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Step inside this house

Late Henson's gallery of wonders draws widespread curiosity

by Michael Andrews

andrews@timescourier.com

In folk tales both Southern and otherwise, it's said that in certain cases when a house's longtime tenant passes, the departed resident's spirit can still be felt watching over the home. The spirit doesn't take the form of a scary house haunter or unwelcome poltergeist. Instead, it looms as an intangible presence in the air that can be felt but not seen.

A strong intangible presence was certainly in the air the weekend of May 15 and 16 as family and friends of late Gilmer County resident Robert Thomas "R.T." Henson opened Henson's home, workshop and, now, wonder-filled gallery for public visitation. Visitors were also welcome to tour the premises the previous weekend of Saturday, May 9, and Sunday, May 10.

The two weekends saw the second round of free, public visitations to the home where Henson lived and created a vivid array of artwork, writings and inventions that has since been compared to the works of both Renaissance genius Leonardo da Vinci and late Summerville outsider artist Howard Finster. Last year, Henson's nephew, Danny Tibbetts, along with his wife, Deborah, son, Brian, and friends Camille Day and Kathe Hall, welcomed over 500 visitors to the uniquely designed brick and rock bungalow high atop Corbin Hill.

Hall, a Pickens County mosaic artist, figures that close to 1,000 visitors passed through this time around. Some came from as far as Atlanta and Fayetteville. Certainly, either amount of foot traffic represents far more than the number of persons who visited the house during the time Henson lived there. He passed away from natural causes in 2007 at the age of 72 after an extended period spent in seclusion. By then, his residence and the world he built inside it had already long become a much whispered-about subject of curiosity among many north Georgians.

Though the man affectionately known simply as "R.T." passed away without ever marrying or fathering children, it would be incorrect to say he was truly alone. After watching over his mother, Lou Ella, until her passing in 1975, Henson's company was often provided by strewn inanimate objects. But, through endless tinkering and experimenting, he was able to bring even the most mundane piece of flotsam to life.

Henson even built the house himself, complete with vaulted ceilings, self-poured concrete columns, a half-rock, half-concrete basement and circular windows that would be at home inside the pages of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. While residing in a stationary school bus parked out front, he constructed his future living quarters plank by plank and brick by brick over a lengthy span that began in the 1960s.

The home was never truly finished. But, says Tibbetts, it was close enough by Henson's judgment despite his never welcoming hot running water or an installed heating system. Inside its walls, Henson created a legacy both perplexing and astounding, the product of a man obsessed with the working mechanics of everyday objects and of human existence, itself.

Not your average Renaissance man



Photos by Michael Andrews



Above, open house attendee Melissa Feltman tries out the handmade telescope used by R.T. Henson to gaze upon the horizon of downtown Ellijay and beyond. At left, visitors examine old photographs of Henson and read some of his writings from 1980. The pages included theories on how man could travel through time using his mind as a machine and early predictions of the digital, computer-reliant age that we are experiencing today. Below, a star attraction of the gallery, Henson's artistically modified bicycle, which was his primary mode of transportation for many years.



To understand why a complementary tour of this man's home is so noteworthy, one must first have at least a rudimentary idea of who Henson was and why he thought the way he did. Uncovering a definitive answer to that query is not a simple task.

A lifelong resident of Ellijay, he served in the U.S. Army as a switchboard operator stationed in Germany until the mid-1950s. Upon arriving home from service, Henson worked jobs at the now closed J&C Spread Mill and Universal Carpet Plant for a time until eventually retiring.

Despite having dropped out of high school, Henson

could assuredly talk intricate mechanics and science with high level Ph.Ds. Even more amazing is that he acquired much of that knowledge the old-fashioned way, in the pre-Internet era, relying on a vast collection of textbooks, correspondences and lengthy visits to numerous county libraries.

Ultimately, Henson was known to most as an off-beat town character seen traveling through Ellijay and neighboring towns dressed in a long-sleeves and slacks seemingly not bound for anywhere too specif-

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Reversal of grammar

Everybody has little obsessions that make them tick. It should come as no surprise that your keyboard-abusing columnist is more than a tad obsessed with words.

