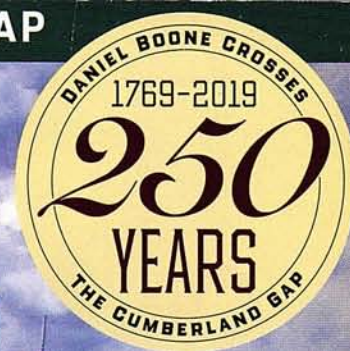


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HENDERSON COUNTY,
NORTH CAROLINA

A Place You'll Remember



BY SUSANNA SHETLEY BARBEE

Henderson County is a gem of a place nestled in the beautiful mountains of Western North Carolina. Widely known for its abundance of apples and as the final home of American poet and writer Carl Sandburg, this popular destination spot offers not only history and agriculture but also an array of culinary, musical and leisure experiences.

During two recent trips to Hendersonville, I experienced the town in an up close and personal way. My palate and wanderlust were both satiated, but what I noticed most was the spirit of the people. One can easily see they love their community and want to extend hospitality to anyone taking time to visit.

RAISE YOUR SPIRITS

When it comes to spirits, there's no shortage in Henderson County. From brandy and mead to wine and beer to hard cider, there's a drink for all tastes. Unlike the middle part of the state, Western North Carolina isn't well known for its vineyards. Nonetheless, several locales, such as Point Lookout Vineyards, are making a statement.

Located just outside downtown Hendersonville, Point Lookout feels hundreds of miles from anywhere. Situated on the southeast slope of Lookout Mountain, visitors are offered a breathtaking 30-mile panoramic view. Hurricane chairs line the lawn so guests can relax while enjoying both the scenery and beverages.

The inside area with timber-frame beams, high ceilings and an inviting open space is used for numerous occasions, including weddings, reunions and other celebrations of life.

Tasting room manager Justin Corliss offered a tour of the property and a tasting of the flagship wines, along with mead, which is a fermented sipping drink made from honey and thought to be one of the oldest alcoholic beverages in the world.



Locals and visitors enjoy the tasting room at Point Lookout Vineyards. SUSANNA SHETLEY BARBEE PHOTO

Another unique offering at Point Lookout is their Javine, which is a mocha-flavored red wine. Hence, the name, which combines "java" and "wine." This drink offers the tongue hints of a latte, as well as milk, chocolate, vanilla cream and ripe raspberries.

"I moved here because I believe North Carolina has the ability to produce outstanding wines and I wanted to be a part of it," Corliss said. His interview occurred during the construction phase at the business. "It was very exciting to be on the literal ground floor of something like Point Lookout."

Later in the day we ventured to Southern Appalachian Brewery, on a side street in the city's Historic Seventh Avenue District. Andy and Kelly Cubbin bought Southern Appalachian Brewery in 2006 and began slowly by making wholesale batches at a facility near Asheville Regional Airport.

The Cubbins wanted to build their own space but felt the Asheville beer scene was already getting saturated. They decided to open up in neighboring Henderson County and be the only brewery in town.

Now they are part of a thriving brewery scene, which includes big dog Sierra Nevada. Kelly says the nationally acclaimed brewery doesn't take away from Southern Appalachian Brewery; it actually supports their business.

People from all over the world visit the massive Sierra Nevada venue in Mills River and inevitably discover the smaller breweries nearby.

Longtime bartender Sandy Love suggested we try a flight of our own selection. It included the Open Beta IPA, Raspberry Chocolate Stout, Winter Ale, Wild Peach Wheat and the IPA. My favorite was the Open Beta IPA, but it was fun to try some types I don't typically explore. At any given time, Southern Appalachian Brewery has 12 of their beers on tap.

Southern Appalachian Brewery is also known for their live music scene. The Dan Keller Trio was playing the night we visited. Their mellow, jazzy improvisational vibe was the cherry on top of an already relaxing atmosphere.

