

Listen to the stories of luthiers in the Southern Appalachian and the Blue Ridge mountains, and it's clear why the current exhibit at the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History is so important.

"There's a rich tradition of not just playing music, but of building instruments," said Matt Edwards, executive director of the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History. "There are a lot of people who can make a great looking instrument. It is something (else) to make a great sounding instrument. They were constantly checking the tone. That really is where that master craftsmanship came in and the ability to combine those two together. It's that fine attention to detail and craftsmanship."

"They were largely self-taught," Edwards said, citing Albert Hash, who led a resurgence of the luthier craft. "As a kid, he wanted a fiddle. He dreamed how to do it, then he went and he made it. Through the years he refined the skills and figured out what he was doing and then he started teaching other folks."

The exhibit, "The Luthier's Craft: Instrument Making Traditions of the Blue Ridge" features fiddle makers Chris Testerman and the late Audrey Hash Ham, banjo maker Johnny Gentry and guitar maker Wayne Henderson, who crafted a guitar for Eric Clapton. Luthiers craft and repair string instruments.

Testerman, 27, learned how to build fiddles from Albert Hash's daughter, Audrey Hash Ham, who died Aug. 2. She was generous with her knowledge and her materials.

"She taught me everything I know," Testerman said. "She was a good lady. At 64 years old, she's done more in her life than people would in a hundred years. She had a lot of impact on a lot of people."

He first met Ham when he attended Mount Rogers Combined School in Whitetop in Grayson County, Va. He was in the band program that Albert Hash started in 1982 just before he died, and then Ham took over teaching, passing on her father's knowledge of music and fiddle making.

“ I was just so impressed by Albert’s work,” Testerman said. “He could make anything.”

He eventually asked Ham to teach him how to craft a fiddle.

“ She said, ‘I’ll help you,’” Testerman said. “She cut me out a fiddle back; it was thick.” Then she gave him a piece of sandpaper and pocket knife. She asked if he had a fiddle and told him to go home and study his fiddle and work that piece of wood down to the arch. He doesn’t remember how much sandpaper he used on that first fiddle.

“ She didn’t think she’d see me again,” he said. “I’ve built all of mine using the very same thing that he (Albert) used. Most of it was done with not much more than a pocket knife. That’s the way she taught me.” She also taught him to focus on the sound in the beginning and to make interior graduations the right thickness.

“ I’ve been working on fiddles 10 years. I’ve talked to her every day. She’s helped me with every one I’ve made. I still use her tools to measure, calipers that Albert made. She gave me all the patterns. She was always willing to share and encouraged me to share it with people. I’m really thankful to have known her.”

He carves the scrolls on the fiddles he makes, just as Hash and Ham did. In this exhibit, he’s carved local red spruce harvested years ago from Whitetop Mountain for the top and blocks. On his exhibit fiddle, he carved an eagle’s head on the scroll, and the back has a peacock and bouquet of flowers. There are small carvings on the finger boards.

He’s learning to build banjos from Johnny Gentry, who is also featured in the exhibit.

“ If you don’t pass it on, it’ll be lost,” said Gentry, 66, who lives in Mountain Park. He has built banjos for 10 years, which seemed a logical extension of the old-time music he’s played over the years and the instruments he’s repaired for decades.

“ When I retired, I thought I’d make a banjo for something to do,” said Gentry, a retired correctional officer. “Now I can’t stop.”

“ What I go for is the sound, and everyone wants a different sound,” he said. “Some people like a real soft sound.... Some people like high-pitched...; some people like in between mellow. I kind of know what it takes to get that sound.”

He plays guitar and his wife, Nancy, a classical pianist, plays upright bass in the Mountain Park Old Time Band. He also teaches people how to play the instruments.

“ I really like to teach kids,” he said. “They just struggle and struggle. All of a sudden you can see it in their eye. Then they get excited.... It makes you feel you’ve accomplished something. It really makes a difference. I don’t know what I’d do without music.”

The idea for the exhibit started after the museum served as the first host site in North Carolina for Museum on Main Street, a project in which the N.C. Humanities Council partnered with the Smithsonian Institution to bring a traveling exhibit to small towns.

“ We saw a tremendous amount of interest in music heritage,” Edwards said, and the museum experienced an 800 percent increase in visits. “We knew our area was really rich in music heritage. There had to be a way to tap into that.”

The project was funded by a \$25,000 matching grant from the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, and Edwards said that local supporters and businesses supplied the match. Edwards and Amy Snyder, the curator of collections, did most of the research. They based their exhibit on the Smithsonian model: a turnkey operation that could be set up in a day. The Mount Airy exhibit has a modular design, which will enable small museums and historical societies to have a high-quality exhibit with tangible artifacts.

“ It’s designed so you can pick one instrument or rotate,” Edwards said. “It gives small venues a

lot of versatility.”

Visitors will see handmade instruments and will learn how they were built; there are biographies that show the interconnectedness of the craftsmen who shared their knowledge among one another to carry on their tradition. In addition to music, there is archival footage of the craftspeople.

One of the tactile-learning pieces is assembling a Boucher-style banjo, which was the first mass-produced banjo and came out just after the Civil War. An Aug. 21 event is scheduled with Jayne Henderson, Wayne Henderson’s daughter, who built a ukulele for the exhibit. At a workshop Nov. 9 visitors can make and take a cigar box banjo.

The exhibit will travel for about five years, and it’s likely its first stop will be in Charlotte, Edwards said. The exhibit components eventually will become part of the Mount Airy museum’s permanent collection.

“ We wanted to do something that was going to be accessible to a lot of folks,” Edwards said. “Some of these craftsmen do this as a hobby, some of them do this as a primary way to make a living. We want to encourage folks to go out and find these people and make them part of their lives.”