

## Historic Laurinburg, North Carolina: Tell a Story, Preserve Traditions, Grow a Community

North Carolina is becoming more diverse every day, but one county's diversity is as old as the nation itself. Scotland County, in the southeastern border belt of North Carolina, was first home to Native Americans, and then to Scottish settlers and African slaves in the 1700s. Descendants of these first residents make up a large portion of the county's population.

Oral history and good old-fashioned yarn-spinning figure prominently in Scottish, African American, and Native American cultures. These three communities, each with strikingly different histories and traditions, come together annually to share in a common bond: storytelling.

And storytelling is also breathing some welcome life into the sagging economy of one rural community. Laurinburg and Scotland County have not escaped the loss of industry and the outsourcing of jobs. But even with 11.5% unemployment and ranking 13<sup>th</sup> among the lowest wealth counties in the state, this three-time winner of the All America City award sees silver linings in the clouds.

Each spring hundreds of listeners, young and old, travel to the Storytelling Festival of Carolina in Scotland County to listen to professional storytellers from throughout the United States—and many from right here in Carolinas—tell their tales.

“We feel it is important to balance our national storytellers with regional folks—stories from this area,” says Jan Schmidt, one of the founders of Storytelling Arts Center of the Southeast (SACS), sponsor of the Storytelling Festival of Carolina. “Our regional cultures and the stories they hold are too important—and too much fun—to let pass away,” Schmidt says. “The national tellers are so awesome, that people come from far away just to hear them. It is a wonderful gathering.”

Schmidt, along with Scotland County storyteller Brenda Gilbert, established SACS as a resource for regional storytellers, educators, and anyone interested in hearing a good tale. Both Schmidt and Gilbert wanted to tap into the rebirth of storytelling and bring it to the southeast, where there is a deep history of the spoken word. “We also wanted to highlight the historic and elegant John Blue House and grounds, where the festival is held. The stories, the environment ... they make the perfect ambiance for storytelling,” Schmidt said.

“Stories can amuse, but they also can inspire and motivate,” Gilbert explains. “I knew that if people here would try it, they would love it.”

Schmidt, Gilbert, and the dozens of SACS volunteers designed the Storytelling Festival of Carolina to offer certain features that few, if any other storytelling festivals offer. Specifically, the festival is family-friendly, offering the Children's Place play area, where youngsters can entertain themselves with bubbles, stilts, and other quiet games within view of parents who are listening to stories. The prices also benefit families: Early daytime registration for the 2008 festival costs just \$50 for a family of five, by far the least expensive storytelling festival of this caliber. Even the Saturday night Meet-the-Teller Story and Music Gala at the award-winning Cypress Bend Vineyard is open to families with children.

In addition to sponsoring the annual April Storytelling Festival of Carolina, SACS promotes a regional storytellers' guild, puts on an annual Bold-Faced Liars' Showdown (honest!), and is going to develop an educators' resource library, all with the goal of preserving and enriching storytelling throughout the southeast.

The success of the festival fostered such a love of storytelling for so many in the community that enjoying the stories once a year just wasn't enough. The Story Spinners Guild helps to fill the void. Meeting monthly, people who love to tell and love to listen come together to do both. In October, the guild presented a Ghost Story Concert for the public on the patio of a local retirement community. Over sixty people of all ages enjoyed the stories told by guild members. The guild has also been invited to tell stories during the annual Christmas on Main celebration in downtown Laurinburg and also members tell stories at regional Barnes and noble Bookstores.

SACS is now the home of the Bold-Faced Liars' Showdown held the first Saturday in February at St. Andrew's Presbyterian College. The inaugural event will feature Bill Lepp, award winning national storyteller and five-time winner of the WV Liars' Competition; he will also be the chief judge for the afternoon competition, and give a storytelling concert in the evening. As a twist, the audience gets to select who places first, second and third in the competition. Awards and prizes will be given.

However, one of the most compelling features of the SACS mission is its commitment to both the history and future of storytelling. In addition to the guild, liars' contest, and resource library—and in keeping with its commitment to families—SACS also sponsors an annual Youthful Voices competition, which allows children to audition and, if selected, perform on the same stages as the professional storytellers. It also will be adding an oral history project, which records and preserves the voices and stories of people—extraordinary and ordinary—throughout the region.

Gilbert sees SACS and the Storytelling Festival of Carolina as a convergence of the best elements of this region: the rural environment, the people, their stories, and the craft of storytelling.

“Our love for the art and craft of it,” she says, “and the ambiance of the weekends with a beautiful renaissance of an art form....It's a wonderful feeling.”

The Storytelling Arts Center of the Southeast continues to protect and preserve stories and the craft of storytelling for the southeastern United States. By doing so, SACS is not only looking back into the region's history and collecting the stories that make this area what it is, but it's also nurturing the skill of storytelling so that kids today will be able to share the stories with future generations.

Laurinburg and Scotland County will become synonymous with storytelling in the southeast region. This cultural renaissance will be a catalyst to grow the community, bringing new people to visit and live, and creating new businesses that will improve the quality of life for residents and visitors alike.

For more information or to attend any of these great events, check out the website at <http://www.storyarts.info> or call 910-291-0929.