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Cornhusk dolls, made by Verily Simpkins, stand on display.

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Heth Lawn was an eventful spot this past Saturday, Oct. 15. Walking through the campus under the near cloudless sky on the brisk autumn morning, one could not help but be drawn to the inviting smell of burning wood over coals, brewing apple butter, and the homely sound of picked banjos at a breakneck tempo. This was the rich, kind atmosphere of Radford University's Appalachian Folk Arts Festival.

Being an annual tradition at RU, the Appalachian Folk Arts Festival is a time for well deserved leisure for the students, and a fun way to educate all who attend about the heritage of the area. The festival is, and has been, appropriately scheduled simultaneously with the university's Family Weekend during its 26 year run. The goal is to greet the parents with a friendly presentation of Appalachian culture, making for both a warm and informative environment.

Generally, the Appalachian Folk Arts Festival is scheduled on the same day as the annual Highlander Festival, with the former taking place on Heth Lawn, and the latter taking place on Moffett Quad. This year was the first in several years where the Appalcahian Folk Arts

Festival was separate.

The festival is organized every year by the Appalachian Events Committee (AEC), who work to bring awareness to Appalachian culture with a variety of events throughout the school year, such as the spring concert which featured the Grammy Award winning Carolina Chocolate Drops last April. The organization is led by the student co-chair, Brenna Ishler.

The highlight of the Folk Arts Festival, who are the very core and makeup of its foundation, are the various artisans, craftsmen and musicians from all over the area who share their work with the RU community and their families. According to Ishler, the festival has generally featured returning crafters and musicians over the years. For some, seeing those crafts is a completely profound new experience. For others, it is a welcome familiarity.

Every year, the festival has been enriched by the variety of craftsman. Those who attended were exposed to demonstrations and displays of the traditional facets by which Appalachian culture is defined. Blacksmiths, beekeepers, and leatherworkers demonstrated their unique art forms before the eyes of eager students and parents, while apple butter was cooked, churned, and sold on site. One notable artisan was Brad Smith, a woodworker who shared his pieces with the attendees, as well as his impressive array of knowledge on Appalachian history.

According to Smith, who works out of Hillsville, Va., he has been crafting wood “on and off” for most of his life, which he estimated added up to about 15 years of experience. His work has been displayed at the Appalachian Folk Arts Festival for the past seven years. The pieces that undoubtedly stood out on Smith’s table were Branch Roosters, which, as the name implies, are roosters made of carved sapling branches and wetted, shaped wood. The tradition of branch rooster making dates back by about 300-400 years, originating in Europe and brought over by settlers who nested in Appalachia.

“Woodworking is its own recipe, and the ingredients are all here,” Smith said about his displayed work. “Form and function were very important for early Appalachians. You were a jack of all trades, and a master of none.”

Smith also noted that all woodworking was functional, in the sense that most of it served a utilitarian purpose. For his own work, Smith uses traditional tools that date back 150 years.

Another notable artist at the Festival was Verily Simpkins, who has shared her love for making cornhusk dolls every year since the very first Folk Arts Festival. Her work incorporates the wetting, shaping, and drying of cornhusks, which Simpkins purchases as

raw materials, as she previously used ones that she cultivated herself.

Simpkins went on to explain the process by which she makes her dolls, as she dyes the husks using paint, due to the tendency of traditional vegetable dyes to fade. Her figures incorporate a number of different personalities. Some are seen holding books, others baskets. According to Simpkins, there is no rhyme or reason to the themes she picks for her cornhusk dolls, with the exception of a "bride" she made and displayed at the festival, which she made after being inspired by the shape of the particular husk.

The Folk Arts Festival also featured a memorial table for Lilly Blanche Kanode, a local candle wicker who had shared her art yearly at the festival. Kanode passed away in an automobile accident this past summer at the age of 84.

Various bluegrass, old-time and folk musicians performed at the festival throughout the day. These included groups such as The Victory X-press Blue-Graz Band, Country Connections, the Wolfe Brothers, Skeeter & the Skid Marks, and Moccasin Gap. CDs recorded by that artists were sold at the festival, along with recordings by other local Appalachian musicians.

One of the more significant events of the day was the Robert Green and Cora Creen Torey Scholarship auction, which is held at the festival every year. The scholarship is given to benefit an Appalachian Studies student, and the auction is made up of items donated by artisans, including cornhusk dolls by Simpkins, branch roosters by Smith, and CDs by the bands. Brianna Kirker, a leading member of the Appalachian Events Committee, was the scholarship recipient last year. Ricky Cox, a sponsor for the AEC, was very pleased with the turnout and overall reception of the Appalachian Folk Arts Festival this year.

"I'm glad we're able to share this culture with the students," Cox said. "Most families who live outside of Appalachia would not have the chance to experience this otherwise."

In keeping with tradition, the AEC continues to share the culture and celebrate the greatness of our historical mountain heritage.