When asked about other microbreweries moving into the county, Sandy said, "It doesn't feel like competition. We all offer something different and support one another." Since Southern Appalachian Brewery opened, a growing list has joined them, including Sanctuary Brewing, Blue Ghost, Triskelion Brewing, Dry Falls Brewing, Guidon Brewing, Mills River Brewery, Bearwallow Brewing and Bold Rock Hard Cider. If you're a beer lover, Henderson County should certainly be on your radar.

As the night wound down, we made our way to The Brandy Bar, a one-of-a-kind establishment owned by artist Brenda Coates. And



The Dan Keller Trio (left) plays on a Saturday night at Southern Appalachian Brewery. The Brandy Bar owner Brenda Coates (right) works with grandson Riley, who helps out when home from college. SUSANNA SHETLEY BARBEE PHOTOS



“Making and selecting brandy is a creative process. Just like art. That’s why I love it.”

— **Brenda Coates**

Henderson County

North Carolina

when I say one-of-a-kind, I mean it’s the only brandy bar in all of North Carolina. When we arrived a local band, the East Flat Rockers, were crooning in the second room of the old Hornes Shoe Store, circa 1911, while the front of house bustled with bar traffic.

“Brandy was the drink of the colonies,” Coates said. “But it fell out of favor over the generations and then got the stigma of being a dessert drink. But really, when made right, it’s not sweet at all.”

We tried it and Coates was correct. While you could certainly taste hints of fig or cherry or other fruit on the back of your tongue, it wasn’t sugary sweet.

An older crowd generally frequents The Brandy Bar, most likely because their change purse is more acquainted to aperitifs and neat drinks. Nevertheless, Coates says she gets a decent amount of young folks who come in for brandy cocktails.

“Making and selecting brandy is a creative process. Just like art. That’s why I love it,” she said.

On Sunday we ventured to the Bold Rock Hard Cider location in Mills River. The parking lot was packed. It was the second Sunday of the month, when the cidery hosts Sunday Brunch & Bluegrass, a popular event where patrons munch on chicken and waffles while listening to bluegrass music in a vibrantly trendy warehouse. Every seat was taken, even to the point they set up additional tables in the bay with the cider vats.

Taproom manager Meg Emerson transferred from Bold Rock’s sister location in Nellysford, Virginia. The story of these two cideries is an interesting one. In 2010, Virginian farm owner John Washburn contacted Brian Shanks, an award-winning cider maker from New Zealand to see if he wanted to partner. The following year, the unlikely pair built a relatively small barn at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Nellysford. Their goal was simply to make a high quality product

with locally-sourced apples.

Fast forward to 2015 when Bold Rock brought their skills and spirits to Mills River. They wanted another location that offered a variety of delicious local apples, and what better place than Henderson County. For both locations, all apples used in production are sourced nearby.

APPLES, SHARKS AND MINERALS. OH, MY!

For anyone familiar with the area, Hendersonville is synonymous with apples. My family attended the popular North Carolina Apple Festival every year of my childhood. And as an adult, I’ve routinely perused Main Street with other festivalgoers over Labor Day weekend to eat apple turnovers, listen to live music and purchase items from artists and crafts people. For over 60 years, this event has offered fun and culture to thousands of attendees.

While the festival hullabaloo happens one weekend a year, the apple orchards attract patrons for a longer time. Peak season for Hendersonville orchards runs August to late October. On any given day, orchards and farms are abuzz with locals and tourists enjoying hayrides, apple picking, corn maze navigating, pumpkin patching and more.

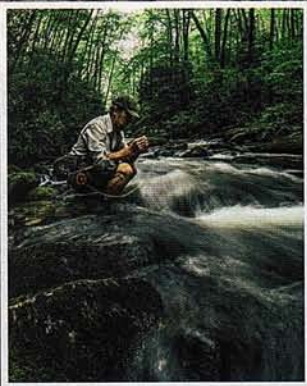


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Last fall, my two sons and I spent a day at Grandad's Apples N' Such on Chimney Rock Road. We arrived bright and early. It was a sunny, warm fall day and I knew it would be packed by lunchtime. We needed to beat the crowd.

