

Text of Panels for Museum Exhibition
(Photos Will Accompany the Text)

*Unicoi County's Farm Heritage, 1945-2014:
Seeds of the Past, Seeds of the Future*

WELCOME TO UNICOI COUNTY

Agriculture has always been a central part of life in Unicoi County. For generations, farms have helped to shape the county's landscape and economy. This exhibition tells the story of Unicoi's farm heritage, especially from 1945 to 2014. The exhibition is based on interviews with Unicoi County people involved with farming both in the past and the present. These farmers have grown tobacco, fruits, and vegetables, raised beef and dairy cows, farmed trees, and harvested and crafted in many ways. Today, some of these individuals honor this heritage by continuing the practices from generations before, while others use new, creative approaches to farming.

Unicoi County lies on the border of Tennessee and North Carolina. Its wide fertile valley, scenic waterways such as the Nolichucky River and Rocky Fork Creek, and surrounding mountain ridges have earned it the name "The Valley Beautiful." The county covers 186 square miles, approximately 50% of which is Cherokee National Forest lands, including a section of the Appalachian Trail and the newly established Rocky Fork Tract. The topography varies from bottomland along the Nolichucky River and the South Indian and North Indian Creeks to the steep terrain and high valleys along Unaka Mountain and the Blue Ridge Mountains. Initially this land was part of Washington and Carter Counties; Unicoi County was officially established in 1875.

EARLY MARKETS & DOMESTIC LIFE PRIOR TO 1945

Native Americans were the first farmers in Unicoi County, concentrating on the classic North American crops of corn, beans, and squash. Euro-American settlers came to the county in the late 1700s, quickly constructing farms and churches.

In Unicoi County, as throughout Appalachia, nineteenth-century farms raised the crops and livestock needed for sustenance and frequently engaged in a flexible market economy. For Unicoi farmers, cash commodities included tobacco, cotton, wheat, hogs, and cattle. Other marketable items were corn, chickens, turkeys, geese, eggs, butter, and manufactured goods like whiskey, shoes, hats, baskets, leather, and homemade tools. By 1886, construction of the Carolina, Clinchfield, and Ohio Railroad had begun. The railroad provided increased competition and economic opportunity, which was fortunate for some communities but negatively impacted existing diverse local markets in other communities.

Nineteenth-century farm women were crucial to agricultural work, and women continued to be very involved in farm life throughout the twentieth century and into the present. In addition to producing goods such as butter and eggs for sale, women often tended the garden, and they kept the family and house in working order. By the mid-twentieth century, the introduction of electricity, running water, and motorized vehicles significantly changed farm and domestic life for both women and men. Electric lights extended the work day, indoor plumbing and appliances such as washing machines made household chores easier, tractors enabled farmers to tend more acres than they could with a team of mules or horses, and truck and cars provided easy access to stores.

Lennis Tipton used to ride the mule as her father plowed their land in Flag Pond during the 1920s and 1930s. Lennis and her siblings would climb two miles up the mountain to pick buckets of wild strawberries. The family also dried apples. "Momma had a wood stove. She'd peel the apples and we'd string them up on a string . . . and dry them behind the stove and then you could when you got ready to cook them, you'd just wash them, soak them." The family grew enough potatoes to give some away, and Lennis's mother provided their elderly neighbors with milk. After her marriage, Lennis and her husband moved but then returned to Flag Pond to raise their children. Lennis operated a greenhouse, which she still maintains, along with her large vegetable garden.

Elean McNabb grew up in the 1930s and 1940s on a 300-acre farm without electricity or telephone in the Fisher Holler community. The family sold tobacco, cattle, and milk. When Elean was a small child, her mother put her in a corn shuck tent while she milked cows and worked in the fields. "I grew up on a farm—that's all I practically knowed all my life; hoeing gardens, washing jars and canning food. If people now a days had to go back and do all this stuff they would realize what they've got."

Josephine Blevins of Limestone Cove took care of a large garden, cooked three meals a day for her family, and tended to the ever-changing, never-ending needs of the farm, including slopping the pigs, working an acre and a half of tomatoes, and grading tobacco. She preserved jams and jellies, beans, sauerkraut, sweet potatoes, hog meat, pork ribs, and chickens to sustain her husband and five children year round. Today Josephine is active in her daughter's garden, and she continues to can; in 2012, she put up 102 jars of green beans.

