a great way to diversify the farming industry and open doors to new industries in the area, such as tourism."

The brothers broke ground in 1999 and haven't looked back, becoming one of the Yadkin Valley's most visible success stories. At 200 acres, the vineyard is one of the largest on the East Coast.

Today, visitors to Shelton can watch the bottling process, see how the fresh juices are aged in oak barrels and finish in the tasting bar with samples of Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir, White Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Sangiovese and several other varieties.

For more information, call (336) 366-4724 or log on to www.sheltonvineyards.com.



Michael and Amy Helton own Hanover Park Vineyard in Yadkinville.

IF YOU GO...

In a given day, winery travelers should expect to be able to visit about three locations — any more is simply too much of a rush. Before you go, check with each winery to make sure they will be open since hours vary by season. Many locations have picnic spots and, like any trip, ample research will reveal a host of fine eateries and several quaint bed-and-breakfast establishments. Many wineries are located on rural backroads so it's best to know your route before going. And, of course, taste and drive responsibly.



WEB LINKS OF INTEREST:

- www.ncwines.org/— An excellent resource about winemaking across the state; includes a listing of all Yadkin Valley wineries.
- www.yadkinvalleywineries.com/— The Yadkin Valley Winegrowers Association — includes information about the nine members of the association as well as an interactive map.
- www.yadkinvalley.org/— The Yadkin Valley Chamber of Commerce; stocked with ample lodging and restaurant information as well as wine-tour facts.



'Grape Expectations'

Another vintage year expected for Yadkin Valley vines

By JASON REAGAN

Don't expect too much winter wrath on the grapes of Yadkin Valley.

Experts predict a relatively productive growing season for Valley vineyards as long as Old Man Winter doesn't return in the spring.

Due to relatively dry conditions last summer and into early fall (perfect for growing grapes) and a not-too-cold winter, the vino forecast should match 2010's vintage harvest.

"Winter has been fine as far the vines go," said Gill Giese, a viticulture instructor at Surry Community College.

But an early thaw could uncork an unwelcome meteorological hazard.

"The only danger [for Yadkin vineyards] would be if we get a warm spike in mid-April and it freezes again," said Rick Conley, director of the viticulture department at Appalachian State University.

"That kind of winter injury can be quite devastating," he said, adding it's too early to make long-term crop forecasts.

UNWELCOME DROPS

For most winery owners, the greatest threat to their precious crop falls from the sky.

"The more rain you have, the worse it is," said Matthew Mayberry, owner of Brushy Mountain Winery in Elkin. Increased moisture dilutes the sugar levels in the grape which can make for a sour crop.

"If you have a drought like we did in 2007, the wine crop is excellent," he said.

Most Yadkin Valley wine grapes --- about 70 percent --- are in the French *vinifera* group; just the right variety to thrive in the loamy, dry soils of the valley.

As winter sets in, the buds, which sprout in the summer and early fall, remain dormant and, unless temperatures drop to record sub-zero digits, are typically unaffected by snow and ice.

"It looks really good," Conley said. "It was a very productive season," he added. "It was dry and that's always good for grapes."

FINE FOR THE VINES

Several factors come together to continue making the valley "good for grapes."

Due to the geography of the Yadkin Valley, most west-bound storms are diverted north of the region when they hit the Yadkin River Basin and then miss the vines.

Conley said the Yadkin region has less than 180 rainy days per year; a key requirement for growing healthy grapes.

The success of the Yadkin Valley American Viticulture Area (North Carolina's first federally approved AVA) not only stems from the soil and ideal climate but also grows better every year due to a vital knowledge base.

Surry Community College, located in Dobson, as well as Appalachian State University in Boone, both offer top-rated viticulture and enology degree and certificate programs. By the way, viticulture is the study of grape-harvesting and cultivation while enology covers all the other aspects of wine-making.

Even as experts uncork new ways to keep Yadkin grapes happy, perhaps it's not inappropriate to remember the words of Robert Louis Stevenson.

"Wine is bottled poetry."

If that's true, the Yadkin Valley may just produce hundreds of pages of sweet, succulent sonnets this year.



Bio-energy creates a MASS of questions

By Jason Reagan

Biomass: it's a new word but an ancient energy source.

For much of the world, the practice of gathering energy from organic material — the “bio” in “biomass” — is an everyday affair. Worldwide, about 146 billion tons of biomass are produced every year.

However, the growing interest in biomass as an alternative energy source in the United States is igniting a philo-

sophical firestorm about how, and even if, biomass could be a sustainable option for future needs.

'Wood' this be the best source?

Although biomass can take the form of any biological material, most efforts focus on the resource that best defines the region — the trees that cover Appalachia's mountains and valleys.

Biomass is sometimes touted as a carbon-neutral source because any carbon dioxide released into the air from incinerating plant material may be absorbed by the next generation of plant growth. Burning fossils fuels, on the other hand, releases carbon dioxide that has been confined in the earth's crust for eons.