Henderson County

North Carolina

We spent the first part of our time picking apples (Jonagold, Golden Delicious and Wine-sap). The boys then shot apples out of a cannon and enjoyed the playground area. After trying some samples we made our way to the corn maze. We got a little lost at times and didn't complete the entire scavenger hunt, but we earned a solid A for effort. A mountain morning at an apple orchard is truly a quintessential autumn time experience.

We then headed downtown to explore a few museums. One wouldn't think it but on Main Street sits a unique aquarium that houses small sharks and other marine life. The Team ECCO Aquarium & Shark Lab is a must on any family's to-do list. Team ECCO was founded in 2001 as a grassroots ocean learning program to reach youth and adults in Western North Carolina. The goals were to serve as an educational resource. In 2018, Team ECCO opened the

aquarium and lab downtown, which is now home to over 275 fish, invertebrates, reptiles and salamanders.

"Our goal is for people to come in asking questions and leave having learned something new," said Brenda Ramer, a former teacher and founder of Team Ecco.

My boys and I were impacted by the relationship between the aquatic life and the humans. We learned that fish possess sound and touch recognition so when certain staff members talked, the fish recognize them, rush to the front of the tank and hang out near the staff member's hand on the outside of the glass. It was very sweet. What sets this aquarium apart is the knowledgeable team and intimacy between the staff and marine life.

"Our goal is to give young people an authentic experience with marine life," said Ramer, "to help them no longer fear what's in the water. We want to foster those fears into interest and discovery."

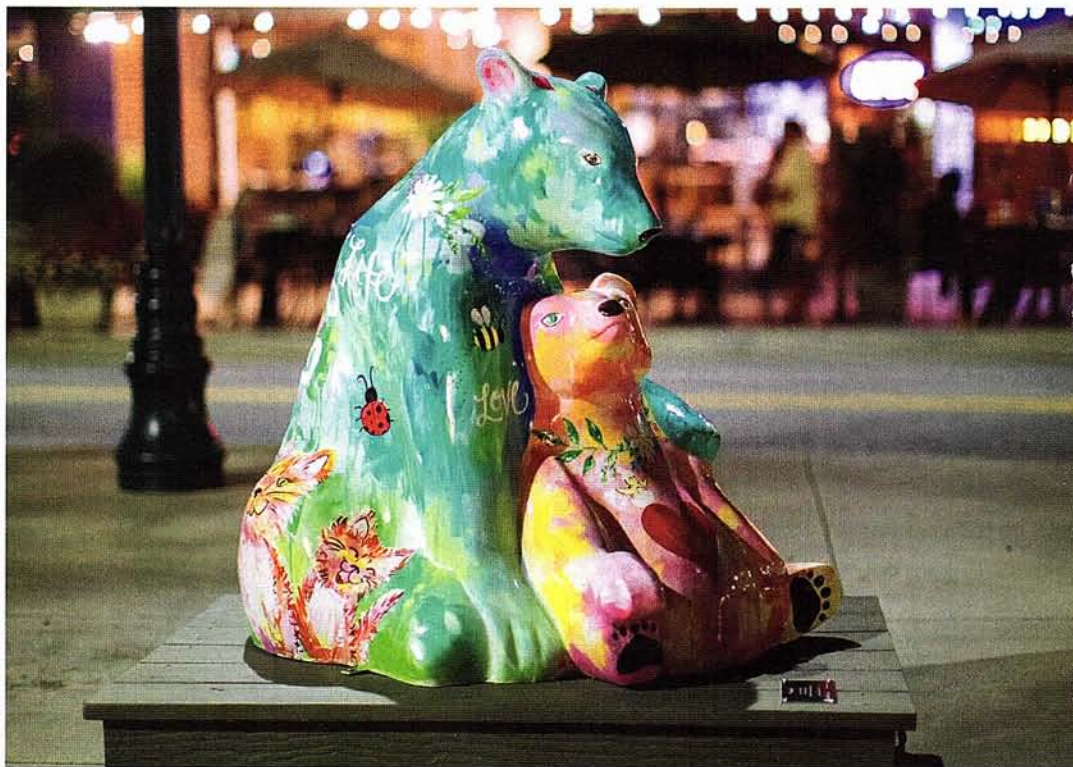
Also on Main Street is the Mineral and Lapidary Museum of Henderson County. This is a free museum on the bottom floor of one of Hendersonville's historic buildings. It offers interesting geological information, fossilized insects and sea creatures, stone figurines, gems, rocks and more. There were also sections about dinosaurs and other pre-historic species. My older son has been interested in gems and



Ten-year old Brooks Barbee picks apples at Grandad's Apples N' Such.