SHIFTING MARKETS, 1945-1970

In the decade following World War II, there was a great deal of agricultural activity in Unicoi County. In 1945, the county had 1068 farms. In southern Unicoi County, the communities of Flag Pond and Coffee Ridge were home to many orchards. The northern part of the county had two commercial dairies. Agricultural education programs and agriculture extension agents played an important role, working with numerous small, active farms. Many people remember this period as a golden era of farming in Unicoi County.

However, this era also saw an increase in employment off the farm. Off-farm work (known as “public work”) had begun in the late 1800s with the construction of the railroad, a major employer in Unicoi County from its inception until 1916, when Southern Potteries opened in Erwin. After World War II, production declined at Southern Potteries, and the plant closed in 1957. Just as the Southern Potteries closed, Davison Chemical Company (now Nuclear Fuel Services) opened in Erwin. Additionally, the county was home to textile manufacturing. All of these industries lured workers off the farm.

Lloyd Garland grew up on a farm in North Carolina. After serving in the army, working for the Clinchfield Railroad, and taking an agriculture course, he took over his father-in-law’s sawmill business in Unicoi County. He kept the sawmill in operation for 23 years, and began farming in the area as well. He kept cattle, beginning with Hereford and Angus. In 1966, Lloyd became the first person to bring Charolais cattle to Unicoi County. He also did soil research for the University of Tennessee, and kept one of the largest tobacco farms in Unicoi County. Today, Lloyd doesn’t tend to cattle anymore, but he does have a large garden and grows Christmas trees.

Margaret Lewis Patterson is from Dry Creek. She grew up on a family farm, and she still owns the first tractor that her father, Grady Lewis, bought in 1952, a 601 Ford that was “his pride and joy.” Margaret remembers that Grady was “very ingenious, he was a carpenter and could work things out.” In the late 1950s, he designed and built his own tobacco planting machine, which worked just as well as commercial planters. The whole family was involved in farm life, tending to chickens, cows, and pigs, hoeing corn, raising other vegetables, and picking blackberries. When the interstate was built through part of the family’s property, it cut off the livestock’s access to water, so Grady had to give up raising cattle. He lived to be ninety-three, and up until that time he continued to farm, keeping a garden and eventually renting his tobacco field. “He was a big hard worker from daylight to dark,” Margaret says, but after he had to cut back on some farming, “he felt like he had nothing left to do. But that is progress, I guess.”

Hugh Bowman Jr. began farming as a child in Shallowford and remembers being involved as young as three years old, bringing in kindling and feeding the animals. His family grew vegetables and grains and made dairy products. His family originally had 60 to 80 acres, but the interstate broke up the property. Hugh learned about farming not only at home but also from the FFA, extension agents, and other education programs. Hugh remembers that unlike “students that just went and studied a book,” this agricultural education “was real to us.” The Bowmans ran one of the commercial bottling dairies that operated in Unicoi County in the 1940s and 1950s, producing what Hugh remembers as “the best chocolate milk that’s ever been made.”

Ulis Miller is from the Nolichucky community but grew up on a farm in Yancey County, North Carolina until the family sawmill closed and the family moved to Unicoi County. His family grew their own food, raised animals for meat, dairy, and eggs, harvested honey, and made molasses. Ulis was in the military, went to college, and worked at the Nuclear Fuels plant before giving 16

years of public service to the county as the county mayor. He always did some farming: "Well, after I got married, I bought a small patch of land over here and I just grew the tomatoes. We did a little bit of strawberries. Just a hobby mostly, but we could sell it then, sell it to Scott, the strawberries and tomatoes too." On the 37 acres where he lives now, his son-in-law raises cattle and makes hay, and Ullis has a vegetable garden and apple trees.

Larry Archer was Unicoi County's Agriculture and 4-H Extension Agent from 1977-2001. Larry's first loves were working with 4-H students and dairy cattle, but he soon learned he also liked adult education. In addition, Larry worked with cattlemen and tobacco farmers, once visiting eighteen farms in one day. Another part of his job involved community resource development, and Larry was successful at helping to obtain a million-dollar grant that allowed Limestone Cove, where half the private water suppliers were contaminated with bacteria, to obtain utility water. It took four or five years but was greatly appreciated by the residents. During Larry's tenure, he saw almost 1500 tobacco allotments disappear, while Interstate 26 destroyed good farmland and barns.