Biomass power generated around 1.4 percent of the national supply of electricity in 2012, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Wood — including tree stumps, dead trees, logging debris, chips and even yard clippings — leads all other sources of biomass.

The sustainability of using woody biomass rests on the methods used to obtain it, especially if the material is removed by simply clear-cutting trees for fuel rather than gathering debris left behind by logging. And even gathering too much downed wood can harm a local ecosystem because it often provides essential habitats for wildlife.

Is the road to hell paved with wood intentions?

In recent years, residual biomass has been touted as the Holy Grail of sustainable biomass production because it only uses the leftovers from timber cutting rather than clear-cutting trees to burn as fuel. But, as skeptics point out, using



The uptick in woody biomass harvesting in the Southeast, partially driven by increased European demand for wood pellets, has set off a debate about how, and if, forest biomass can be harvested sustainably. Image © Kurmis/iStockPhoto

logging residues for fuel could pave a slippery slope toward widespread clear-cutting, or worse yet, harvesting old-growth forests that most agree should be protected.

“It's a complicated issue, and few, if any, are currently doing it right,” says Debbie Hammel, senior resource specialist at the Natural Resources Defense Council. NRDC has partnered with the Dogwood Alliance, an Asheville, N.C.-based advocacy group, to oppose industrial-scale biomass operations throughout the Southeast.

The groups claim that, although some forms of biomass can be termed renewable, the use of entire trees and forests should never be included under that umbrella. As part of their effort, the Dogwood Alliance is calling for a moratorium on the use of whole trees to create wood pellets for stoves.

Biomass operations, the groups say, should be implemented in a way that will “reduce near-term carbon emissions compared to fossil fuels; will not adversely impact forests, carbon sinks, soil, wildlife habitat, biodiversity and water resources; and will not result in net increases to local air pollution.”

Hammel says that many southeastern utility companies — such as Dominion Virginia Power — are breaking into the biomass business and investing in large-scale plants. Dominion recently announced the conversion of three

Virginia coal plants to woody biomass.

The increase in utility-scale biomass has potentially substantial environmental implications. According to Hammel, a 2012 *Wall Street Journal* investigation found that 85 of 107 U.S. biomass plants had been cited for violations of both clean water and air standards.

But in July, a federal court ruled that biomass carbon dioxide emissions should be regulated under the same sections of the Clean Air Act as other polluting industries, closing a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency loophole that had previously exempted biomass producers from greenhouse gas regulations.

“Burning trees to generate electricity is dangerous, polluting, and ought to be limited to protect people and the environment,” Kevin Bundy of the Center for Biological Diversity's Climate Law Institute stated in a media release about the court's decision.

Residual Biomass: What's left behind

When limited to the leftovers from timber operations, there are ways for woody biomass harvesting to be practiced sustainably, according to the Forest Guild.

The Forest Guild, a professional organization of forest stewards, recently released a guide to best practices in

Continued on next page

Biomass Energy

Continued from previous page

biomass harvesting in the Southeast. The guidelines warn that while deadwood and logging debris provide crucial habitat that supports biodiversity, sustainable methods can be employed to balance energy needs with ecological concerns.

To achieve that balance, the report recommends that on an average logging site with existing deadwood, about 30 percent should be left for the more than 55 mammal species, 20 bird species, numerous reptiles, amphibians, arthropods and gastropods that rely on deadwood for habitat.

Michael Jacobson, a professor of forest resources at Pennsylvania State University, agrees, mentioning that the state of Pennsylvania also recommends that at least 30 percent of logging residue be left behind untouched. He adds that, if such practices are maintained, using residual woody biomass can be sustainable.

“Harvesting and using [woody biomass residue] as an energy source makes a lot of sense,” he says.

Chris Moorman, an associate professor of fisheries, wildlife, and conservation at North Carolina State University, says that although some kind of standard needs to be developed for what goes and what stays in a harvested forest, more research must be done first. And Moorman is doing just that — co-leading an effort to see if leaving a portion of harvestable biomass improves habitat for wildlife, especially species that depend on downed wood.

“It's common for biomass harvesting guidelines in other states to recom-

mend this practice, but there is little empirical evidence to help guide development of the specifics,” he says.

The Forest Guild report recommends that woody biomass harvesting should be integrated with other forest operations, and advocates using low-impact logging techniques to protect soil from rutting or compacting.

Of local concern

From the standpoint of Appalachian communities near biomass operations, the debate can grow as thorny as some of the forest ground that's under such deep scrutiny.

A proposed biomass project in Penrose, N.C., generated a groundswell of local opposition this spring, as residents feared health problems and sooty air pollution from the \$22 million plant, which would use garbage and wood chips to generate power. Although officials from Renewable Developers, the project's backer, claim that the process would not require actual burning of the material, residents are concerned the project will skewer home values and create noise, light and water pollution.

Despite such fervent opposition at the local level, others say biomass production can be a boon for area economies. Jingxin Wang, a professor of wood science and technology at West Virginia University, says that biomass and similar sources could supplant coal as the region's next economic powerhouse.

