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SECTION B



# Surry County a community of immigrants

By Kate Rauhauser-Smith

*This Our History column was first published in the Oct. 27, 2019 edition of The Mount Airy News as part of a long-running weekly series of history columns produced by the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History.*

Once upon a time, this region was home to the Saura. As I've written before, little is known of the tribe because their numbers were already dwindling, likely caused by disease brought by Spanish Conquistadors who came as far as Morganton and may have ventured farther north in 1540.

By 1670 when the first known European walked the ridges and hollows here in today's Surry County, the Cherokee were more prominent here.

That May Johann Lederer, a German physician and trader, set out from Fort Charles (Richmond, Virginia today) with a contingent of 25 British and Susquehannock Indian men. By June all but a few of the Natives had turned back but he continued along the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

He followed them south into North Carolina, passing through this area and going as far as the Catawba River before turning back. He was the first white to pass through here but far from the last as Scottish and English trappers and long hunters explored the area.

The earliest known map of this region, done in 1749, showed several occupied cabins. English and German settlers from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, seeking more land in less crowded spaces, followed the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road through the Shenandoah Valley to North Carolina.

In 1752, the Moravians began construction on their Wachovia settlements and the trickle became a torrent as their people and others moved to the backcountry of this state.

America, of all nations in the modern world, for good or ill, has been built by immigrants. Each new wave brought new

## Our History



Photos courtesy of Mount Airy Museum of Regional History  
**Eng (left) and Chang (right) Bunker** were born in the Mae Klong Valley, Samut Songkhrum Province, Siam to ethnically Chinese parents in 1824. After traveling the world as entertainers, they retired to North Carolina, first settling in Wilkes County where they met and married sisters in 1843, then moving to Surry where they owned a sizable tobacco farm.

ideas, skills, and customs.

For the first 100 years or so, settlers in this area seem to have primarily been English, Scottish, Irish, and German. In the 1850 Census, the first to collect birthplace data, the vast majority of the 18,443 people in Surry County were born in North Carolina or Virginia. Those born in other states, about 16 total, number less than 400.

About 20 were born in England, Canada,

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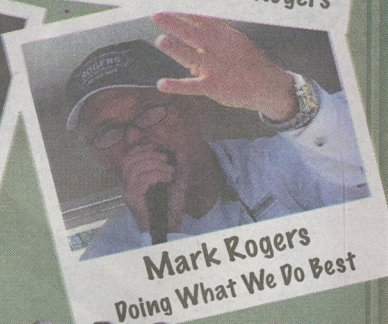


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Scotland, and Ireland and Surry's most famous immigrants, Chang and Eng Bunker, of course, were from Siam.

Surry remained incredibly homogenous until the granite quarry opened in the 1880s. At that time records show a significant influx of immigrants from Italy, Spain, England, and Scotland, regions with deeply rooted mining and stone carving industries.

Vincenzo "Big Jim" Alfano was a master stone cutter and worked on the Mount Airy Post Office, the Wright Brothers Monument at Kitty Hawk, Fort Knox, the bison heads for Arlington National Bridge in Washington, D.C., and the sphynxes of the Dodge Brothers Mausoleum in Detroit. His son, Ugo, worked for Renfro Manufacturing.

Today new industries are rising as tobacco and textile shrink. What started as production of metal car parts in the mid-1990s has grown to a multi-company industry manufacturing steel buildings sold across the US.

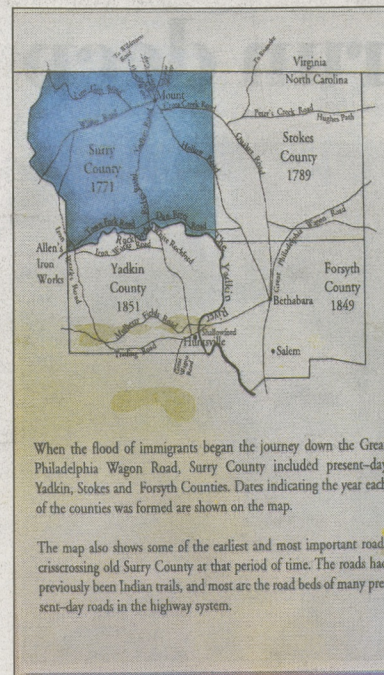
The industry is dominated by the Hispanic community, Surry's most recent immigrants. The community began growing here in the late 1980s, bringing a strong work ethic and devotion to family as



**John Sobotta, born in Germany, came to the US with his family in 1880 when he was 5. He began working in furniture factories near their Michigan home and remained in that industry his entire life. He moved to Mount Airy in 1904 and joined the National Furniture Company. He would eventually become part owner and retired as vice president of manufacturing in 1961.**

well as becoming economic drivers for the region.

Kate Rauhauser-Smith is a freelance writer, researcher, and genealogist.



When the flood of immigrants began the journey down the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road, Surry County included present-day Yadkin, Stokes and Forsyth Counties. Dates indicating the year each of the counties was formed are shown on the map.

The map also shows some of the earliest and most important roads crisscrossing old Surry County at that period of time. The roads had previously been Indian trails, and most are the road beds of many present-day roads in the highway system.



Most early immigration to the area flowed down the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road beginning in the mid-1700s. Most were of English, Scots, or German ancestry until the end of the 1800s. They brought their culture with them and blended with others here, most notably in the music tradition of the region which shows strong influence from old English and Scottish tunes.



All three of these men, pictured about 1945, were stone carvers at the granite quarry. Marcelino San Emeterio was born in Santander, Spain, known for its black marble. He moved to the US in 1905. His wife and child came 15 years later. Vincenzo "Big Jim" Alfano, from Salerno, Italy, came to US in 1903. Palmiro Rossi, born in Cremona, Italy, arrived in 1896. They lived on Flat Rock Road within a few doors of each other surrounded by people of many nationalities, recruited to Surry for their skill and experience with mining and carving ornamental stone.

