Hagood Mill celebrates past, plans for future

BY GREG OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

PICKENS — Those longing to temporarily escape the rat race of everyday life and return to a simpler way of living should plan a visit to Hagood Mill in Pickens.

Originally built in 1845 by James Hagood, whose father, Ben, had purchased the property in 1823, Hagood Mill is self-described as having once been "a busy center of commerce." According to the 1870 Products of Industry Census, Hagood Mill is recorded as having produced 2,500 bushels of meal, or 140,000 pounds, and 200 bushes of flour, or 11,200 pounds.

Today, the Hagood Mill serves as a tourist attraction — donated to Pickens County in 1973. Now owned and operated by the Pickens County Museum, Ed Bolt, museum curator who also serves as site manager for the mill, said 25,000 people make the destination part of their sightseeing experience each year.

The mill, which ceased commercial operations in 1966, is currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places. When it reopened in 1997 as a tourism destination, Bolt said only the mill and 20-foot overshot waterwheel and small wooden barn existed.

"There was no presence out here," Bolt said. "I came out and checked on it, but we didn't have anyone manning it except for every third Saturday when we would be there."

But that has changed significantly over the past 16 years. These days, visitors that tour the center — open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays — can observe the family farm exhibit, visitor center with gift shop, a three-quarter mile nature trail, two log cabins that have been relocated and restored, the Old Bear Blacksmith shop, a complete 19th Century cotton gin operation, the Ol' Mill Moonshine display and a large outdoor stage.

Also found at Hagood Mill is the Prater's Creek Bridge, the county's last steel bridge constructed during the WPA days of the Great Depression. The bridge was relocated to the back of the property and restored and placed over the creek, allowing for continued expansion and development at the site.

Though excited about the improvements that have already taken place at Hagood Mill, Bolt said there are more to come. The discovery of prehistoric rock carvings several years ago has led to the construction of the South Carolina Rock Art Interpretive Center. The center will feature those carvings while highlighting the work and historical significance of the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology's Rock Art Survey.

Bolt said the Rock Art Center is scheduled to open within the next several months.

"Even before this idea came about, there was an interest in Native American culture that will be drawn to this building," Bolt said, adding, "I think we have a one-two punch with the museum in town and Hagood Mill, with art, history and the folk life center all in one place."

Bolt added that Hagood Mill continues to host "Music in the Mountains" the third Saturday of every month, featuring traditional music, folk life and living history. The mill is part of what Bolt said is the county's focus on tourism that intensified with the closing of mills in the early 2000s.

"We get a great benefit from Table Rock State Park, since they always have a large number of visitors," he said.

Bolt said Hagood Mill was also significant in that trips to North Carolina or the mountains generally required passage through the area prior to construction of U.S. 178. As is the case with all Pickens County owned buildings, inmates provide maintenance to the mill and its buildings as well as cut the grass.

Visitors to the mill say a trip to the mill is one worth taking.

"It's really cool; it's a great place," said George Young, of Denmark, S.C. "I love old historical stuff, especially looking at the mechanics and the old wooden items and how people used to operate. We have a lost art and I think we could learn a lot from the way we used to do things."

Mary Lou Shelhamer, of Keowee Key, said she hopes more schools include Hagood Mill when it comes to field trip destinations.

"I hope the local school kids get an opportunity to come here and check it out, to see how people used to live in log cabins and the sacrifices they made," Shelhamer said.

Hagood Mill is located 3 miles north of Pickens, just off U.S. Highway 178 on Hagood Mill Road, 5.5 miles south of Highway 11. For more information, call (864) 898-2936, (864) 898-5963 or online at picmus@co.pickens.sc.us.

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George Young, right, of Denmark, S.C., and Curtis Cain, of Orangeburg, examine the waterwheel located at the exterior of the gristmill at Hagood Mill.



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Above: Though not original to the site, the two cabins have been restored to show visitors living conditions in the 1800s. Right: A moonshine still is also among the things that visitors will find during their visit to the Hagood Mill in Pickens.



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Left: Ed Bolt, site manager of the Hagood Mill Historic Site and Folklife Center near Pickens, is pictured at the entrance to the gift shop. Right: Mary Lou Shelhamer, left, of Keowee Key, and Loretta Bull, of Valdese, N.C., examine a corn sheller that removes kernels from corn cobs during their visit to the Hagood Mill.