“The major need for the region is to increase jobs and improve economic health,” Wang says. “There are approximately three million acres of



Critics of woody biomass worry that poor practices create greenhouse gas pollution and eliminate forest habitat. Groups like the Forest Guild are trying to encourage practices such as sustainable harvesting of debris left from already-logged timber tracts, which involves leaving as much as 30 percent of the “residue” behind for wildlife habitat. But research has yet to determine how sustainable the idea will prove to be. Photo by Alex Finkral, courtesy the Forest Guild

harvested forest material from residual debris and already-logged tracts may yet offer some advantages.

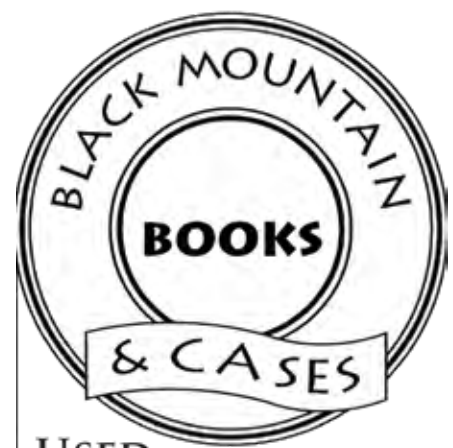
timberland with an estimated 190 million dry tons of above-ground woody biomass in the area.”

Wang is leading a research team to explore the impact of woody biomass in Central Appalachia. The team recently received a \$350,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

While researchers like Wang and Moorman continue to investigate the environmental and economic questions posed by woody biomass, sustainably

However, until producers, local residents and environmental groups can agree on a balanced strategy, it's likely that biomass — at least the woody variety — will remain a fragile sapling of alternative energy among a huge forest of uncertainty.

Stay tuned for future stories exploring the promises and perils surrounding various forms of bio-energy in upcoming issues of The Appalachian Voice.



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Dog House Resort

A Canine Paradise Opens In Ashe

By Jason Reagan
Editor
Autumn Times

Travelers who are doggone tired of staying in pet-unfriendly lodging now have a better option tucked away in the mountains of Ashe County.

Britta and Roger Roberts opened Dog House Resort, a log-cabin bed and breakfast, just north of Jefferson last month. They cater to all manner of pooches and their owners.

“Although other hotels and motels accept pets, many times you don’t always get a nice room since you have your dogs with you,” Britta said. “You can walk them only on the parking lot and often have to pay a high pet fee.”

Dog House doesn’t charge a pet fee — on the contrary guests (both two and four-legged) get several bonus amenities with the room price.

Every room — named after a famous dog like Lassie or Benji — offers a fireplace, bath with a jet-stream tub/shower and a private balcony overlooking the mountains.

Canine guests can frolic in a half-acre, fenced dog park — either solo or with the Roberts’ two dogs, unofficial hosts Renna and Rex.

The rooms are equipped with a complimentary pet treat, in-room pet bed, food and water dishes and sitting services when “mom and dad” want to get away.

“What sets us apart is that Dog House Resort is offering an interactive and fun as well as relaxing and luxurious place to stay while vacationing with their pets,” Britta said.

Why Ashe County?

Like many new High Country residents, Britta and Roger arrived here by way of Florida. While living in Naples, the couple grew weary of the corporate world and decided to find an existing bed and breakfast to try their dog-friendly business plan. They had some experience in the field after operating a pet-friendly rental house.

“We discovered that finding a B-and-B with acreage was hard,” Britta said. “We shifted gears and decided to build the B-and-B according to the needs of our specific clientele.”

“We decided to specifically built Dog House Resort to cater directly to the needs of dog owners and their dogs.”

Once they saw the tract of land — just off the New River near top of a mountain summit, the Roberts said they knew it was the right location.

The availability of Jefferson Landing Golf & Country Club and the closeness of Jefferson and West Jefferson sealed the deal.

“We really like the small town feel of both cities — which also offer many social events and attractions like the abundance of art galleries for example,” she said.

Six weeks before opening the resort, the couple moved here in an adjacent house during the final phase of construction.

As far as architecture, Dog House Resort is built of bright, engineered logs from Deep Creek Log Homes. Including the basement area — where dog owners can leave their “kids” in pens while eating breakfast — the building projects over a mountain slope at three stories.

While the couple loves the fun and frivolity of their concept, they are all business once the doors open.

Roger takes care of reservations and cooking — he makes a mean omelet — while Britta handles accounting and marketing, an arrangement Britta says works well for the business and their marriage.

“It’s much easier to respect each other and work together like you would in any company with different departments,” she said. “I’m happy to say that working together and making Dog House Resort a reality has brought us closer together.”

