



MITCHELL COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Fourth Quarter 2016

A Look Back at 2016 – and a Peek Ahead to 2017!

The past year for MCHS has been a busy one, indeed. The first few months were devoted to organizing the Carolyn McBee Morphy research room and cataloging items generously donated to the Society by Mayland Community College and those already in our collection.

Monthly programs began in April, and this year we added an additional presentation, in September. Three programs were held in the Historic Courthouse in Bakersville, two at the Public Library in Spruce Pine, and one at Penland School. Thanks to all the presenters for graciously agreeing to share their fascinating and informative topics with us.

We participated in the Rhododendron Festival in June and hosted a moving Decoration Day ceremony at the Old Town Cemetery in Bakersville in September. Although our annual Apple Butter Festival fell on the absolute coldest day in the otherwise mild month of October, it was nevertheless a success. We hosted more vendors than last year, and sold more apple butter than in 2015 – plus some hot cider to keep folks warm!

A brand new endeavor for MCHS was our 2016 Christmas Tour of Historic Mitchell County Homes, co-sponsored with the Bakersville Improvement Group. Seven home owners – 5 in Bakersville and 2 in Spruce Pine – opened their homes built between the late 18th and the early 20th century to about 100 Tour participants.



The Greene-Masters-Ledford Home in Bakersville, one of the featured homes.

Sales of MCHS's Commemorative Christmas Ornaments are really taking off. For the fifth year we had an ornament with an historically significant scene; this year it was the Old Kona Baptist Church, burial site of Charlie Silver, the victim of the Toe River Valley's best-known killing. They nearly all sold by Christmas! We also had to re-order some of our earlier

We have worked to implement an online store and update our website; plus, MCHS presence on FaceBook has been enhanced – have you seen the amazing photos posted there? And just

as the number of online friends has increased, so has visitation in our office! Mitchell County researchers have found our research room is the place to be.

So what's on our agenda for next year? We're lining up some great programs on topics from Mitchell County's stories as presented in newspapers around the region and nation to DeSoto's expedition through Western NC. We plan to move the events around the county again, from Kona to Harris School in Spruce Pine. We also hope to continue our traditions with the Rhododendron Festival, Decoration Day, the Apple Butter Festival, and commemorative ornaments – and perhaps the Christmas Tour of Homes.

Plus, a new tradition may be in the works – MCHS is going to host a History Bee in March 2017. Middle and High School students will have a chance to win cash prizes for answering questions about Mitchell County. Watch for more info on this in the New Year.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS
from Mitchell County Historical
Society to all our friends!



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CATASTROPHIC FLOOD 100 YEARS AGO

by Rhonda Gunter

Mid-July 2016 marked the centennial of the one of the worst floods ever to hit Western North Carolina; the "Great Flood" took at least 80 lives, and monetary losses were huge - \$23 million in 1916, which would approach half a billion dollars today.

Drained by the Toe River and its tributaries, the land that is now Mitchell County has seen considerable flooding. The earliest written report of such was in 1791; Davy Crockett, living near the Nolichucky River, compared it to "Noah's fresh." Records also show floods occurred here in 1867, 1875, 1888, and of course 1901, when "the May Flood" drowned at least 2 people, and "12 homes, a church, a mill, several bridges, and much livestock were swept away."

The heavy rains across Western NC 14-16 July 1916 were the result of two Category 4 hurricanes, the first in the Gulf of Mexico in early July and another in the Atlantic about 2 weeks later; rainfall from the latter storm overwhelmed ground already saturated. At times during the 3-day period, Friday to Sunday, rain fell at the rate of an inch per hour. An incredible 22.22 inches fell from 2 pm Saturday, 7/15, until 2 pm Sunday, 7/16, at Altapass, "where the center of the storm burst."

Even where there were no streams, the deluge off mountain slopes washed away homes, cornfields, and livestock. Ashton Chapman, columnist for *The Tri-County News* in the 1970s, wrote that a Spruce Pine man "saw whole hillsides explode outward when the already sodden ground could no longer absorb the continued downpour." Descriptions told of the deafening roar that accompanied the rushing waters.

A number of families in Mitchell County were affected, losing crops and entire fields, their homes and other structures. Hurriedly fleeing residents abandoned their livestock and lost cows, pigs, and chickens. Poor farming practices had left nothing in places to hold the soil; consequently, "the farms will remain barren in many sections forever. No soil is left, only rocks. This is true especially in the mountain sections. The natives ordinarily of scant means, many of them barely able to eke out an existence, will be forced to emigrate to new fields" according to W.M. Bell of Charlotte.

Roadways, mostly dirt in those days, simply vanished. The 3-mile stretch of present NC 226A from Gillespie Gap to Little Switzerland was virtually destroyed, and mail was disrupted for weeks. *The Burnsville Eagle* reported that the bridge across the Toe River at Spruce Pine was washed away. The Great Flood ruined other highway bridges, and breaks appeared in a number of dams. Several feet of water stood on the railroad tracks along Toe River in Spruce Pine, and buildings on the lower street there had up to 2 feet of floodwater, according to a 1963 report by the State of North Carolina Department of Water Resources.



Ashton Chapman reported that Harris Clay Company and much of Spruce Pine were without electricity for weeks because generators in the powerhouse were so badly damaged they had to be sent away for repairs. "Telephone and telegraph connections with all sections west of Hickory were down" (Bell).

For the Carolina, Clinchfield & Ohio Railroad, the worst damage was due to "mountain slides and cloudbursts of water sweeping down carrying rails, ties and roadbed to the chasms below," wrote W.M. Bell. Fills were badly washed, and tunnels were blocked by debris or partially caved in. "The monetary damage to this road could not be estimated. It was closed for several weeks afterwards," and full rail service was not restored through Spruce Pine until 23 August 1916.

The Burnsville Eagle warned that "from three to six miles of the CC&O Railroad, down in the gorge below Poplar, has been washed away," and it would take at least 3 months and a million dollars to repair the tracks "on the south end of that line, from Altapass across the Blue Ridge to Marion."

Families were separated due to the destruction of roads and railroads. Charles Buchanan tells how his grandmother Lelia Randolph Buchanan, visiting her parents in Robbinsville, began the trip back home to Greene Creek with four children aged 4 to 9, on Sunday, 16 July 1916. "The railroad was washed out completely from Asheville to Marion," and they had to return to Robbinsville. The family ultimately took a train to Morristown, TN, another to Johnson City, and "as the CC&O had the track through the gorge repaired, they were able to get to Toecane," having been separated from her Mitchell County family for 6 months.

Carrie Young McKinney told a curious story of the Great Flood's aftermath. She said that visible from the front porch of her home in the Young Cove were phenomena called "Jack-O-Lanterns." Her father Stokes Young would go investigate, her mother Esther calling out to guide his direction, but he never found anything. This was likely *ignis fatuus*, or marsh gas, the phosphorescence from decaying organic material in boggy areas.

David Weintraub is Executive Director of Cultural Preservation in Hendersonville. An award-winning film maker, Weintraub produced a documentary titled *Come Hell or High Water - Remembering the 1916 Flood*. The production premiered at Blue Ridge Community College on 23 June.

Western NC has of course been inundated several times in the century since the Great Flood, including 1940, 1961, 1977, and 2013. Rains will certainly return, and the more developed the area, the greater the destruction is likely to be. Weintraub says that, "Remembering the history of the 1916 flood means understanding that working in concert with nature is imperative to insure history does not repeat itself once again in worse tragedy."