So, when I sit down to watch the evening news or other programs, I pay close attention to the words and phrases spilt forth from the mouths of those doing the reporting and those being interviewed.

In doing so, I've ascertained that there is a bizarre reversal of grammar afoot in today's snatch and grab, snooze or lose society.

Late comic George Carlin was also more than a little grammar obsessive. Were he alive today, Carlin would have at least a good half-hour of material on which to harp.

Here's an example. At the supermarket, pharmacy, movie theater or football stadium, people used to stand in a line. Now, thanks to the intrusive presence of the Internet, they instead stand online.

This makes no sense. For starters, they are standing on concrete, grass or good, solid terra firma, not the line itself. As the economy continues its spiraling black hole effect, the way that people reference it also worsens with each passing day.

During the last week, I've heard at least five people refer to the ongoing slump as an "economic turndown," rather than an economic downturn.

"Turndown" is something a lady on the outer parameters of your perpetually single columnist's league does not think twice about doing. It is not what the economy does after eight years of presidential obliviousness and apathy.

Let the record state I am not a high-falooting grammar snob. "Ain't," "y'all" and "fixin' to" still figure greatly into my regular vocabulary.

However, I will not soon be standing "online" for anything. Nor will an economic "turn-down" be the stimulus that finally forces me to dump diet soda for an exclusive, free-flowing romance with transparent H2O.

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Grazing will abound as Taste of Ellijay is on for this Saturday

by Michael Andrews

andrews@timescourier.com

The streets of downtown Ellijay will once again be filled with food, fun and frivolity as the annual Taste of Ellijay food sampling event returns Saturday afternoon, May 23. This year's Taste of Ellijay is scheduled to run from 4 till around 8 p.m.

Aside from the event taking place on a Saturday, rather than a Thursday as has been the case with previous installments, there have been a few additional adjustments made to the Taste of Ellijay blueprint this year.

Food vendor booths will be lined up mainly along North Main Street this year, rather than around the downtown square, according to Berty Kamholz, event chairperson and member of the Dedicated

Ellijay Merchants and Associates (DEMA), the event's presenter.

Taking place on the weekend before Memorial Day, Monday, May 25, this year's

Taste of Ellijay will be preceded by the Whole Town Yard Sale, also organized by DEMA.

The extensive yard sale will take place from 8 a.m.

through Saturday afternoon along Broad Street. Some of the sale will have already wrapped up by the time the Taste... event begins, says Kamholz, but vendors are wel-

come to leave their booths up as Taste of Ellijay gets under way. A large array of resale items offered by members of the local community will be available for purchase during the yard sale.

At least a dozen food vendors, with more expected, will be on hand offering samples of their specialties for Taste... ticketholders. So far, Cornerstone Cafe, Charlie's Italian Restaurant, Cantaberry Restaurant, The Pink Pig, Shane's Rib Shack, Appalachian Wraps, Carnival Eateries, Big Green Egg, Okinawa, The Fudge Cafe, Il Forno's and Naturally Fresh have committed, says Kamholz. A strip of 10 tickets cost \$5 this year and samples will be available for one to three tickets depending on the vendor, she adds. Tickets can be purchased at most mer-

chant stores downtown in advance and also at the event.

There will also be a few new entertainment options on hand, says Kamholz. DJ Mark Greenway will be spinning tunes throughout the day and tethered balloon rides will be offered for a low price. The ground-secured hot air balloon will be taking off from and landing in the First Baptist Church of Ellijay parking area.

Due to Taste of Ellijay coinciding with the Whole Town Yard Sale, there will be multiple street closings around the downtown square area Saturday.

North Main Street, from the roundabout to College Street, will be blocked off much of Saturday afternoon for Taste of Ellijay. Broad

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Photo by Michael Andrews

Ticketholders line up for a hot slice from Charlie's during last year's Taste of Ellijay.