The Response

On opening night, Roger and Britta almost had a full house — the result of an Internet marketing campaign. Along with my wife, our stray-turned-pet beagle Skippy and me, two other families stayed the first weekend. We were all amazed with Roger and Britta's many thoughtful details including a complimentary chew toy for every dog. The foyer/living room area sparkled with bare logs, leather sofas and rough-hewn wooden tables appearing both rustic and spanking new at the same time.

As our dog and the other four-footed guests checked things out, you could sense a discernible excitement, as toenails click frantically across wooden floors and the tail-swishing reached a crescendo. It was as if they knew this place had been built for them.

Beginning that first weekend, the Roberts knew they had barked up the right tree (bad pun, writer-boy, bad boy!).

"The response since opening has been beyond our expectations — not only do we have reservations every weekend — but we have guests who are planning on a return visit and referring us already," Britta said.

The Appeal

Britta thinks their concept will continue to grow in popularity as people devote more time, attention and money to their dogs.

"I think people love their dogs so much as they are part of the family," Britta said.

"Many of our guests are either couples in their mid-30s who don't have children yet or don't have any at all or are baby-boomers where the children are adults who have left the home."

And so dogs have become surrogate children to some people.

"I can definitely say that for Rex and Rena," she added.

The numbers back up the Roberts' concept. According to a study by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 40.6 million households in the U.S own at least one dog and more than 20 million Americans travel with

their pets each year. And the Roberts are betting that several of those millions will wind their way through the mountains of Ashe County to find their very own pooch paradise (and that's the last of the doggone puns).

The Dog House Resort is located just north of Jefferson. Because the inn is located at the end of winding mountain road, calling for directions is recommended. Call (336) 977-3582 or (336) 977-3482. The e-mail address is reservations@dog-house-resort.com and the inn's Web site is www.dog-house-resort.com.

Hiking Review

The Nuwati Trail

*By Jason Reagan
The Summer Times*

Visiting the High Country without communing with its variety of natural wonders is kind of like driving to the Grand Canyon and never leaving a video arcade.

One of the best ways to enjoy the splendor and pageantry of the mountains is by taking a hike along one of several local trails.

Many travelers prefer to skip a local hike because of a perceived lack of trail experience — it wouldn't do to ruin one's vacation with an elaborate helicopter rescue. So, that's where I, your outdoorsy guinea pig, come into play. If an amateur like me can experience the joy of nature and still avoid the pitfalls of the wild, anyone can venture down our local trails with the confidence of Grizzly Adams — minus the cheesy lumberjack shirt.

For our experiment, I chose one of the 11 hiking trails that snake across and around Grandfather Mountain (www.grandfathermountain.com).

Located near the junction of N.C. 105 and U.S. 221 south of Boone, Grandfather Mountain boasts some of the grandest views and most diverse flora and fauna in the area. Since the trails are funded by the cost of permits, the area is professionally maintained and monitored without the funding worries of federal or state budget constraints. One of the most serene and easiest hiking trails is the Nuwati Trail, one of Grandfather's East Side trails.

While perusing the Grandfather Mountain Back Country Trail Guide, my eyes immediately targeted the word "easy" under the Nuwati description. I decided to test the limits of easiness and hit the trail in my moderately out-of-shape splendor.

One of my pet peeves in the current outdoors movement is the trend towards extravagant equipment driven mostly by the magazine industry. I can't count how many articles I've perused about buying the "perfect" gear in *Men's Health* and *Men's Journal*. Do you really need a solar-powered, gold-plated, portable, nose-hair clipper with GPS tracker (\$4,345 plus shipping and your first-born)? Should a day-trip backpack cost more than tires that bring you to the trailhead? I decided to tackle the Nuwati with simplicity (read "cheapness") in mind — Mr. Thoreau in a Subaru.

I found my daypack purchased locally for about \$20. A downloaded trail map from Grandfather Mountain's Web site served me just fine (cost: eight sheets of paper and ink). My compass was a freebie courtesy of the N.C. Forestry Council obtained at some past trade show. Clothing? A free "Freakonomics" T-shirt from the Watauga County

Public Library's Summer Reading campaign. Shorts? four-year-old khaki pair (probably \$20) purchased locally and cheaply.

My backpack also held a pocketknife purchased illegally from a Tennessee flea market at age 11 — I assumed it was illegal to sell knives to preteens; as well as two bottles of spring water (\$.50 per bottle in bulk) and two Clif Bars (\$1.50 each at Bare Essentials in Boone). My boots were also purchased on the cheap right here in Boone — they felt fine. My one regret after the hike was not investing a little more in socks — I soon replaced my white tube socks for some Columbia Hikers.

In all, I probably had \$60 invested in this hike, not counting gas and permit cost. Take that, Sharper Image.

The Nuwati trail can be reached at two trailheads. The best is probably the Boone Fork parking area at mile marker 300 of the Blue Ridge Parkway — a couple of miles south of Moses Cone Manor.

The other is the Asutsi Trail via the Serenity Farms parking area (for more information about this access point, call Grandfather Mountain).