DWINDLING FAMILY FARMS AND THE RISE OF AGRIBUSINESS, 1970-2000

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a push to bolster US agricultural production. Because big farms were thought to be more productive than small ones, President Richard Nixon's Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz famously advised farmers to "get big or get out" and to "adapt or die." Governmental pressure, combined with the continued changes brought by industrialization, led to a decrease in small-scale farming and the expansion of agribusiness throughout the United States. These changes in agriculture were reflected in Unicoi County. From 1964 to 1978, the number of farms rapidly declined from 668 to 375. During this period, two large-scale growers emerged: Scott's Strawberry & Tomato Farms and Jones & Church Farms. While both of these farms are still family operated, they are distinctly different from earlier smaller family farms because of the scale at which they produce.

As Scott's and Jones & Church grew, additional labor was necessary to keep up with demand. The farms started bringing in Mexican migrant workers to the area. Many of these workers came from the Guanajuato area. Initially, migrant workers were housed locally by the companies and then returned to Mexico at the end of the growing season. But today there is a growing community of workers and their families who call Unicoi County home year-round.

	1945	1950	1959	1964	1978	1982	1992	1997	2002	2007*
Farms	1068	926	741	668	365	363	237	155	166	86
Average acres	39	43	47	46	43	39	48	48	56	55
% Tobacco	48%	53%	80%	81%	-	86%	62%	54%	20%	0%
% Hogs	55%	63%	-	19%	3%	1%	3%	5%	2%	0%
% Cattle	84%	79%	64%	72%	22%	20%	44%	57%	42%	47%
% Dairy	-	72%	56%	41%	1%	1%	0%	1%	0%	1%
% Fruit	-	-	26%	16%	7%	4%	7%	12%	9%	9%

[Label for chart indicating pivotal changes and providing some potential reasons for them]

Steve Scott is the co-owner of Scott's Farms, which has been in business in Unicoi since 1959, when Steve's parents, Wayne and Mary Lou Scott, began growing strawberries. Today the farm produces strawberries, tomatoes, blueberries, and other food crops. Scott's tomatoes are sold all over the United States, and their strawberries are cherished in local markets. Though Scott's has grown to be one of the regions biggest producers with 1100 acres across several counties, it is still a family business. Steve and his brother, David, run the farm, and their siblings work and teach there. Steve's two sons work on the farm, too, making them the third generation to carry on the family tradition.

Renea Jones-Rogers works at Jones & Church Farms in Unicoi. In business since 1975, Jones & Church Farms is currently one of the largest employers in the county. They ship over 22 million pounds of tomatoes annually. Renea helps her father, Carl Jones, manage the packing house and employees. Renea remembers being inspired by a chemical representative to major in horticulture, and she did research on pesticides and herbicides after college. After getting her Masters in Horticulture, she was drawn back to the farm. Renea believes "the ideal farm is one that is always looking to the future and staying up to date with the latest technology in food production and safety."

John Padgett has been running Indian Creek Nursery in the Fishery Community since 1981. Right out of high school, John decided to continue with his father's landscaping business "just a little while" before going to college. The business proved more alluring than college, and the 22 greenhouses with 75,000 square footage have kept him plenty busy. John grows seasonal plants beginning with bedding plants in the spring, pansies and mums in the fall, poinsettias during the winter holidays, and Easter lilies, for which John has a special touch.

When Zeneida Saldaña was 16, she moved from Mexico to Florida and started working in the field with her mother. She began picking strawberries, tomatoes, and green beans for Scott's farm in 1982, and continued for 25 years. Most of her coworkers were Mexican, but she recalls

there being a few people from Honduras or Guatemala. She worked hard at Scott's, and after losing her husband farming became the only means to take care of her eleven children. With the exception of her two youngest, all of her children have worked in farming.

Florentino Porras says that for him, farming was a year-round job. Before he moved to the United States in 1985, he farmed at home in Guanajuato, Mexico. Like many other migrant workers, he came to Unicoi looking to earn money and secure a better future for his family. After farming with Jones & Church for more than 20 years, Florentino is now retired. He does landscaping work in Unicoi and Gray with a small company. But his time spent farming gave him a unique perspective on changes taking place in Unicoi's agricultural practices. In particular, he feels that migrant workers are finally being recognized as dedicated workers, and he feels they are less of a "minority" now.

CREATIVE ECONOMIES, 2000-2014

Though large-scale monocrop agriculture significantly changed Unicoi's food systems, the county is still home to small-scale food production. Often people grow large gardens for their own use and to give away to family and neighbors, a traditional practice. Some small farmers sell at farmers' markets. U-Pick farms and orchards, berry farms, Christmas tree farms, and vineyards encourage people to come directly to the farm and participate in the harvest. The Town of Unicoi is currently planning a community kitchen, which will serve as a small business incubator for people throughout the region interested in producing and marketing locally made food products.

