Volunteers invest sweat equity in museum

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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WALHALLA — Jason Nichols says he has Cherokee blood running through his veins from both his father's and mother's sides of the family.

Nichols is proud of his Cherokee heritage, even if friends sometimes question his lineage.

"They tell me I look more Irish than anything else," Nichols said with a big smile, as he put up a wall at the future home of the Cherokee Museum in Walhalla on Thursday.

Slowly, the abandoned school building across the street from the Oconee County Courthouse is beginning to take shape.

Nichols, the owner of Nichols Masonry in Seneca, and a few volunteers invested plenty of sweat equity in getting a wall up on the back of the building facing the Oconee County Health Department building.

The son of Cherokee Bear Clan Chief James Nichols, Jason Nichols said he's happy to be able to lend a hand with the project.

"It's something that's been talked about for a while," he said.

At one time, Cherokee Bear Clan members thought about buying a doctor's office in Walhalla and converting it into a museum, Nichols said.

Instead, the Oconee County Heritage Center received the abandoned building from the School District of Oconee, and OHC turned around and presented the Cherokee Bear Clan with a 20-year lease on the building.

OHC and the Bear Clan signed a contract last year stipulating that the museum must open within five years.

Luther Lyle, chairman of the Oconee Arts and Historical Commission, said the cement blocks used to put up the back wall of the building were paid for with

$4,000 that was the latest money to come in from State ATAX funds.

"We need the walls up before we start the roof," Lyle said. "We have to raise more money to match grant money needed for the roof."

Donations may be sent to the Cherokee Bear Clan of South Carolina or the Cherokee Museum, P.O. Box 1014, Walhalla, SC 29691.

"We're getting there; we've made remarkable progress," Lyle said. "Once we get the roof on, everything else will be easy."

Once completed, the Cherokee Museum would be the first of its kind in South Carolina and become another piece of what's shaping up to be a cluster of historical and cultural venues within walking distance of each other. The museum would complement the Heritage Center and Patriots' Hall.

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