From the Boone fork parking lot, I entered the Parkway's Tanawha Trail and walked south through acres of tranquil forest, encountering only about four other hikers along the way. Since the National Parks Service owns the Tanawha trail there is no charge but no camping is allowed. Although the trail is sometimes not clearly visible, the Tanawha is blazed with small feather signs on some trees.

In just a few minutes I met the junction of the Tanawha and Nuwati and I could immediately see the difference in maintenance. The staff at Grandfather Mountain keeps the trail ways quite clear and provides several easily visible blue trail blazes to keep hikers on track. Along the way, I met a Grandfather Mountain employee who answered several of my navigational questions.

The Nuwati — Cherokee for “medicine” — roughly follows the track of a former logging road for 1.2 miles.

Although the trail is ranked easy there are some a few steep climbs and at least one large stream crossing where caution is advised. But overall the trail is even albeit rocky. Of course, even the act of stepping on the many circular and rough-hewn rocks becomes sacred when you realize many rocks in the range are more than one billion years old. The path of the Nuwati describes a partial arc through Boone Bowl, a U-shaped valley roughly bisected by musical Boone Fork Creek. Photographers wanting to practice the rare skill of capturing cascades will have several chances along the creek.

Due to the timing of my early spring hike, I missed the colorful show performed by the areas trilliums, lilies and pantheon of rich mountain wildflowers. However, I experienced the rich feeling of green — yes, at this point green becomes more than a visual stimulus

— as canopies of hardwood trees, mosses, and plant life too rich to adequately describe here enveloped me.

Along the way, evidence of the old logging days are still visible with remnants of rusty cables protruding from some trees. The lone stand of Quaking Aspens should not be missed.

Rustic campsites provide weary hikers with nice clearings to enjoy a Clif Bar or chug some H2O. See the end of the article for information about campsites.

Instead of sore feet, sweat and that nagging “I-gotta-hike-this-back!” feeling that can sometimes accompany a hiker (at least out-of-shape hikers like me), the Nuwati offers a bonus at the hiking faithful — a spectacular view of the Boone Bowl from Storyteller’s Rock.

Jutting out about 70 feet off the ground, the mostly bare, flat rock got its name after Grandfather Mountain trail employee and history buff Ed Schultz began to tell interpretive “Living History” stories from the rock’s summit in 1990.

To reach the top, hikers should climb carefully and follow the blue blazes to the top. From there, the shape of the valley is evident and hikers can trace the line of the Boone Fork as well — a grand payoff for a one-mile walk. The Nuwati trail truly earns its Cherokee name as it gave at least one cheapskate hiker a string dose of spiritual medicine.

SIDEBAR

More information and safety tips from the folks at Grandfather Mountain

Backcountry Hiking Trails

Grandfather's backcountry is very different from other areas in the South.

- * Trails take you through forests usually found in Canadian climates.
- * Many of the trails use ladders and cables to climb sheer cliff faces.
- * Grandfather is home to 16 distinct natural communities (ecosystems).
- * Is home to 66 rare or endangered species, including 11 that are globally imperiled.
- * Portions of the backcountry are sheltered within a Nature Conservancy trust.
- * Grandfather is part of the United Nation's international network of Biosphere Reserves
- * Hikers access trails only by paying user fees.
- * Hiking is included as part of your attraction admission . Guests who purchase a ticket to the attraction may access the trails from inside the gates.

* Guests who visit for hiking only may access the trails from off-mountain trailheads and must purchase hiking permits for one-half the regular gate admission price.

If you want to enter the Backcountry from the Swinging Bridge area

* Hiking is included in the price of admission. To access the start of the Grandfather Trail, please park at the Hiker's Parking Area, a quarter mile below the summit.

* Please return to your vehicle at least one hour before closing time. If, in an emergency, you leave your car on the mountain, please call (828) 733-2800 (Top Shop), (828) 733-4337 (Gate) or (828) 733-1059 (Nature Museum) as soon as possible to notify Grandfather Mountain staff. If you do not call, we will send out a search party.

If you want only to hike without going through the Entrance Gate

* Guests wishing only to hike can begin at one of the two off-mountain trailheads located either on US 221 or NC 105. A trail map will be supplied when you purchase your permit.

* If you park at an off-mountain trailhead, plan on hiking back to your car

* If you plan to have someone pick you up at the Hiker's Parking Area, the driver of the pick-up vehicle will be charged regular gate admission to come in to pick you up.

* Grandfather Mountain is not able to provide rides to or from trailheads.

Source: Grandfather Mountain

SIDEBAR

Grandfather Permit Rates and Info Rates & Hiking Permits

Grandfather Mountain is privately owned and operated. Since the Mountain is not supported by tax dollars, hiking fees are charged to finance trail maintenance and construction and to insure conservation efforts.

Hiking is included in the price of park admission. However, should you desire to come to Grandfather for hiking only, you may purchase a hiking permit to access the trails from trailheads located outside of the attraction. The following reflects the full range of individual and group fees for hiking access to Grandfather Mountain from trailheads at the base of the Mountain.