1770 Happy Anniversary 2020  
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# Griffith roots run deep

## Our History



Family settled locally in 1700s

By Kate Rauhauser-Smith

*This Our History column was first published in the Sept. 29, 2019 edition of The Mount Airy News as part of a long-running weekly series of history columns produced by the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History.*

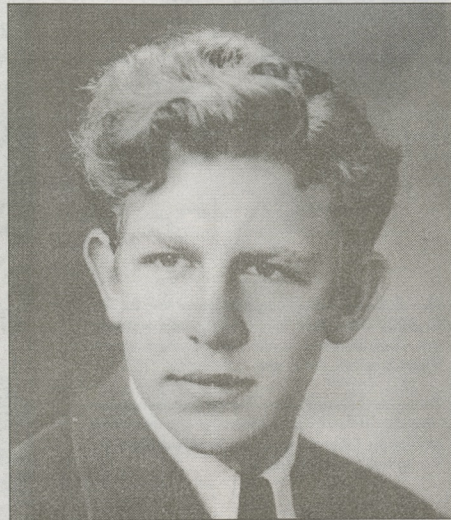
“One time, a long time ago, this country was a part of England and we wasn’t gettin’ along with them too good. Fact, we was thinking about breakin’ away and startin’ our own country,” Sheriff Andy Taylor explained to a group of spellbound boys at the courthouse. “But the king over there in England, he says, ‘If you do that I’m gonna send my Red Coats.’ They was British soldiers and he was a gonna send ‘em over here to whoop us!”

“Of all the nerve,” exclaimed an indignant Deputy Barney Fife.

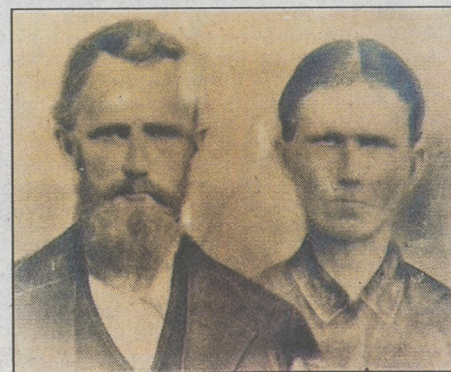
“Yeah, and he says, ‘You better think about that thing,’” Taylor continued. “Well, so your great, great, great, great, great, great-granddaddies all got together, you know, to think about it and they argued back and forth about it for a while and finally one of ‘em says, ‘Let’s do it! Let’s start our own country. ... Git your gun we gonna have us a Revolution!’”

So it was that America’s favorite dad ignited a love of history in Opie and his friends on the 1963 episode of the “Andy Griffith Show” called “Andy Discovers America.” It was also the episode in which Sheriff Andy meets schoolteacher Helen Crump, the woman he would eventually marry.

Griffith’s character frequently found folksy and entertaining ways to teach lessons, big and small, to the characters on the show and to those of us who



“When I was in high school, I was not athletic,” Griffith said in a 2005 interview. “We didn’t have money, and I was not a good student but when music came into my life. ... I became somebody.” As a child he listened to the Lone Ranger on the radio, imagining the stories told. “When I discovered I could entertain, I worked hard at it,” he said in a 1983 interview. “It’s the only thing I do well. There’s no point in doing what you don’t enjoy. ... Whenever I act or entertain, I try to say some small truth. No preaching, just to have some small thing to say that is true.” Andy is shown here about 1943.



Henry Clayton Taylor (1842-1900) and Rebecca Ann Simmons (1848-1923), Andy’s great-grandparents, were Quakers, and lived in the Westfield community of Surry County from the early 1800s. They are buried in the White Plains Friends Cemetery.

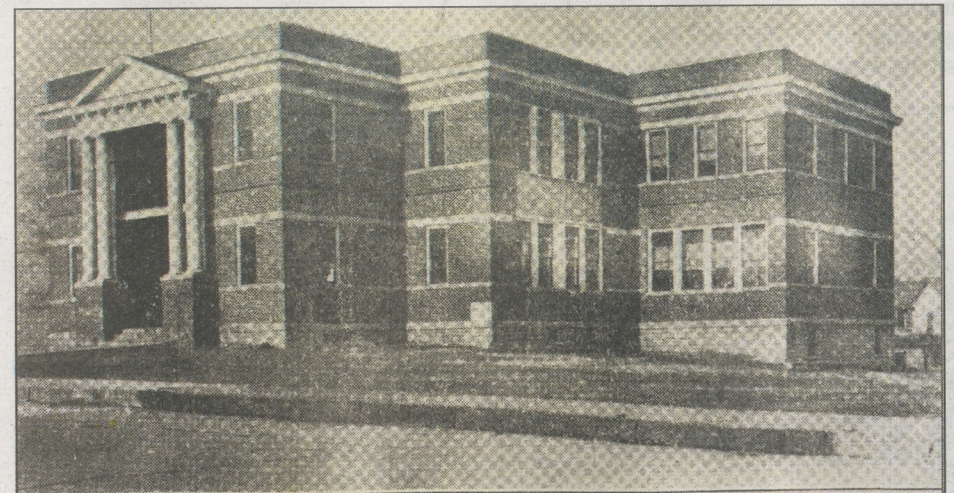
were watching. He still has lessons he can teach us if we take the time to look.

