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Your friendly guide to area museums and historical sites

By Christi Marsico • Staff Writer

While looking for something fun and inexpensive to do in these tough economic times, look no further than the treasure trove of museums, many free, in Western North Carolina.

Museum goers in this area can learn about Appalachian roots, unusual gems and historic artifacts, to name a few.

And there is a helpful guide that tells all about the museums and how to locate them.

The Friends of the Mountain History, which promotes tourism in Western North Carolina, will distribute 50,000 copies of the free 2009 guide Feb. 6.

The guides will be available in North Carolina welcome centers, chamber of commerce offices, and other tourist areas.

The guide lists more than 100 museums and historic locations and provides a short description of each site. Hours, fees and directions are listed and there is a foldout map.

"Friends of Mountain History saw a need to get museums in one listing to better serve visitors in all 25 counties," said Kaye Myers, tourism development officer for the N.C. Department of Commerce Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development.

"We wanted visitors to open the guide and realize we have a lot of history to showcase here in the mountains and our museums and sites can be linked together by a map of the region," Myers said.

Friends of Mountain History was created under former Cultural Resources Secretary Betty Ray McCain in 1998 to promote the culture of the area.

Tourism themes

Each year the guide has a different theme, and this year it has an agricultural focus: "That's A Long Row to Hoe!" Lifestyles in Agriculture, Farming, Gardening, Foodways and Viticulture - Mountain Style."

Each museum featured in the guide will showcase the theme in its own unique way, whether it's part of their permanent collection or a new exhibit.

The museums can also sponsor an event, such as a book reading or lecture, based on that theme. The theme runs for a year, giving the museums ample opportunity for multiple programming.

In conjunction with this year's theme, Robert Ingles, the grocery store pioneer who originated Ingles grocery stores in North Carolina, was interviewed.

Ingles is the biggest name North Carolina has in the food industry, Myers believes.

In the interview Ingles shared how his business developed and changed since its opening in the 1960s.

More in this year's guide

This year the guide lists many more museums than it has in the past.

"The first issue highlighted 68 museums and sites, and after a more thorough search we have come up with 106 sites in our new guide," Myers said.

Among the sites are historical house museums of prominent people who have lived in the area, such as the Shook House Museum in Clyde.

Plans for future guides are already in the works. The 2010 museum guide's theme is "Natural Scenic Beauty! Mountains, rivers, valleys, historic sites and trails; Adventure for the Traveling Pioneer!," while the 2011 theme is "Brother, brother, brother, War Is Not the Answer!" A War Within a War; Mountain People and Counties Divided by the Civil War."

The Friends of Mountain History board members decide on the themes finding a common bond between the museums and historical sites while striving to be creative in their promotions.

"We looked at 10 topics that every museum had in their permanent collection," Myers said.

The guide invites readers to discover and explore the fabric of Western North Carolina's history.

For more information or to download the guide visit www.fomhnc.org.

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