Rates for Individuals

Adults \$5 per day

Child (4-12 years) \$3 per day

Child ages 3 and younger Free
Backpacking / Camping Rates

Backpackers pay for each day on the mountain. For example, an adult camping one night would be on the Mountain two days.

Adult Overnight (2 days) \$10

Child Overnight (2 days) \$6
Rates for Groups (10 or more people)

Adults \$4 per day

Child (4-12 years) \$2 per day
Annual Hiking Passes

Passes are valid for one year from the date of purchase and may be purchased at any permit outlet.

Adult Individual Annual Pass (includes all park facilities) \$35

Child Individual Annual Pass (includes all park facilities) \$15

Group Annual Hiking Pass (Passholder + 5) \$60
Where To Find Permits

The High Country outlets listed below sell hiking permits. For more information about trails, fees and outlet locations, write:

Grandfather Mountain Backcountry Manager
P.O. Box 129
Linville, NC 28646 .
Or Email: hiking@grandfather.com
Or call 828-737-0833
At Grandfather Mountain:

* Grandfather Mountain Entrance, US 221, Linville

Closest to Profile Trail:

- * Invershiel Exxon, Intersection of NC 105 & NC 184, Banner Elk
- * Extreme Snowboard & Ski, Hwy 184, Sugar Mountain (closed in April)
- * Seven Devils Exxon, NC Highway 105, Foscoe

Closest to Nuwati and Daniel Boone Scout Trails:

- * Grandfather Mountain Market, Jct. of US 221 and Holloway Mtn. Road
- * Footsloggers, US 221 & Main Street, Blowing Rock

Other Area Outlets:

- * Footsloggers, 139 Depot Street, Boone
- * Mast General Store, King Street, Boone
- * Mast General Store Annex, Hwy 194, Valle Crucis

SIDEBAR

Please use good judgment in taking the following safety tips into account:

- * Equipment- Trails here are often steep, rocky, uneven, and slippery. Hikers should wear sturdy boots and carry a daypack with food, water, first aid supplies, rain gear, flashlight, cellular phone, trail map, and users permit.
 - * Please do not attempt these trails wearing sandals, street shoes, or smooth soles.
 - * Lightning- Peaks , ridges, ledges, and shallow overhangs are all high-risk areas for lightning strikes. Stay alert for changing weather patterns (thunderstorms can arrive suddenly in the afternoon) and stay clear of risk areas in an electrical storm.
 - * Hypothermia- A cold summer rain can be as dangerous as an arctic windstorm. Carry appropriate weatherproof garments, even in summer months.
 - * Trail Conditions- In wet or wintry weather, backcountry trails can be slick, muddy, and treacherous. Upper trails in winter often glaze over with ice. Hiking under these conditions falls in the domain of well-equipped experts.
 - * Water- All untreated water should be purified. Giardia, bacteria and other contaminants cannot be easily detected. You can purify water by boiling it for 10 minutes, by using purification chemicals, or through use of a filtering device.
 - * Watching Children- Adults should lead and follow their hiking groups with their young children in the middle. If the hiking party decides to split up, make plans to rejoin at a prearranged time and place to avoid confusion and the possibility of after-dark searches for lost hikers.
 - * Health Considerations- Hikers with breathing or heart conditions should be cautious of strenuous activity, especially at Grandfather Mountain's higher altitudes.
 - * In Case Of Emergency, Dial 911.
- Source: Grandfather Mountain

Linville Caverns

A Geological Kaleidoscope

By Jason Reagan

Editor

The Mountain Times

On Humpback Mountain near Linville Falls, 2,700 feet below the Blue Ridge Parkway, visitors can discover the real lowdown on the High Country at Linville Caverns.

Carved from a river flowing through the mountain's limestone for more than one hundred thousand years, Linville Caverns offers visitors a geological kaleidoscope of sparkling stalactites, stalagmites and other rock formations formed by mineral-laden drops of water absorbed from the surface of the mountains.

In fact, a few drops still fall depending on past rainstorms so take a waterproof jacket to keep dry and to keep away the slight chill in the constant 52-degree air.

For the cavern novice, remember stalactites are limestone-based rock formations that hang from cave ceilings (they hang on "tite" - get it?).

Stalagmites form on the ground when minerals in water drop from the ceiling and form an ever-growing rock mound. (They "mite" touch the ceiling someday - yes, it's corny but memorable).

When the two formations meet, a rock column is formed and Linville Caverns has plenty of those as well as glittering gem outcrops and chambers featuring amazing symmetry for a natural formation. In the center, look for "The Cathedral," which some say resembles a miniature, medieval wedding scene

If your tour guide doesn't remind you, refrain from touching the formations since oils from human hands can stop the rock growth.

Rocks aren't the only growing things in the caverns. Small, brown bats can occasionally be found taking a nap on the ceiling. The harmless mammals like to hang out - literally- especially during colder months to take advantage of the constant 52-degree climate. By summer, most of them are outside but don't be surprised to see a few sleepy stragglers, which are usually no larger than a human thumb.

