

ESTATOEE

Quarterly Newsletter

Yancey History Association



Volume XII, No.4

Preserving Our Appalachian Heritage

December 1998

Museum Project awarded four Grants

The Yancey History Association is proud to announce that it has received notification of four successful grant applications totaling \$52,490. The four grants will provide the Association with the funds required to open the first phase, the Living History Area, of the Rush Wray Museum of Yancey County History.

The first of the four grants was awarded by The JANIRVE Foundation of Asheville. The JANIRVE Foundation has been instrumental in the progress of the Museum Project. In 1992 the Foundation awarded a \$25,000 matching grant to the History Association. By 1994 the \$25,000 in local matching funds were raised through the diligent efforts of the History Association members and through substantial contributions from the Town of Burnsville and Yancey County Government. The \$50,000 was used to structurally stabilize the Historic McElroy House that will be the home of the County Museum.

The \$20,000 grant that the JANIRVE Foundation has currently awarded the Museum Project will allow the History Association to complete the Living History Area by April of 1999, and does not require matching funds.

The second grant was awarded by the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina with a sub-grant from the Steel-Reese Foundation. This grant will provide \$2,000 for desperately needed office equipment and \$5,000 for Start-Up Programming for next year's opening of the Living History Area.

The computer and other equipment made possible through the first portion of the grant will allow the History Association to stream-line and improve current office operations and the production of The Estatoee. The new office equipment will also be a vital part of the production of the Start-Up Programming.

The 1999 Programs made possible by the second portion of the grant will include; a family history Outreach Program to be made available to area schools and libraries, a Self Guided tour of the McElroy House that will give visitors an understanding of the historic significance of the house and the process involved in restoring a 150 year old home, a series of four one act plays all centered around the life and times of the mid to late 1800's, and a series of weekly Traditional Craft Demonstrations that will begin in April and run through October.

This grant received unanimous support from the newly formed Community Foundation of Yancey County which works closely with the Community Foundation of W.N.C.

The third grant is through the Toe River Arts Council by a grant from the Grassroots Arts Program of the North Carolina Arts Council, a state agency. The \$500. grant will provide entertainment at the Museum Open House next Spring.

The fourth grant was awarded by the North Carolina Department of Commerce through the Rural Tourism Development Grants Program. This grant provides \$24,990. for the purchase and installation of display cases.

These grants pave the way for an excellent beginning of a project that has involved a major commitment of time, money and energy by private individuals, businesses, Foundations and Government Agencies, both state and local.

Program Report

by Norma Westall

September 19, 1998

Jim introduced the two guest speakers for the evening as Drs. Allen Paul Speer and Janet Barton Speer (husband and wife), teachers at Lees McRae College, Banner Elk, NC.

Dr. Speer said that he and his then wife-to-be, Janet Barton, met for the first time at Lees McRae College, where they both now teach- he History and she Performing Arts.

Before the Drs. Speer began their reading performance about Dr. Allen Speer's Book, Voices From Cemetery Hill, long awaited by YHA members and guest since before the June, 1998 Membership Meeting) at which they were scheduled to perform, but had to postpone until later, due to illness of a family member), he gave a review of what had led to his authorship of the book.

Dr. Speer explained that his book, Voices From Cemetery Hill, began as essentially about the Civil War diary, reports and letters of his great-great-uncle, Confederate Army Colonel William Henry Asbury Speer, during 1861-1864. He said, However, that in 1980, following the death of Nellie Speer Dobbins, niece of Colonel Asbury Speer, he discovered family papers dating back to the time of his great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Aaron Speer, Sr., born in 1734. The Civil War diary, letters, and reports of Colonel Asbury Speer are only a part of this rich inheritance, the other family papers he found tell the history of his Speer family.