Andy Samuel Griffith was born in June 1926 in Mount Airy to Carl and Geneva “Nannie” (Nunn) Griffith. I



Photos courtesy of Mount Airy Museum of Regional History

Charity Childress (1834-1910) and William Griffith (1833-1895), Andy Griffith’s father’s grandparents, were the generation to bring the family off the farm. Bill was a blacksmith in Mount Airy, leaving behind the land the family had farmed since Benjamin Griffith’s land grant in 1786 south of town near Stewarts Creek.



ROCKFORD STREET GRADED SCHOOL, MT. AIRY N. C.  
Completed in 1924

Andy graduated from high school in Mount Airy in 1944 and headed to UNC-Chapel Hill intent on becoming a Moravian minister. Whenever he was home from school he sang in services at Grace Moravian but acting became his true love. He didn’t stay with the Moravian church but he held onto many of the denomination’s beliefs such as pacifism. “On my show, if there’s a squabble, we stop it. ... I don’t care who you are, you’re going to have frustration. I can be violent ... but I don’t hurt people.” The Andy Griffith Playhouse is all that remains of Rockford Street School, where Andy attended grade school, shown here in 1929.

don’t think there’s anyone in this town, especially in the last week who doesn’t know that.

Many know he attended the Rockford Street School, graduated from the

Mount Airy High School and attended University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. They might even know that he rode his bike across town to Grace Moravian Church where Rev. Mickey taught him



to read music, play the tuba and other brass instruments, and to sing.

But there is so much more to the story of America's favorite sheriff. His family roots spread wide and hold deep in the hollows and up the mountain ridges to Patrick County in Virginia and down to Stokes County here in North Carolina, where his ancestors have lived since the 1700s.

John Griffith, Andy's 4x great-grandfather, was settled in today's Surry County at least by 1772 when he appeared on Martin Armstrong's tax list.

Armstrong was a surveyor hired to

oversee the division of Rowan County to form Surry County in 1770, a process that took nearly two years to be formalized. A shrewd land speculator, he laid out the towns on land he owned and then served as justice of the peace, sheriff, tax collector, and colonel of the Surry County Militia.

John Griffith served as ensign of the first company of the militia through the colonists' war against the Cherokee and into the beginning of the Revolutionary War though he died before the Surry Militia deployed to Kings Mountain, Cowpens, or Guilford Courthouse.

John Newman, however, Andy's

4x great-grandfather on his mother's family, served in the Virginia militia throughout the Revolution and claimed bounty land in Patrick County as payment at the war's end.

It was this family with others allied through marriage such as the Nunns, Phillips, and Cassels, who shopped at the big white building near the Parkway, called Mayberry Trading Post.

Digging into the genealogy of the town's famous son personalizes many stories of the South. Some lines (Childress, Vest, and Alford) seem to have come from early Virginia settlements along the James River

and Chesapeake Bay, perhaps French Huguenots. Some seem to have been "long hunters" and other early settlers who traveled down the wide Shenandoah Valley and cut through the Appalachians into the Kentucky territories.

His family tree is filled with English, Scots, Germans and, if folklore is to be believed, Native Americans. More research will bring to light more stories about this man who spent his life telling stories to make people laugh.

Kate Rauhauser-Smith is a freelance writer, researcher, and genealogist.

# Times, they are a changin'

## Our History



1920 ushered in era of transition

By Kate Rauhauser-Smith

*This Our History column was first published in the Jan. 5, 2020 edition of The Mount Airy News as part of a long-running weekly series of history columns produced by the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History.*

Charley Green from Charlotte walked onto the trading floor of Planters Tobacco Warehouse and, as was common, he struck up conversations with a number of local men there. He eventually asked one, Arthur Cooke, where a man could find a drink in the town.

Cooke sold him the pint jar of whiskey in his coat pocket for \$4.

Green walked up Main Street to the office of Sheriff Belton where he turned the illicit liquor over with Cooke's name and the date recorded on the bottle.

It was November 1919 and the making, sale, and distribution of distilled spirits had been illegal in the state for 11 years. Green was a private detective hired to help bring down the supply chain authorities knew,

but couldn't prove, was operating in Mount Airy.

He made several other undercover purchases but was soon identified as a detective by his "hardboiled" mannerisms.

So Belton sent him back to Charlotte and asked for another detective, expecting an older man with years of experience. What he got was M.L. Johnson, described in the The Mount Airy News as "an awkward young man with freckles all over his face and red hair" who "looked as if he had just come from the farm."

Within two weeks, the innocent-looking boy had identified dozens of whiskey suppliers in town but the jars he turned in

See TIMES | B6



Photo courtesy of Mount Airy Museum of Regional History  
Beaded bags have been popular since the 1600s but reached their greatest popularity in the 1920s when these bags were used. These purses, from the museum's collection, came from local families, left to right, Oscar "Bud" and Clara Yokley, Beth George (daughter of Roscoe "Bowman" George and "Gertrude" Elizabeth Moore), and Elizabeth Payne Moore, born Dec. 4, 1906, and mother of Jo (Howard) Woltz.



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## Times

From page B5

were always half empty. When questioned on that he explained he always shared his purchase with the seller and bystanders. An unorthodox approach, to be sure, but it was netting results.

On Dec. 29, Belton arrested 26 men. The trials started the next day in Mount Airy's city hall. By Wednesday evening two had been found guilty and attorneys for the third were trying to discredit the young detective.

Johnson, a farmer, had been a detective only a week before coming to the city. When the defense lawyer questioned his lack of experience Johnson explained no experience was needed to buy liquor in Mount Airy.

So began the Roaring '20s in Surry County. It was a decade marked by great change across the country as women gained the right to vote and national Prohibition went into effect.

