Oconee Heritage Center looks to bright future

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — The Oconee County Heritage Center is extending its historical fingertips with many new projects.

Director Leslie White is thrilled about the additions, and she is confident that the community will jump on board as well.

Four projects continue to make progress as funding becomes available while the center's biggest project awaits approval.

"The OHC's application to the U.S. Forest Service to create the Southern Appalachian Farmstead is still under review," White said. "The Environmental Assessment report should be out in a matter of weeks for public review and comment for 30 days following its release. At that point a decision regarding whether or not the U.S. Forest Service will issue the OHC the Special Use Permit to do the project will be made. Once the permit is issued, we can begin raising funds and will begin stabilizing the existing Russell Farmstead structures."

If the Russell Farmstead is approved, it will be the first of its kind in the county.

In addition to the pending farmstead, the General Store Museum is now open Saturdays from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m.

"It is located in downtown Westminster across from the depot. It will be housing many of the artifacts that were saved from the old England's General Merchandise that operated on Main Street Westminster for nearly 100 years," she added. "The Westminster Historic Area Preservation Society raised $25,000 in 2007 to purchase the items and gave them to the OHC. They were in storage until the donated Barrett-Jones Building could be renovated. The museum looks like an old general store when you walk in and the back will soon feature exhibit space dedicated to displays about Westminster and the surrounding areas (Oakway, Fair Play, Long Creek, etc). At least 300 people visited the General Store Museum on its opening weekend during the Apple Festival and the comments were very, very good. People enjoyed seeing the array of antique store items and the authentic feeling of a real general store. Kids also enjoyed it because it was unlike any stores that they see now."

And when it comes to newspapers in the county, one in particular will be made into a historic gem.

"The Keowee Courier building was adopted in early 2010 and continues to be the newspaper office," she said. "We have no plans to interrupt that process, but one day would like to turn it into a small museum that would interpret the county's rich history with news and media.

For such a small place Oconee County had many wonderful newspapers, radio stations and obviously valued staying up to date with the wider world even during times when that was a hard job to do. We would also like to exhibit the technology that was required for creating newspapers, such as printing presses and linotypes that have since been replaced by more modern computers and machinery. Extensive restoration will be required to preserve the unique brickwork on the c.1899 structure. When this happens downtown Walhalla will have four museums on one street, and we are excited to be a part of this cluster that will certainly bring tourists to the downtown area."

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