For their reading performance, Dr. Allen Speer wore the full dress uniform of a Confederate Army officer, and Dr. Janet Speer was
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Program Report cont.

dressed as a lovely Southern belle. She held up a shawl for attendees to see, of the type which elderly Southern gentry ladies in the 1860's draped around their shoulders to ward off any chill. She explained that, when she didn't have the shawl on, she was reading as a narrator. However, when she was wearing the shawl, she would be reading as the mother of Colonel Asbury Speer, in her letters to him.

Sample readings from the diary and letters of Colonel Asbury Speer, and from his reports and letters of other Speer family members, as read by the Drs. Speer, brought to life the Civil War days, and how the Speers and other families were affected by this period in the history of the U.S. It was realized by meeting attendees the Colonel Asbury Speer, faithful to his religion and the Confederacy, sympathized with the North and the ills of slavery, yet performed his duties faithfully, even to giving his own life in his service as a Confederate officer a year before the Civil War ended. It was also realized by those lucky enough to have attended the meeting, and heard the Speer's performance, that Colonel William Henry Asbury Speer also left for us this unique story of what went on during that "battle of all battles" in our country, the Civil War, as recorded in the book by his great-great-nephew.

After the reading performance by the Drs. Speer ended, a refreshment break was taken. Dr. Allen Speer very kindly held a question and answer session with his wife beside him. He answered questions regarding aspects of the Civil War and the part his great-great-uncle, Colonel Asbury Speer played in it.

By the time the semi-break for refreshments was over, there was a line YHA members and guest in front of Dr. Allen Speer, anxiously awaiting their turns to purchase and have autographed copies of his book, Voices From Cemetery Hill.

The Very Interesting an enjoyable meeting ended on this positive note, and was adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

Executive Directors Year End Report

A Year ago this past November a special meeting was called to determine the future course of the Museum/Visitor Center Project. The primary supporters of the project were called upon to assist the History Association in making changes to the on-going approach to complete the restoration of the McElroy House and to open the house as the home of the Rush Wray Museum of Yancey County History. The meeting produced a new level of understanding and commitment that has kept the Project on track.

The most significant outcome of the November meeting was the development of Town and County support for the operational funding of the History Association. While the Association has been able to provide planning and fund raising for the Project it has been unable to carry the additional financial burden these services have placed upon its operation. Local Government funding has played and will continue to play a vital roll in our continued progress and success.

This past March the History Association was called upon to lend its support in the saving of the Brown Dormitory at the old Yancey Collegiate Institute campus. This has been an important issue for the Association for two reasons; first the campus is the last potential Historic District in Yancey County and second it is very difficult to convince State and Federal agencies that you are serious about preservation and deserve their funding while standing idle as a Landmark is torn down.

Although the fate of the Brown Dorm is still uncertain it is at least, still standing. Several very interesting developments have come about as a result of the Brown Dorm controversy. There has been a substantial increase in interest by individuals to pursue having their homes placed on the National Register of Historic Places, only four such designations currently exist in Yancey County. Also, Yancey County is now receiving a great deal of attention from Preservation North Carolina. I hope that the new year will bring an announcement that possibly two of our most notable homes will be saved from demolition and by year end I hope we will have doubled the number of designations on the National Register.

This past summer the History Association produced four programs that were interesting, informative and entertaining. If you were unable to attend I hope you have had an opportunity to read Norma Westall's reports on the programs. While attendance was still low it was a great improvement over the previous year and I am sure that when people realize what they missed they will make it a point to attend in the future. Speaking of the future.....

The four grants we have just received promise to make the year ahead of us both exciting and challenging. By the end of January we should be announcing the outline of our program schedule for 1999. We will also put our acquisition of items and collections for display in full swing.

What a difference a year can make.

Respectfully Submitted,

Jim Priesmeyer

Volunteer Meeting Tuesday Jan. 12th, 5:00 PM at the Library Annex. The efforts made by volunteers will determine what people will see and think when they enter the Museum.

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Estatoee (es-toe-e)

Estootowie in early records. A Cherokee place name, shortened to Estatoe/Estatoah, from which the name Towe or Toe River is derived.

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