Here there was a sense of progressiveness as the region prospered with booming furniture, granite, and textile factories and tobacco sales. Main Street was paved and sidewalks installed. The state built a "hard-top road" from Mount Airy to Stuart Virginia, and another to Hillsville, Virginia. Market Street was created and paved.

County officials, in the wake of the devastating Spanish Flu outbreak of 1918 and increasing deaths from rabies, tuberculosis, and illnesses such as measles, hired a full-time public health nurse, Miss Cleone Hobbs, and a full-time sanitary officer to enforce health codes in the county of 32,464.



MAIN STREET, MT. AIRY, N. C., LOOKING FROM BLUE RIDGE HOTEL.

Photos courtesy of Mount Airy Museum of Regional History

A view of Mount Airy's business district on North Main Street looking south from the intersection of Oak Street. The Blue Ridge Inn is pictured to the right with a doorman waiting on the sidewalk for customers. The street is parked full of cars as the town, a center for tobacco, textile, and furniture industries in the region, grew more prosperous about 1927.

Fashions changed with young women cutting their hair short and raising their hemlines the whole way to their knees. Electric appliances began to appear in the homes of the middle class changing aspects of everyday life. It was simply easier to keep and prepare food safely with refrigerators and ranges than it was with ice boxes and coal-fired stoves.

Looking back at 1920 seemed reasonable as we rang in the new 2020 decade this week. But as I was researching I took a stab to see if I could find anything related to Surry County in 1820. It was a long shot since no newspapers from the county exist

and there are precious few other written records from that long ago — but I got lucky.

On January 8, 1820, the New Bern Sentinel published the acts passed by the state legislature the month before. Two dealt with Surry: Commissioners were appointed for the town of Rockford, then the county seat; and it was decided "To lay off and establish a town on the lands of Constant Perkins." Constantine Perkins owned the Blue Ridge Inn and the plantation he'd inherited from his father, Thomas, called Mount Airy.

I wonder what the 2020s will hold in store for us?



Magazines of the 1920s marketed motherhood and romance, fashion and artistically stylized flappers to women. Shorter hair and skirts scandalized many but the trend, which started with rebellious flappers, eventually became mainstream. These magazines from the museum's collection are Good Housekeeping from 1921; Life with the butterfly flapper, 1922; Life with the "Modern Witch," 1923; and McCall's, 1926.



Some beaded purses were so intricate and used such small beads they could have as many as 1,000 beads per inch and take up to a year to create. This bag has only about 550 per inch but includes jade, coral, lapis and cloisonné decorations on the closure. Prices ranged from a modest \$5 to a more extravagant high of \$100 (\$75-\$1,500 in today's money). This is a detail of Elizabeth Payne Moore's purse in the museum's collection which dates from the 1920s.

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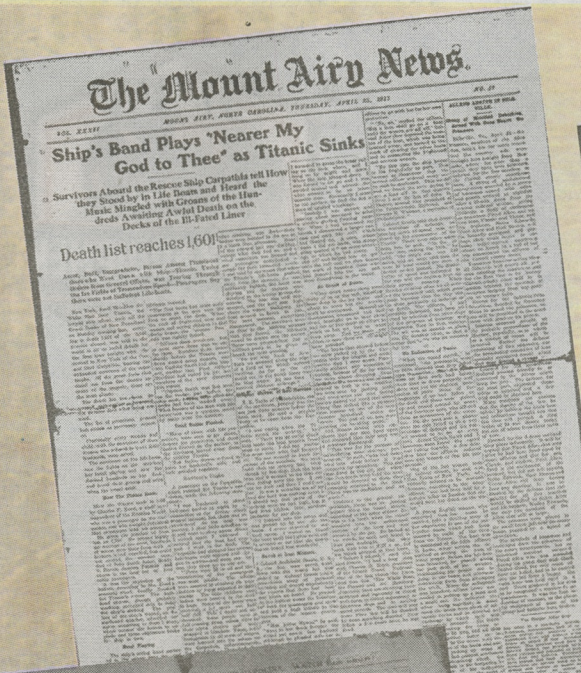


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AUGUST 18, 2021 B7



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AUGUST 18, 2021 B9



# Festival shows off city's past, present

By John Peters  
jpeters@mtairynews.com

No account of Surry County's history is complete without a mention of one of the largest annual events that takes place in Mount Airy, a gathering that was founded to pay homage to the county's agricultural roots — Autumn Leaves Festival.

Founded in 1966 as a community celebration to honor the tobacco growing roots of the local economy, and to coincide with the region's apple harvest, the festival has grown to be one of the largest, and best-known, events in the South.

Held the second full weekend of October, it is a three-day festival of music, food, fun and most of all, artists of all backgrounds showing off — and selling — their creations, drawing upwards of 200,000 people to Mount Airy.

The event has been so popular and well-run it perennially makes the Top 20 Events in the Southeast list published by the Southeast Tourism Society. Of course, with that much publicity, the festival does draw a crowd. Providing the weather is nice, the festival is usually jam-packed with people, perusing as many as 200 artist and crafter booths.

It wasn't always so.

## Humble beginnings

Yvonne Nichols, who had organized the event for nearly half of its first 52 years, said it began with a twofold purpose; to celebrate the harvest in a community that was still largely agrarian at the time of the festival's inception; and to take advantage of the fact that hundreds of thousands of leaf watchers were traveling nearby highways, meandering along the Blue Ridge Parkway to see the brilliant fall foliage.

Surely, there had to be a way to bring those folks a few miles over to Mount Airy.

Dr. Dale Simmons is credited with starting the festival. He was a small-town boy who made good, leaving Mount Airy, eventually becoming a doctor, traveling the world in the U.S. Navy, only to return to his home town to set up his physician's practice.

Upon his return to Mount Airy he was struck by two things.