Speaking of wildlife, be on the lookout for two or three varieties of trout in the caverns streams. Trout play a large part in the history of Linville Caverns when,

sometime in the 1800s, a group of men discovered the caverns while trying to find where the fish in their streams originated.

The caverns are actually three levels and tourists are only allowed on the middle one. The lowest is the water level where streams meander at visitors' feet. The upper level is honeycombed with flow stone, a slick, glass-like form of limestone, which is too fragile to stand on. One section is so perfectly horizontal, slick and flat, tour guides refer to it as the "ballroom floor."

"To make sure nobody gets on the ballroom floor, we have a guardian that watches over it to keep people out of there," tour guide Ronnie Davis said, pointing his flashlight towards a rock formation resembling an alligator.

Like cloud watching, visitors can make a game out trying to match a formation with an animal or famous person. A hint: George Washington lurks somewhere in Linville Caverns as well as a mysterious figure known as "Mr. Bones."

The history of Linville Caverns is as fascinating as its many exotic rock formations.

Civil War soldiers used the caves to hide from enemy troops. Traces of campfires still exist in the cavern's central chambers. Unfortunately, smoke from the fires eventually made it out of the mountainside and soldiers thinking they had found the perfect hideout often discovered their fatal mistake too late.

In 1937, the caverns were open for commercial touring by John Q. Gilkey - one of the larger chambers is still named after him.

Thomas Edison once sent a team of explorers to the caverns hoping to find platinum - an element once thought vital in the production of incandescent lamps.

Although his team found no platinum, the variety of gems in the caverns sparked more interest in North Carolina's geological variety and helped establish it as "The Gem State."

Near the end of the tour, the caverns open to a "bottomless lake." Several years ago, when its owners tried to gauge the lake's depth, their measuring device stopped at its limit: 250 feet.

Visitors can stand on a metal bridge and gaze deep into the clear water thanks to powerful, underwater lighting.

People suffering from claustrophobia should know that part of the tour includes the extinguishing of the cave lights to demonstrate what total darkness is like.

While most of the passages are easy to navigate, a few earn the moniker "fat man's squeeze." Visitors should dress warmly and always watch for low hanging rocks.

Examples of the caverns many minerals as well as other native North Carolina gems can be found in the gift shop after the tour.

Linville Caverns is located just off scenic U.S. 221 between the towns of Linville and Marion, just four miles south of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Parkway travelers should take the Linville Falls Village exit and head south on US 221.

From Boone: Stay on US-105. It will turn into US-221. Head south on 221 for 14 mile and pass through the Linville Falls community. The caverns entrance will be on the right.

For more information, call Linville Caverns at (828) 756-4171, toll free at 1-800-419-0540, or visit their website at www.linvillecaverns.com.

All is merry and bright

Solar holiday tree lights up frigid Friday

*By Jason Reagan
Mountain Times*

Perhaps “Dreaming of a Bright Christmas,” would have been an appropriate faux-Christmas carol for the more than 150 people who filled the Jones House front lawn on a frigid Friday to watch the lighting of the town’s solar-powered Christmas tree. Apparently, the days were merry and bright leading up the event — when Boone Mayor Loretta Clawson pulled the bright-red “on” switch, a towering fir tree in the lawn’s corner began to glow with twinkling blue lights.

Mike Uchal, president of the Appalachian State University Sustainable Energy Society, welcomed the crowd amid 20-plus degree temperatures. The campus-based group brought the event together in alignment with what club officials stated is the group’s purpose: “to educate, enlighten, and inform students and the community about solar applications as well as other renewable energy sources.”

Society vice president Grey Nelson introduced Clawson and reminded the crowd the tradition started 13 years when several students wanted a solar-power tree and erected a small one near the Katherine Harper technology building. “Here’s where we are today,” Nelson said to applause and plenty of cheers. He thanked the campus Solar Club for helping publicize the event, Café Portofino for hosting a post-lighting reception as well as instructor Stony Oswald and his photovoltaic class for technical assistance.

“It reminds each one of us how bright and creative ASU students are to be able to illuminate a tree with solar power,” Clawson said before flipping the switch. “The gift of peace around the world and leaving the legacy of the preservation of our natural resources and landscapes for future generations may be one of the two greatest gifts we can give our children,” she said, adding that this year’s crowd was the largest she had seen in four years.

Participants were invited to return to Café Portofino following the tree lighting for raffles, prizes and scheduled live music by Wood Grain, Southern Exposure and The Native Sway.

For more information about the sustainable energy society, log on to the group’s Web site at asuses.appstate.edu

Woolly Worm Fest Crawls into Banner Elk

By Jason Reagan

Editor

The Mountain Times

No autumn visit to the High Country would be complete without paying homage to our mountain weather prognosticator, Isia Isabella, a.k.a. The Woolly Worm.