Small farms typically produce diverse crops. Many small farmers in Unicoi County believe that diversified farming helps to maintain the sustainability of the land, increases economic benefit, contributes to local food security, and preserves cultural traditions.

David Moore runs a U-Pick "recreation" farm on three acres that he reclaimed from the terraces created when Interstate 26 was built through southern Unicoi County. David has been farming since 1997, and today he tends to apple, plum, and peach orchards, berry brambles, and a recreation field. He strongly believes in the role of agritourism in the future of Unicoi County: "Oh boy," he says. "Anybody who wants to get into farming today, this IS the option."

Karen Bonita Bailey remembers her mother tending to a garden and selling beans in Unicoi County. Today Karen is known as the "blueberry lady." Together with her husband and four children, Karen grows not just blueberries but also green beans, tomatoes, and corn. Despite her and her husband's love of farming, they recognize that it's tough: "Even with your tractors and all that stuff, I don't see how you could make a living on farming all by itself."

Amy Tilley and Jack Tipton operate The Cows Are Out Dairy, a small thriving raw dairy farm outside of Johnson City. They sell a variety of dairy products like milk, butter, yogurt, cheese, and kefir, along with grass-fed beef and pork, eggs, honey, jams, and kombucha. The dairy has a strong regional following, thanks in part to its delivery service. Amy is passionate about raw

dairy and organic, sustainable agriculture, and she is convinced that small farms, backyard gardening, and educating people about farming will reinvigorate a sense of community and interdependence and may help boost the economy of Unicoi County.

Ed and Janice Honeycutt run Blackberry Blossom Farm, a small family farm that grows a variety of fruits, vegetables, flowers, herbs, trees, and shrubs. They also run a campground, and they think that agritourism could really help other family farms to thrive. They moved from coastal North Carolina to Unicoi County in 1999, and they love living here. The Honeycutts value the simplicity and restorative power of farm life and believe getting your hands in the dirt can help people realize what's important: "There's nothing like dirt therapy!" They are certified as a "Naturally Grown" farm and insist that if you "take care of the land, the land will take care of you."

Ty Petty has been the Agriculture and 4-H Extension Agent for Unicoi County since 2002, and he's involved in many different activities. He works with 4-H students on parliamentary procedure, speaking skills, and the use of Global Positioning Systems (GPS). He is involved in master gardening classes, teaches master beef producer classes, and helps farmers solve problems with pests or soils. He also helped produce a local apple growers' brochure. Ty is particularly proud of a 2007 task force that was able to bring in hay from other areas of the county during a severe drought, keeping Unicoi farmers from having to sell their stock at a loss or go bankrupt feeding them. "We're all about education and whether it's a gardener or a farmer or homeowner, we try to provide them with education and let them ultimately make the decision about the best step to take."

CONCLUSION

You can help celebrate Unicoi's farm heritage in a number of ways. Start by telling a friend about something you learned in this exhibit. On your way home tonight, take a look at the landscape and imagine the generations of families who have lived and farmed there. Next time you buy groceries, think about where each item came from. Has Unicoi County played a part in feeding your family? You can attend cooking and gardening related events and workshops, and stop by the farmers market for some fresh, locally produced food and community bonding. You can even visit the farmers themselves to learn more about their practices and hear their stories. Finally, try growing something yourself, and get direct experience with Unicoi's farming heritage by interacting with the land first hand.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The interviews on which this exhibition is based were collected from 2010-2013 by graduate students in the Documenting Community Traditions Class at East Tennessee State University. Taught by Dr. Theresa Lloyd and Dr. John Lewis 2010-2011 and by Dr. Theresa Lloyd 2012-2013, the class is part of the Appalachian Teaching Project, an initiative of the Appalachian Regional Commission. Students in the class also compiled this exhibition. The Town of Unicoi served as community partner to the class.

Thanks to Mayor Johnny Lynch and Recorder Larry Rea of the Town of Unicoi, Kostas Skordas of the Appalachian Regional Commission, Dr. Roberta Herrin of the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services at East Tennessee State University, Randy Sanders of the B. Carroll Reece Museum at East Tennessee State University, Dr. John Lewis, Theresa Hammons, Dr. Heather Halsey, Dr. Ron Roach, and Megan King.