The Team ECCO Aquarium & Shark Lab (below, left) is located on Main Street in Hendersonville. SUSANNA SHETLEY BARBEE PHOTOS

Colorful painted bears (below) adorn downtown Hendersonville. SAM DEAN PHOTO



stones since he was very small so he especially loved that part. My youngest enjoyed learning more about dinosaurs.

Frolicking Main Street not only offers delicious dining, exploratory museums, shopping and more but also artistically painted bears and other animals scattered throughout downtown. Many of the animals are painted to match the nearest store. It was a fun treat to be on the lookout for the next colorful creature.

PINBALLS AND GEM STONES

Another unique addition to the Hendersonville scene is The Appalachian Pinball Museum, housed in a historic building that was once a movie theatre. Owners T.C. Di Bella and John French own The Pinball Museum in neighboring Asheville and decided to open a second location in Hendersonville.

It's fun and nostalgic to get in the classic stance and hammer away at the silver ball. It's neat to watch my young boys get just as much entertainment out of these games as I do. Not only does the venue offer over 50 pinball machines, but it also houses other classic games such as Pac-Man and Donkey Kong. Hanging out in that setting for a few hours was like stepping back in time.

Henderson County

North Carolina

Ten miles away, another unique attraction welcomes locals and visitors of all ages. Elijah Cloer was eight-years-old when he started Elijah Mountain Gem Mine. As part of his home-school curriculum, his parents wanted him to learn the ins and outs of creating a business. He said his favorite thing to do while on vacation as a kid was gem mine, so when his dad asked what type of business he wanted to open, he knew right away.

What started as one flume is now a popular thriving business rated the top gem mine in North Carolina by Trip Advisor. Along with mining, visitors can peruse the gift shop, picnic beside a backyard creek, pet and feed goats, and say hi to chickens and roosters walking freely in the store.

I noticed the employees' smiles the minute we walked in. "We love it here and we're all friends outside the business," Cloer said. "In a setting like this, it's hard to have a bad day at work."

**"The balance
between woodlands and
open space couldn't have
been better for
Sandburg's poetic soul,
and here his soul took
root while his farm and
family flourished."**

**— Writer Thomas Crowe on
Carl Sandburg's home, Connemara**

SANDBURG AND THEATER

Henderson County was established as the southern gateway into the Blue Ridge. Completion of the Buncombe Turnpike in 1827 began a period of cultural and economic expansion for Western North Carolina. Before that, the western part of the state lagged behind its eastern counterpart. Mountainous terrain and lack of adequate transportation into the region kept it isolated from the rest of the state.

Henderson County pulses with history. On a drizzly Sunday morning, we set out for the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site in Flat Rock. From 1945 to 1967, this was the home of acclaimed American writer and poet Carl Sandburg. Along with his beloved family, he lived, worked and reflected on the 245-acre farm he dubbed Connemara after a county in Ireland with rolling hills such as those in Henderson County.

Thomas Crowe, regional writer and author of *Zoro's Field: My Life in the Appalachian Woods*, described Connemara like this, "The balance between woodlands and open space couldn't have been better for Sandburg's poetic soul, and here his soul took root while his farm and family flourished."

There's tranquility about the property. We walked in silence along the inclined path from the parking area to the house. Throughout our tour, we learned about Sandburg's wife and three daughters. We learned of his ability to write for all people, from all classes and walks of life. We learned about the man and the writer.

As Crowe said of Sandburg, "I've come to appreciate him as a poet of place as well as poet of the people. Although he adopted Western North Carolina as his home late in life, he

quickly became both a homeboy and homebody at Connemara, where he was protector of both place and privacy."

