

As students who have attended Clay County Schools all our lives, we have visited the old Clay County jail, which currently houses the Clay County Historic and Arts Museum, many times. Since its construction in 1912, the building was used as a jail until 1972, later transitioning into a museum in 1974. Over the years, the museum has changed as it has acquired new artifacts. On our most recent visit, we had the opportunity to view one of their newest exhibits, which showcases uniquely handmade instruments fashioned by craftsman Gordon Parris.

Although Parris was born in Swain County, he later moved to Clay County in 1929 when he was 9 years old, and over the years he remained a life-long resident of Clay County. Even though he was not an accomplished musician, when he was about 20 years old, he made his first instrument, a banjo. He used maple wood, green oak wood, veal skin, and an older banjo to create a one-of-a-kind instrument. Having a background in furniture making, it allowed him to have the extensive knowledge of woodworking, which he used to his advantage to become self-taught in instrument making. One of the unique features we noticed while viewing one of his guitars in the exhibit was the pickguard he made with Formica laminate. The museum also displays one of his custom-made banjos on which he appears to have utilized an old snare drum as the head of the banjo. Parris scavenged his surroundings and used whatever he could find to sculpt his instruments, making them true works of art.

As one of the oldest instruments in Southern Appalachia, dulcimers come in many shapes and sizes. In a 1980 *Asheville Citizen Times* news article, Parris spoke of the process he used when he began designing dulcimers in 1967. "Mine are more or less pear-shaped, but I do make one that is shaped like a tear drop. And my favorite design for the holes in the body is heart-shaped, which I cut out with my pocket knife." Soon, his unique style was known in more places than Clay County, and by the 1980s he was creating as many as two dulcimers a week and shipping them to places such as California, New York, and Washington State.

Even though his instruments became sought after, his primary job was actually farming. In Deby Jo Ferguson's book *Whispers Among the Laurels 'A Vanishing Culture'*, Parris discussed his early memories of the farming culture in Appalachia. "Growing up wasn't all work; we did have some fun. I played basketball with some other boys in the room of an old house where no one had lived for a long time. But, I really had to work hard at home. We had hogs, cattle and other animals. We raised wheat and corn and had the wheat ground into flour." Parris also shared his contentment with life in the mountains of Western N.C., "I never left home, just stayed right here. My brothers both had to go to war, but they turned me down, so I stayed here and worked at home and for our neighbors. Never did work a public job, just farmed and did odd jobs for people." His lack of travel and what some might call adventure never squelched his inventive spirit, and his creativity thrived as he honed his craft.

When asked about Parris, local businessman, musician and community leader Rob Tiger described him as a "...self-taught and a really sweet guy, him and his wife both." Tiger reminisced on memories of Parris bringing his instruments over to Tigers & Chinquapins to allow him to try out the freshly-made instruments. Parris valued Tiger's hands-on expertise as a more experienced musician, and enjoyed the camaraderie that accompanied their times of collaboration. Tiger echoed earlier sentiments of how Parris made his instruments out of "found objects" and visited the library often to get new ideas on how to build them. As Tiger recalled stories of his friendship with Parris, he noted that he is thankful to own several of his instruments, specifically three of Parris' dulcimers, all of which are mainly made out of hardwoods and are beautifully crafted treasures.

Although Clay County attracts many tourists for the natural beauty of Lake Chatuge and the surrounding mountains, locals need to also appreciate the historical culture of our own community. As Gandhi said, "A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its

people.” Gordon Parris’ legacy lives on through the memories he left behind and the people he touched along the way. Digging deeper into the county’s history has been an eye-opening experience that deserves to be shared among all. After viewing Parris’ exhibit and learning more about his life, we encourage the residents of Clay County and surrounding areas to stop by and view the gems of the museum.

About the Authors: Parker Seabolt and Emily Shook are junior Honors Journalism students attending Hayesville High School.

This is part of a series of articles about historical gems in the Old Jail Museum and the interesting stories behind them. The museum is closed for the winter, but we hope to have made many improvements when it opens for the summer season.

The Clay County Historical and Arts Council is currently seeking to raise funds for the repair and restoration of the Old Jail Museum. To donate you may visit our website clayhistoryarts.org or mail your check designated for Old Jail Museum Restoration Fund to CCHAC, P. O. Box 5, Hayesville, NC 28904