



## Rural Life Museum: Remembering Our Place

*Nonprofit organizations throughout Asheville and the surrounding area nourish the people within our communities, caring for those in need, protecting our historic heritage, educating young and old, and nurturing our cultural soul. Each month, The Laurel is bringing to our readers some of the stories behind these agencies. This month, the "spotlight" is on the Rural Life Museum.*

BY JACQUELYN DOBRINSKA

Hidden within the hills and hollers of our region lives a rich and complex history that still reverberates in today's culture, politics, and industries. Helping to preserve and to impart a deeper understanding of this tapestry of past and present is Mars Hill University's Rural Life Museum that helps tell stories of rural life in Madison County.

"Madison County is a microcosm for Western North Carolina and maybe even all of America," says Les Reker, director of the Museum, which recently reopened after much needed repairs and a seven-year dormancy. "This county contains crafts from the turn of the last century that form today's tourism, generations of family feuds

that still influence local politics, and a history of race and religion that played out many places around the country."

Elucidating one of the historical threads is their current exhibition *Interwoven: Coverlets, Ballads and America's Discovery of Madison County Folk Life*. It tells the story of the Allanstand Cottage Industries, a foundational piece of the great revival in handcrafts that eventually led to the creation of one of America's oldest and most renowned craft associations, the Southern Highland Craft Guild.

In the early 1900s, Frances Goodrich came to Madison County, riding sidesaddle, to bring education and religion to the people. In her travels, she discovered sophisticated coverlets woven in an older style originally associated with the British Isles. Recognizing that this traditional art was dying, she brought together collectives of women to relearn the craft. Together, young and old processed flax and wool, wove distinctive patterns, created catalogues, distributed them nationwide, and succeeded in bringing a livelihood to their families. For many, it was the first time they had enough to be able to send their kids to school.

The coverlets of the Allanstand Cottage Industries, literally woven in the living rooms of small cottages, were complex and well regarded. In fact, first lady Ellen Wilson