

Unique Approaches to Rural Community Development

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HandMade in America serves 22 counties in Western North Carolina. Our mission is to help build community and economic development opportunities based on the region's rich heritage. Western North Carolina covers 9,081 sq. miles and includes approximately 850,000 people. Every region has unique development challenges when it comes to building and sustaining an economy, and certainly the mountains are no different. Our topography, for example, is a significant challenge. There are 40 peaks in our mountain range that extend over 6,000 feet. North Carolina's mountains are some of the highest in the Eastern United States and some of the oldest in the world. Indeed, Mount Mitchell is the highest peak in the Eastern United States.

The isolation of the region is changing but it is still part of how we see ourselves. Our road system is improving somewhat. Interstate 26 will eventually connect at the Tennessee border, traverse Madison County and connect at the southern end of Buncombe County, opening up a major corridor through the area. Traditionally, most of our roads have stretched from east to west through the gaps of the mountains. The Blue Ridge Parkway is the only true north-south corridor that connects our region. However, millions of visitors use the Blue Ridge Parkway annually, thus limiting its usefulness for everyday traffic, besides the fact that it is not intended as a regular traffic or commercial traffic thoroughfare. Another barrier to development is the fact that most of our land is held in the public trust, such as through the Forest Service and the National

Park Service. There are several large corporate land holdings in the mountains of Western North Carolina, but there is a shortage of available land for traditional kinds of economic development activities, such as the development of industrial parks and shell buildings to market to larger industry. And, maybe that is a good thing. We obviously need to protect the natural resources, environment and vistas of our unique region. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the most visited national park in the country with ten million visitors every year.

Given the unique challenges that face Western North Carolina, HandMade in America was established six years ago to explore alternative avenues for economic and community development and to build upon the assets of our region, rather than simply pointing out its needs and deficiencies. Our very first project was the *Craft Heritage Trails Guidebook*, which resulted from a study we conducted with Appalachian State University and the Craft Organization Directors Association. We found to our great surprise that Western North Carolina has the fourth largest concentration of craftspeople in the United States (New York is first, San Francisco is second, and Santa Fe is third). Western North Carolina is populated with over 5,000 craftspeople, who contribute over \$122 million a year. This is three times the amount of revenue that burly tobacco contributes to the regional economy. The goal of the guidebook was to encourage tourists to exit on and off the Blue Ridge Parkway and other major roads, and to explore the unique, 'back roads'

heritage of small towns. HandMade in America visited communities and interacted with craftspeople. We asked questions such as "Where are your sacred places?" and "Where do you not want people to visit?" Tourism has a double-edged nature, and can overwhelm rural communities. Although tourism has great economic potential in remote communities, we did not want it to overtake these communities and ruin what was there, or the feeling of 'ownership' that residents had for their small towns. The guidebook allows people to tour—at their own pace in an automobile—tucked away crafts studios, beds and breakfasts, and restaurants that serve local fare and homegrown food. Although a systematic study has not been conducted yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that the guidebook has raised incomes for those who participate. Some people have indicated that their incomes have increased from 13 to 28%. Because of the great success of the guidebook, a third edition is scheduled for publication in early 2003.

HandMade learned a great deal about the Western North Carolina region in the wake of the publication of the first Craft Trails Guidebook in 1996. We learned that communities are anxious for new approaches. We created our *Small Towns Revitalization Program* based on the demand from small towns who were not included in the first guidebook, and who wanted to revitalize their downtowns and main streets and attract artisans into empty storefronts. The program is modeled on the North Carolina Main Street program and has received help from the North Carolina Division of Community Assistance in carrying it out. We now serve 12 small towns scattered across the region.

Our most recent project is the *Farms, Gardens and Countryside Guidebook*. HandMade in America modeled it after the Craft Heritage Guidebook. The same principle we applied to craftspeople is being used to help farmers and gardeners across Western North Carolina. The region's farms are small-acreage, 'scratch-ankle' farms carved out of the hillsides. Despite (or perhaps because of) their small size, these farms have a great deal to offer visitors. Using the guide-

book, visitors can wind their way to choose-and-cut Christmas tree farms, herb gardens, and working farms, which can teach young and old alike about where their food actually comes from.

Finally, HandMade in America is involved a post-landfill development project in Yancey County. About four years ago, the Blue Ridge Resource Conservation and Development Council approached us about developing a use for the methane that would be tapped from a closed ten-acre landfill. As a result, we decided to locate two craft studio incubators near the landfill, where potters and glass blowers use the methane to fuel their pottery kilns and glass blowing furnaces. The engineers tell us that the landfill will produce gas for approximately twenty years. It has been a tremendous success. We have six tenants on the site now, and whereas typically a glass blower would spend \$1,200 dollars a month for fuel, we offer fuel for free on this site. The craftspeople simply pay us \$250 a month in rent. The Yancey County site also hosts greenhouses, which are warmed with methane for some native plant propagation. Because of second home construction in the mountains, many of the region's native plants, such as rhododendrons and azaleas, are being over-harvested from the wild. Consequently, we are exploring ways of cultivating these native plants and supplying them to landscapers. In this respect, the landfill project is benefiting conservation efforts as well as economic development. The development in Yancey County is significant since there are a large number of small rural landfills in North Carolina that also could be used in creative ways economically.

HandMade in America has had several partners in these projects. The Rural Center has been a tremendous resource for us. The Golden LEAF Foundation has contributed to several of our projects, particularly the new farms guidebook. The cooperative extension service has also been invaluable, as have two of our major contributors, the North Carolina Community Development Initiative and the Appalachian Regional Commission.