First, he said in a 2015 interview, was the natural beauty of the region, particularly during the autumn when the mountains

and ridges are ablaze with color. While he'd grown up seeing it with his own eyes, it wasn't until Simmons was away from his home for extended periods of time that he realized just how special the local scenery was.

Second was the fact that so few people outside of the immediate community knew about Surry County, the wonderful natural beauty or the friendly nature of the community.

"I thought, why can't we do a festival and why can't we show people what we've got?"

He drummed up enough support to make the Autumn Leaves Festival a reality in 1966.

As it was conceived, the festival's focus was about showing, not selling.

"We're not here to charge people lots of money, we're letting people know we're friendly and we want to be friends," Simmons recalled telling those who were working with him at the time. He even went so far as to insist ham biscuits be sold for no more than 10 cents apiece.

Booths were set up along Main Street to display a large variety of skills, with crafts such as apple butter and quilt making, but industry was also represented, from furniture to plastics.

Vendors were told, "we want you to show how you developed your materials," Simmons said, recalling the blacksmith's horses backing up to his booth to be shod, right during the festival.

"These people enjoyed showing their wares," Simmons said.

He shared one story that illustrates how different those early days were, expressing amazement when, during that first Autumn Leaves Festival, "some fellow from Greensboro" came all the way to Mount Airy — three times — just to see a cow milked.

Simmons recalled how the cow had been dry on the determined man's first two visits to the festival, but the third time was a charm.

Milking a cow on Main Street, "that just tells you a little of what we were doing," in the early days of Autumn Leaves, he said, and how there was an interest to see those kinds of things.

Much has changed over the decades — there are no sows on Main Street during the modern version of the festival, and the

variety of food and beverage available far exceeds simple ham biscuits.

But a few things remain the same: some crafters not only sell their wares, but they have ongoing demonstrations showing just how they make the items they sell; the variety of both food and craft goods seems to grow every year; and visitors continue to rave about how friendly the town is, even when crowded with visitors.

## Crafts, food and music

Travis Frye, who serves as program and events director and Autumn Leaves Festival director for the Greater Mount Airy Chamber of Commerce, has said the festival routinely draws more than 200 craft vendors — sometimes even having to turn a few away. Artists working in pottery, paintings, textile, jewelry, woodwork, metalwork, and a host of other crafts, in all sorts of media, come and set up. While many festivals feature artists and crafters who ply their trade as a sideline business or hobby, most who set up at the Autumn Leaves Festival do this sort of work on a full-time basis.

Not just anyone gets in. Yvonne Nichols, the former festival director, said she and others working with the festival spend hours upon hours studying those wanting a booth, to see if their material is up to snuff, or if those already here are maintaining high standards to receive an invitation to return. Frye said the process has remained much the same.

As for the artists and crafters working the show? Those who get a booth for the first time often rave about the festival, and few ever give up that booth once they've secured a spot, returning year after year.

If the crafts aren't enough to bring a crowd, the food certainly does, with nearly two dozen food and drink vendors set up for the three-day event as well.

"Food for the Soul," is how organizers describe what's available, which include all the regular fare — hot dogs, hamburgers, barbecue, funnel cakes, and the like, along with Mount Airy specialties such as the collard green sandwiches, ground steak sandwiches and crowd favorite Amish brownies. Organizers also set up a children's area which generally includes inflatables and train rides, so parents can give the kids a break from shopping.

That doesn't even touch on the live mu-



Tom Joyce | Mount Airy News

People flock to Mount Airy every year for the three-day Autumn Leaves Festival, filling Main Street, side streets, and local stores, as they did in this photo from 2014.

sic, playing non-stop at multiple stages. Gospel, bluegrass, pop and rock, old time music, R&B — it's all represented during the gathering.

All of that brings what seems to be an ever-increasing crowd. By the time she became involved in the festival, in 1993, Nichols said the estimation was somewhere in the neighborhood of 50,000 people perusing the streets of Mount Airy over the course of the three days.

Now? Local officials put that number at around 200,000.

Despite all that the festival offers, there's an additional intangible Nichols, and later Frye, and many others associated with the event said keeps the folks coming back year to year. Many consider it a perfect place and time for a reunion of sorts. Folks who have grown up in the area and moved away use this weekend as their excuse for coming back, visiting friends and family.

"Some families plan their annual family reunion for this weekend," chamber President and CEO Randy Collins has said on several occasions. "They'll plan to meet this weekend, and everyone head over to the festival as part of their reunion."

"I've had people tell me they plan their vacation around that week every year," Nichols said.

In 2015, she met a couple from Hawaii who had crossed an ocean and a continent to get to Mount Airy.

"I asked them if they were here because of the Mayberry link, and they said no. 'We came for the festival,' they said. I couldn't believe someone would come that far for the festival. Of course, I was very happy about that," she said with a smile.

For more information on the festival, visit <http://www.autumnleavesfestival.com/>



# Mayberry Days a major part of Surry County life

By John Peters  
jpeters@mtairynews.com

Developing a big hit — whether it be a song, a business, or an annual celebration — is a great feeling, but there's also a bit of pressure afterward.

In the case of a song, it's what does the musician or writer do for an encore? For a business person, it's how to become more profitable.

And for the founder of a festival, it's how to keep the people coming, keep them excited, and give them something to look forward to each year.

That's the challenge Tanya Jones has dealt with for more than 30 years, since the inaugural Mayberry Day Celebration.

Her answer? Just keep adding to it, expanding, turning a one-day affair into a week-long celebration built around the incomparable "The Andy Griffith Show" as well as offering an ever-widening array of entertainment options for those visiting Mount Airy each year.