Not far from Connemara sits Flat Rock Playhouse, another historic institution of Henderson County. In 1937, a group of struggling performers called the Vagabond Players worked wherever they could until 1940 when they landed in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. Their first summer season of plays happened in a 150-year-old grist mill that was converted into The Old Mill Playhouse at Highland Lake.

Flat Rock Playhouse thrives today and boasts the title of State Theatre of North Carolina. What started as a summer line-up of productions now spans the full year and brings in performers from around the globe.

TALKING TREES

Are you seeking a balance in nature? Less than 15 miles outside town is the Holmes Educational State Forest. Unlike the crowded and popular DuPont State Recreational Forest 4.5 miles away, the Holmes Educational State Forest offers quiet reprieve.

The Talking Tree exhibit peaked my curiosity and propelled me to explore with my boys. Upon arrival, we mistakenly took a trail we thought was the Talking Tree Exhibit, but it was actually a flat trail with fire prevention information, an old N.C. Forest Service helicopter and a fire tower. The boys loved it, but we were still on a search for the talking trees.

With 235 acres, Holmes Educational State Forest is a beautiful span of forest, offering numerous trails and a robust ecosystem. When we finally landed on the Talking Tree trail, we were humored and excited by what we found. Along the winding trail, eight trees introduced themselves to us. Quite literally, we pushed a button, and they talked to us.

We were very impressed and humored. It was fun to go on a search for the next talking tree. We learned about black birches, white oaks, yellow poplars and others. This section of the forest is called an "outdoor classroom" and has been educating folks since 1977. It certainly taught us about native trees that have seen their fair share of history.

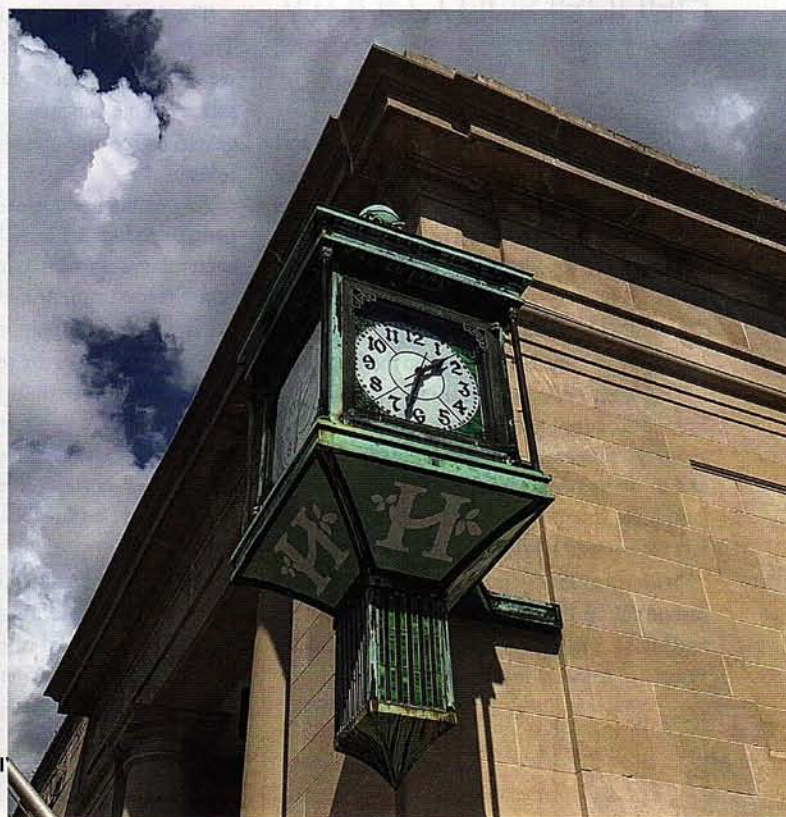
FOOD, LODGING AND MORE

Rich in agriculture and wildlife, along with a melting pot of cultures and skill levels, Hendersonville is known for delicious dining.



