



"Our mission is....to collect, preserve, protect and publicly display materials that are historically significant to Mitchell County...and to make its citizens aware of their heritage."

MITCHELL COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

FIRST QUARTER 2016

BEST PLACE TO RESEARCH YOUR ROOTS

Mitchell County Historical Society has expanded its collection of volumes on local and family history thanks to a generous donation from Mayland Community College. This gift has made our collection the best source for researchers of Mitchell County history and genealogy. You will find our Carolyn McBee Morphy Research Room, in the old vault in the Historic Court House, has many resources that local libraries don't have, as well as much information not available online. Come browse through books and journals filled with local and regional history and look at photographs, original documents such as old store ledgers, and newspaper clippings that go way back!



One of our volunteers helping to archive and shelve our new book collection in the Research Room



RAILROADS IN TOE RIVER VALLEY

The flow of settlers into the Toe River Valley was only a trickle prior to 1800, but a steady stream by 1820. It was a real flood by the 1840s as travelers went west via roads that were almost better in 1845 than they were in 1900. The westward movement slacked off by the 1850s and completely ended during the 1860s and the Civil War. Appalachia became isolated after the major wave ended and people stopped coming through the region on the way west. Roads fell into disrepair and regular contact with the rest of the state ceased. There were still occasional visits by people from other parts of the country, including peddlers and traders, and traveling preachers, doctors, and lawyers.

The region stayed isolated until the arrival of the railroad. While some plans were formulated, charters granted, and promotions begun prior to the Civil War for tracks to be laid across the Appalachian range, none came to fruition due to lack of money or quarreling about routes.

Plans were made for the East Tennessee and Western North Carolina line in Johnson City, TN, as early as 1866 due to the rich iron

deposits of the Cranberry iron belt. The ET&WNC - (Many local people said the acronym was for "Eat Taters and Wear No Clothes") - went through Elizabethton, Elk Park, Cranberry, Newland, Linville, and finally got to Boone in 1918. It was a Narrow Gauge railroad because of the steep grades and rough terrain in the mountains. It was nicknamed "Tweetsie," and a remnant of this railroad is found in the resort between Boone and Blowing Rock.

According to James A. Goforth, author of *When Steam Ran the Clinchfield*, a \$21 million dollar project was launched in 1886 for a 625-mile line from Ohio to Charleston, SC. Post-war construction in a devastated South very often depended upon northern and foreign entrepreneurship. The charter for the Charleston, Cincinnati and Chicago Railroad was obtained by a former Union general, John H. Wilder, backed by financing from London, England.

Substantial progress was made on the tracks built north and south of the "3-C" Railroad's Johnson City headquarters, but the company folded in 1893 due to financial problems; its assets were sold and some construction was made on the renamed Ohio River and Charleston Railroad.

In 1902, magnate George L. Carter purchased the company with a plan to deliver coal from his southwestern Virginia mines to the port of Charleston. He was able to secure additional investors in the rechristened Carolina, Clinchfield, and Ohio Railroad. In 1909 tracks reached Spartanburg, SC, and by 1915 they extended to Elkhorn City, in Pike County, KY.



The Clinchfield has the distinction of being the only railroad that cuts directly through the entire Southern Appalachians.

Bakersville hoped for the railroad but was bypassed; instead, the railroad stopped at Toecane, which was for twenty or thirty years quite a booming little community. There was a hack line to bring guests to Bakersville and then on to the attractions at Roan Mountain.

Spruce Pine hardly existed before the railroad came through in 1903. It was a small community in an area called Kim's Thicket after Kimble McHone, but growth followed on narrow but relatively flat land where the tracks followed the Toe River; the town would expand on both sides of the river.

The railroad left Spruce Pine and made its way to Altapass in 1905. In the 20 miles between Spruce Pine and Marion, tracks dropped over 1,000 feet and went through 17 tunnels. At its peak, construction involved more than 4000 workers in 9 camps between Altapass and Sevier in McDowell County.

Countless men lost their lives in building the railroad; many were killed blasting the tunnels or were caught in cave-ins. Willis Gunter, a wagon driver for the railroad, thought he might like one of the higher-paying construction jobs, he said, until he saw how many dead men they brought out of the tunnels.

Railroads in the Toe Valley meant more ore could be taken out of local mines, the local timber resources could be exploited (and the ornamental shrubbery and Christmas tree industries could be born); in addition, livestock and produce, such as apples, could be marketed more readily. It also provided "store-boughten" goods at prices most families could afford. Even if they did not have the cash, they could barter eggs, or produce, or galax.

The time-consuming practice of making furniture, bedding, and clothing by hand was abandoned as mountain people found that they could obtain chairs, blankets, and bright cloth. Manufactured nails and implements meant that the blacksmith's craft declined in importance. Many mountain handicrafts were discontinued, the expertise and patterns were lost, and the crafts were not revived until much later in the 20th century.





A GOOD YEAR FOR MITCHELL COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Members of the Mitchell County Historical Society Board of Directors are: seated, left to right, Inez McRae, Randy McClellan, Chair Rhonda Gunter; standing, left to right outgoing Treasurer Susan Basini, Secretary David Biddix, Treasurer Chris Hollifield, Dean Duncan, and Vice-Chair Bruce Koran.

The year 2015 was an especially good year for MCHS, incorporated in 1989. We had great programs in the months of April through August at the Historic Court House in Bakersville and the Public Library in Spruce Pine. The Society participated in the Rhododendron Festival in June, Decoration Day ceremonies at the Old Town Cemetery in Bakersville in September, and held our annual Apple Butter Festival in October. We expanded our volumes on local and family history thanks to a generous donation from Mayland Community College. For the fourth year, we've sold commemorative Christmas ornaments; each features an historic site in Mitchell County, including the John McBee Law Office, the English Inn, the Dellinger Mill, and the Penland Post Office.

MCHS invites you to join us for the exciting things we have planned for 2016. WATCH FOR OUR SPECIAL EDITION, coming soon, of a program of our Events, beginning in April. All events are FREE to the public. Membership fees for the year are \$20 for an individual and \$25 for a family. Contact the Society at 828-688-4371, E-mail: historicmitchellcounty.org@gmail.com or visit our office and library in the Historic Court House in Bakersville.