Storytelling event planned at Hagood Mill

BY STEPHANIE JADRNICEK
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PICKENS — Everyone's a storyteller. Some take it to the stage, and others take it to the living room.

That's how Johnny Fowler, coordinator of the 15th annual Hagood Mill Storytelling Festival, describes the intrinsic art.

The festival started as an offshoot from Hagood's annual fiddlers convention. People would gather around in the late afternoon and share their tall tales and memories. When the mill was ready to expand its activities, the storytelling festival seemed a natural addition.

Admission is free, but there's a $5 parking fee. Storytellers from all over the Southeast will perform at Hagood Mill from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday.

Besides being the coordinator of the festival, Fowler is also considered Hagood Mill's resident storyteller. He's been steeped in storytelling since he was a child, learning the art at the feet of his grandmothers.

"I was raised in the Appalachian tradition. Both of my grandmothers were from the Appalachian hills — one was from Tennessee and one was from western North Carolina," Fowler said. "So I grew up listening to their stories and their music."



Fowler

As he grew older, he started playing some instruments and discovered his own love of storytelling. He began performing back in the mid-1980s at schools, then he expanded to festivals, colleges and private events.

About 300 to 500 people usually attend Hagood Mill's Storytelling Festival. Some folks will listen to a few stories and then tour the historical site, while others will sit and stay for the whole day.

Featured storytellers include award-winning storyteller Michael Reno Harrell, Kathy Gordon of Asheville, N.C., and Darion McCloud of Columbia.

Fowler has attended the National Storytelling Festival several times. The event takes place in Jonesborough, Tenn., which has a population of about 4,000 to 5,000. But during the festival the town fills with 15,000.

"People come from as far away as Germany and New Zealand," he said. "They spread it out under seven circus tents. One tent can hold about 1,000 people, and each tent can be so full you can't get another person in. So people will be standing outside to listen."

Fowler thinks there's something magical about storytelling, something captivating.

"Most people like that personal element," he said. "They like the idea that somebody shared their story."

Sometimes these stories even change people's lives. Storytellers usually draw on their own experiences and talk about lessons they've learned in humorous or poignant ways. So as audience members identify with the stories, the tales shed light on their own lives.

People tell stories every day — to their sisters, to their kids, to their coworkers — it's a main avenue for communication. It's part of how people connect with each other. And often, one story stirs up another.

"It's part folksy, part social and part magical," Fowler said. "People are generally just interested in people."

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