Clockwise from top left: Memorabilia on display at the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site. Brothers, Brooks and Case Barbree, hike through Holmes Educational State Forest searching for talking trees. The historic McClintock Clock adorns the corner of Fourth Avenue and Main Street in downtown Hendersonville. Appalachian Pinball Museum offers nostalgic fun for gamers of all ages.

SUSANNA SHETLEY BARBEE PHOTOS





Highland Lake Inn
SUSANNA SHETLEY BARBEE PHOTOS



We stayed at Cascades Mountain Resort, which is a perfect lodging option for families. With spacious rooms and doors that open to the interior, it felt safe. There is a massive water slide attached to the indoor pool. It was fun to simply walk out our room door and enjoy the thrill of a water slide.

The resort is also home to Old Orchard Tavern, which offers a classy dining experience that's relaxing and kid-friendly. Many of the menu items were small batch or locally-sourced. My older son ordered Scottish salmon

Henderson County

North Carolina

with a pesto rub over stone-ground grits and fresh vegetables. I ordered the Sunburst Trout with grits and sautéed vegetables. The veggies even included broccolini, one of my favorites. My younger son decided on the kid's hamburger. The beef was fresh and the fries were hand-cut (I had to steal a few).

Highland Lake is also home to the Highland Lake Inn, a beautiful mountain retreat since 1910. Throughout the century, the site served as a boys' preparatory school, military academy and a variety of summer camps. Today, Highland Lake Inn, poised atop 26 scenic acres, offers year-round relaxation and recreation.

Season's at Highland Lake is the renowned restaurant on the property that serves visitors and locals. You do not have to be a guest at the resort to enjoy a lovely dinner at Season's.

When we arrived for our reservation, manager Kayla Jarvis, welcomed us and led us to a table at a picturesque window.

She handed us menus, along with a wine list, and told us about the soup de jour, saying, "It's delicious. As they say, you can tell a good chef by his soups."

Settling in, our server, Chris, offered water and took our wine order. Chatting with him, we learned he'd worked at Season's for 20 years. When asked what had kept him there so long, he said, "The community and the people. I just love our guests and truly enjoy being part of their experience."

The food was delicious and well prepared. The service was excellent; we always had what we needed yet he never interrupted our conversation. At the conclusion of dinner, Chris suggested coffee and crème brûlée. We couldn't refuse.

As we were leaving, executive chef Nate Sargent introduced himself to us and ensured everything was to our liking. We complimented both the food and the service.

Nate's story is a full-circle tale. He worked a summer internship 20 years ago at Highland Lake Inn and when the opportunity opened two years ago for him to return, he jumped on it.

"This is a magical place. We try to create a taste on the palate that mimics the colors and flavors of these beautiful mountains," Sargent said.

While Henderson County offers its fare share of upscale dining, you can also find plenty of casual and funky establishments in more mellow environments. You can pop into

Black Rose or Mike's on Main or any of the other causal dining places.

And if you really want something unique, check out HenDough Chicken & Donuts, just off the beaten path on Kanuga Road. Here you'll find an eclectic menu full of—you guessed it—chicken and donuts.

Paul and Sarah Klaassen met while working as chefs at the Biltmore Estate. They combined their culinary skills to create a local restaurant that would become a favorite for residents and visitors. Having worked in mostly upscale restaurants, the Klaassen's wanted to open a place that was not only reputable for its food but also its fun and approachable environment.

We ordered the traditional chicken sandwich topped with pickles and Duke's mayonnaise, along with a Cobb salad with fried chicken. And of course, we tried several varieties of donuts. Everything was scrumptious. The crowd and our happy taste buds proved the quality of HenDough.

A PLACE YOU'LL REMEMBER

Some cities and destinations are appreciated for their natural beauty, others for their family-friendly fun and yet others for their arts, dining and entertainment scene. Hendersonville has all of the above. There are many more establishments, shops and locales I didn't have a chance to visit during my trips to this beautiful place. No matter what your goal or the ages of those in your tribe, Henderson County is a place for memories.

SML