And nowhere else is the larvae of the tiger moth venerated more than in Banner Elk, where every October the Woolly Worm Festival draws an average of 25,000 of visitors in much the way as groundhog groupies flock to Paxtahawney, Pa. every February. The 28th annual festival will inch forward this year Saturday, Oct. 15 and Sunday, Oct. 16 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. in downtown Banner Elk.

According to local lore, the severity of winter weather for the following year can be accurately predicted by counting the dark rings on the woolly worm (which is known as the woolly bear off the mountain).

To determine which single worm (it's actually a caterpillar) gets the honor of predicting wintry weather, festival organizers developed the festival's cornerstone, the annual race.

John Thomas Walsh holds the official 2004 winning worm, Sparky. Hundreds of festival-goers either bring their own worms (some even "train" them) or buy them at the festival. The worms are placed on vertically mounted strings. When the "go" signal is given, "trainers" urge their worms to victory, many using the time-honored technique of blowing on the worm. The first worm to reach the top wins. After several heats, race officials declare the final winner; the stripes of its 13 segments are counted and interpreted. The stripes are said to correspond to the 13 weeks of winter.

In 2004, Sparky, trained by John Thomas Walsh, 7, of Charlotte, claimed the title of speediest racer and top prognosticator. He (or his stripes) predicted a mixed bag of snow for the 13 weeks following Dec. 21.

Officials have touted the accuracy of 27 years of worms at 85 percent. What is 100 percent accurate is that this fall festival will continue to be the biggest in Banner Elk for years to come.

History

Banner Elk resident and festival co-founder Jim Morton recalls the festival began with a merchants' meeting in 1973.

"A gentleman who worked at Grandfather Mountain told me about woolly worms being used to forecast winter," Morton said in a past interview.

"Some years later, I was invited to a meeting where they were trying to get some ideas together to possibly form a merchant's association in Banner Elk. It was a preliminary gathering. I was not a merchant, but I accepted the invitation to go to the meeting," he said.

Morton told the group that Banner Elk needed an annual event like the Highland Games at Grandfather Mountain.

"The day before the meeting, I had done a woolly worm publication that I worked for. I'd done the forecast using the very first worm that I found that year because we were getting close to deadline. When I finally found a woolly worm, it was completely brown from end to end," he said.

Later, as if by fate, Morton found a woolly worm on his front porch "with a lot of black on it, and only a minimal amount of brown."

With so many worms around - some offering contradictory weather advice - Morton and other merchants decided to hold a race to crown the climate king or queen.

"The first year was cold and windy, but sunny. We discovered then that woolly worms don't go very fast on a cold day. We only had eight heats that day, with 63 worms," he said. Only a few hundred visitors attended that year but word of mouth and an increasingly heavy media presence ensured the festival would grow to national prominence.

Woolly Worm Woad Wace

And who says only worms can run. Organizers also sponsor the annual 10-Mile Woad Wace from Newland to Banner Elk. Until Oct. 1, the registration entry fee is \$15 - \$20 after then through race day. Registration the day of the event will begin at 1 p.m. at Lees-McRae Track on Hickory Nut Gap Road just off Highway 184 in Banner Elk.

More information

Food and craft vendors will be open each from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Woolly worm races begin around 10:20, or as soon as the first heat, which consists of 20 worms, is registered and running.

Races will continue until the finale around 4 p.m. when the champion worm and trainer will be crowned. For the trainer, a \$1,000 grand prize will accompany the glory of victory. The Avery-Banner Elk Chamber of Commerce and the Banner Elk Kiwanis Club sponsor the Woolly Worm Festival. A portion of the proceeds from the festival will go to support children's charities throughout the county.

For more information, call 828-898-5605 or 800-972-2183 or log on to Avery/Banner Elk Chamber of Commerce at www.averycounty.com.

How to Enter the Woolly Worm Races

1. Get a Woolly Worm

There are many ways to get your very own Woolly Worm to race. One is to bring one with you from home. The drawback to this method is that if you live off the mountain, your woolly worm may not be used to the colder mountain weather and may be sluggish.

Another alternative is to wait until you get to the mountains to start looking for your woolly worms. The third, and most popular, option is to purchase one right at the Woolly Worm Festival. There will be many local woolly worm 'breeders' on the festival grounds with a large assortment of specially bred and trained worms.

2. Name Your Woolly Worm

This is a very important step. The name you give your woolly worm can reflect your aspirations of his (or her) performance. You should be able to take pride if your woolly worm's name is called as the winner of the race!

3. Obtain a Registration Form

The official woolly worm race registration forms will be available right at the entrance to the Woolly Worm Festival grounds.

4. Visit The Registration Table

The registration table will be located near the large, raised platform where the races will be held. At the table, you will turn in your registration form, pay the \$5 registration fee, and you will be assigned a Heat Number.

5. Listen For Your Heat To Be Called

The races move along quickly. When your heat is called, go directly to the race board.

6. Hustle to the Race Board

This is it! Get ready to race and good luck