The festival, which annual draws tens of thousands of visitors to Mount Airy, celebrates "The Andy Griffith Show," which was, of course, a hit television show from 1960 through 1968 and still is among the most popular shows in syndication on TV and streaming services. The show itself is a look at the idyllic life of a small southern town, and while the show was set in the 1960s, many of the characters and happenings are based, at least in some small measure, on Griffith's memory of growing up in and around Surry County.

## Modest beginnings

The festival began as a hastily assembled Mayberry Day in 1990, when a 30th reunion of "The Andy Griffith Show" cast was planned in Charlotte. An off-hand comment from Jim Clark, co-founder of the The Andy Griffith Show Rerun Watcher's Club, to Jones got the ball rolling.

Jones, executive director of the Surry Arts Council, and her staff and a host of volunteers put together a

day-long event, offering local tours, rock throwing contests (in a nod to Ernest T. Bass' penchant for such shenanigans), and anything else that felt as if it could be related to Mayberry life.

A bit of coverage in a few national publications, and suddenly Mount Airy, and the soon-to-be annual Mayberry Days Festival, became a must-visit location for all Andy Griffith Show fans.

Over the years, the event has grown from one day to two, then to an entire weekend, eventually encroaching back further into the preceding week.

## Stronger than ever

"We absolutely did not see what it would become," she said while putting together plans for the annual gathering.

Mayberry Days is now a full seven-day event, beginning with various performances that Monday and ending on Sunday with a Mayberry Days chapel service at the Blackmon Amphitheatre.

In between there are comedy shows, appearances and performances by former "Andy Griffith Show" cast members, talks about the show, so many concerts it's almost as if Mount Airy is hosting a giant music festival, a golf tournament, parade, variety shows... the list could go on and on.

And most everything is, in one way or another, built around the ideal of Mayberry and "The Andy Griffith Show."

"There is great interest in not only Andy Griffith, but what Andy Griffith created," Jones said in an interview about the event in 2018. "The values that are timeless. We are certainly blessed that Andy Griffith grew up here and that he took a lot from this town in creating the show."

That blessing, and the forethought by Jones and others involved in those first Mayberry Days, has turned the festival into an annual "must-do" for thousands of people across the South and beyond, and turned the festival into an important part of the city's history.

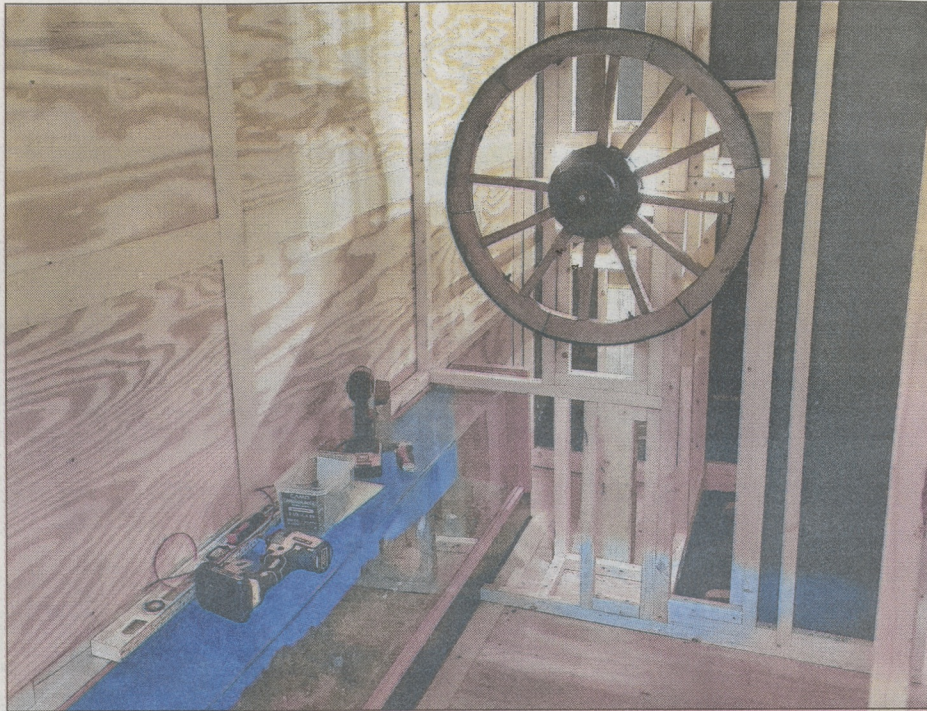


Photo courtesy Surry Arts Council  
LeRoy McNeese, far right, is shown with Andy Griffith and fellow members of The Country Boys on the set of Griffith's TV series during the 1960s. While the show was a huge hit across America, no one at the time envisioned how it would resonate with American viewers as many as six decades later.



John Peters | Mount Airy News  
Whether it be during the annual Mayberry Days Festival or any other time during the year, it's not uncommon to see old time and bluegrass musicians striking up impromptu concerts along Main Street in Mount Airy. Here, going clockwise, starting with the guitarist in front wearing overalls are Steve Bradley of Ravenswood, West Virginia, Al Barnett, of Mineral Wells, West Virginia, John Barnett and Jake Eddy, both of Parkersburg, West Virginia, and Jim Yates, of Boaz, West Virginia, putting on a mini-concert along Main Street prior to the start of the 2019 Mayberry Days parade.





Submitted photo  
Some of the display items are being built into the museum's traveling exhibit. One focus of the traveling display is to incorporate science, technology engineering and math in showing how those concepts were important in the region's history.

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# Traveling history display to debut at celebration

By John Peters  
jpeters@mtairynews.com

The Mount Airy Museum of Regional History will be on hand for Saturday's Surry 250 celebration, not only displaying relics and facts from the county's past, but doing so in a way that may blaze a new trail for how such exhibits are done in the future — at least when it comes to reaching school-aged youth.

The museum will have a mobile display — a look at Surry County's 250 years of history — all inside a traveling trailer.

"It's literally 250 years of county history in a 26 foot by 8 foot space," said Matt Edwards, executive director of the museum.

While it was the upcoming celebration of Surry County's 250th that spurred the museum to build the mobile history display, Saturday will be far from the final time it will be used.

Marion Venable, of the Surry County Historical Society, said the display is being designed to travel among the county schools over the next year, with a specific curriculum designed to teach local children and youths about their history.

Edwards said having such a display allows the museum to rebuild some of its outreach with the area school systems.

"One of the things we've seen over the past 15 or 20 years, is a steady reduction in visitorship from our schools," he said. "We used to get a ton, 20,000, 25,000 school kids visiting the museum a year. As curriculum changes, budgets tighten, technology changes, it just gets harder for them to get off campus. There is stiff competition, there are a lot of great programs out there, and they can only do so many of them."

"We can take this out to them, rather than to have them come into the museum," he said. "It's a whole lot easier if we can pull up and say 'Your third period and your fourth period classes can come out and check this out.' That gives teachers a jumping off point to work curriculum."

Not only is it an easier way for teachers to fold local history into their teaching, Edwards said it has the potential to pull more visitors to the museum.

"We hope the kids get just enough taste from the unit to go home and say 'Mom

and Dad, we need to go check this out.' It serves as a teaser for what we have here at the museum."

## Design challenges

With more than two centuries worth of history to cram into a relatively small space, Edwards said the museum turned to a local firm — Xtreme Marketing — to figure out how to best display what they have to offer.

"It is primarily artifacts and text, a little bit of audio and video incorporated," he said of the display. "Part of it is just a space limitation. Literally, we're talking about 221 square feet in which to tell 250 years of county history. What we've learned is there are a wealth of fascinating stories that can be told from around this county. Really, what we do is scratch the surface with this. As with any exhibit or story book, it's like telling a story, as an author you have to pick and choose what your story will be."

While this weekend's Surry 250 celebration was the main impetus for building the display, Edwards said the project has been underway for some time.

"We have been working on it, on and off, for a little over two years. When COVID hit, we kind of tabled the project and stuck it on the back burner, no one was sure what we were going to be able to do. A lot of the grand plans on the front end fell victim to COVID. We weren't totally able to implement things as we had envisioned. Probably March of this year we reached back out, we already had a pretty good plan of what the inside was going to look like, the content, it was just a matter of the build-out."

While the display has yet to make its public debut, Edwards said word has already gotten out — a few other museums in North Carolina have contacted him to learn more of what they are doing.

"This is the only display, that I'm aware of, like this in the state," he said. If it's successful, others may try to replicate what he and his staff have done, changing the way history is taken to the public.

And there are ways school systems can utilize such displays into the ever-present STEM focus of education — an acronym for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.



Submitted photo

A photo of the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History's mobile history display, still under construction.

"STEM is nothing new, it's always been part of daily life, but it's never been discussed," until recent years, he said.

"There's a ton of opportunities to explore and talk about science and math in a practical setting in history." Part of that is simply looking at the science and physics behind building a working wagon wheel, or how STEM is used in construction of homes and other buildings.

Regardless of how widespread displays

such as this might become, Edwards said his main hope is to simply make people more aware of, and interested in, local history.

"We want to build a population that values and understands both our institutions and community's history. We're making history every day. This is a way for us to engage the community and show them that their stories matter, that our stories matter."



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# Museum developing history of its own

## Our History



By Kate Rauhauser-Smith

*This Our History column was first published in the Dec. 12, 2019 edition of The Mount Airy News as part of a long-running weekly series of history columns produced by the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History.*

Mount Airy Museum of Regional History is four floors of artifacts and information telling the stories of the people who settled this area and built these communities. Begun by private citizens, artifact collection began years before the museum would open, before anyone knew where the museum would actually be.

Once the building, an old hardware store, was acquired, galleries opened one at a time over several years, as resources allowed exhibits to be completed. Today we have one of the most impressive local museums I've ever seen.

I don't know if the folks who live in the area today understand how unusual it is for a county of this population and location off the beaten path to have a museum of this size and quality.

I'm sure that will strike some as self-serving but, remember, I'm not from here. I had nothing to do with building the museum or gathering her collection though I count myself fortunate to work here these past few years.

This was obviously a labor of love for a great many people who, for more than a quarter century, worked to create and maintain a history museum on Mount Airy's Main Street.

The museum began as an idea of the Mount Airy Restoration Foundation, known today for their beautiful property, the Moore House. The foundation was established in 1982 with the express goal to "promote, restore, preserve, and revitalize the Greater Mount Airy area" by the preservation of significant structures and encourage their development into modern uses.



The museum relies on the community for its existence, from monetary and artifact donations to thousands of hours of volunteer work each year. More than 17,000 people visit the museum annually, including hundreds of local school children who come on field trips.

In 1988 they formed a museum committee to explore the idea of a history museum in Mount Airy. They set their sights high — Smithsonian high.

"Our emphasis at the museum is going to be on programs and primarily tied to local history in the schools," chairman Barbara Summerlin was quoted in The Mount Airy News in January 1990. "This will help a lot of young people realize that what they have and where they live ... (is the result of) a lot of hard work and commitment to a community."

They also wanted historic items from Surry County to stay in Surry County. In the few years prior, a locally owned antique doll collection had been sent to Old Salem Museum and Gardens and a piano belonging to the Brower family of Mount Airy went to Greensboro History Museum.

The committee hired an architectural firm in Winston-Salem specializing in historic buildings to conduct a feasibility study. Several properties were considered, including some historic homes, but the 30,000-square foot empty W.E. Merritt Hardware building was chosen. It had room enough for active demonstrations and Smithsonian-style exhibits.

"We're fortunate in this community to have a really well-executed museum that is more than just our collective 'attic.' It's

really a testament to the enduring vision and hard work the founders put into creating a quality experience 25 years ago," Matt Edwards, the museum's executive director, said recently as he guides the institution into the first major renovation in many years.

The committee organized as a separate non-profit in 1992 and established the museum with primarily private money. It continues in that status unlike many other museums in the state that are operated by state or local governments.

Our mission statement is deceptively simple. "The purpose of the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History is to collect, preserve and interpret the natural, historical, and artistic heritage of the region." Adopted by the board of directors in October 1994, it leaves a vastly open-ended goal but one our volunteers and staff continue to pursue.

"As we start this project, we're building on those solid foundations," Edwards said. "We can incorporate new stories, technologies and new amenities that were not readily available when the museum first opened. This project will allow the museum to continue serving this community and visitors to it long into the future as one of the premier community museums in the state."



Photos courtesy of Mount Airy Museum of Regional History  
William Edward Merritt ran several businesses, including a brickyard, at the end of the 1800s and beginning of the 1900s. His first Main Street location was lost in the Blue Ridge Inn fire on New Year's Day 1892. Built between 1905 and 1910, the W.E. Merritt Hardware Company was an impressive change from the two-story wooden saloon it replaced.



Opened in stages, the building dedication of the first floor Communities Gallery was held Oct. 2, 1994. The developing museum was part of the reason Mount Airy was named an All-American City that year. The clocktower was built at the end of 1998. The 1920 Model Ts, the first exhibits in place on the third floor, arrived in 2006.

If you'd like to be involved in the next stage of the museum's life through docent work, volunteer participation, financial support, or photo or artifact donation, please contact the museum at 336-786-4478.

Kate Rauhauser-Smith is a freelance writer, researcher, and genealogist.



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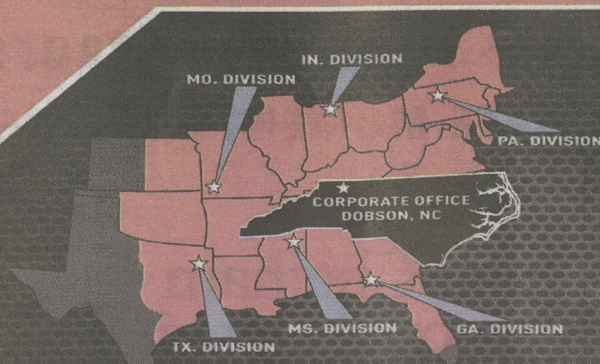
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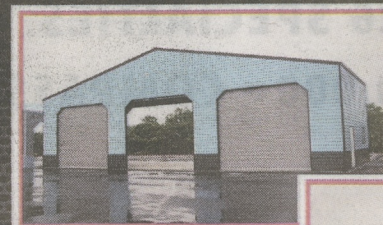
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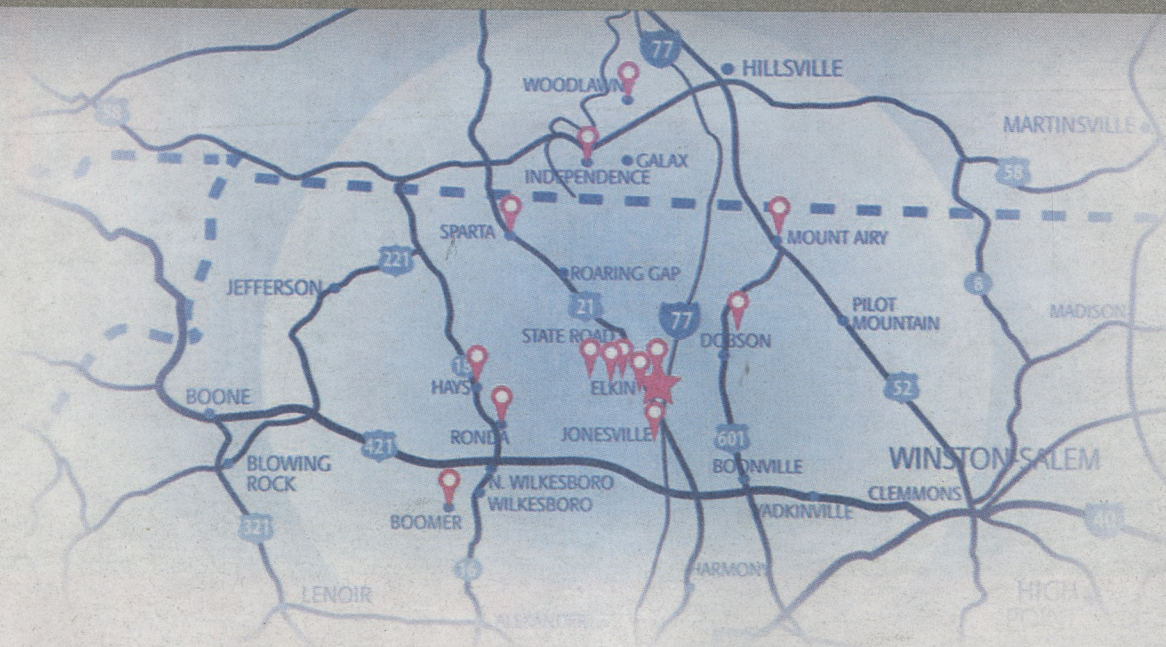
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