

Monteith Family & Farmstead History

Dillsboro, North Carolina

The Family

Elias Brendle (E.B.) Monteith was born in 1876 in Monteith Cove near Dillsboro in Jackson County, North Carolina. He was one of seven children, having three brothers and three sisters; in 1907, E.B. married Mary Magdalene Carson from the Balsam community, also in Jackson County. E.B. died in 1954, Mary in 1958. They had two daughters: Edna Corine, born in 1908, and Edith Irene, born in 1915. Edna passed in 1988 at the age of 80 and Edith passed in 2001 at the age of 85; as neither sister had children, this branch of the Monteith family ended upon Edith's death.

The Property

In 1908, E.B. and Mary built their farmstead on property received from E.B.'s father. The still-intact site, less than a mile east of Dillsboro, NC, is approximately 14 acres in size. Scotts Creek forms the western and northern boundary of the property. Highway 23, constructed in the 1950s and the primary route linking Sylva, NC with Dillsboro, borders the south end of the property. The property extends eastward toward a cluster of retail stores anchored by Harold's Supermarket, a store that plays an important role in the Monteith story. Roughly following the creek bed, both the original Western North Carolina Railroad and the original Highway 10, now S.R. 1381, cross through the Monteith property, only yards away from the main house. The topography is comprised of gently rolling hills. Ten outbuildings surround and support the main farmhouse. They include a barn, greenhouse, washhouse, slaughterhouse, four sheds, and two outhouses.

The House

All of the structures on the Farmstead were built in or around 1908. Alterations continued as late as 1921. The main farmhouse is two-story with a front gabled roof. It is a Craftsman Style, Four-Square residence, both practical and unimposing. An eight-foot wide porch frames the house on all four sides. Plain, tapered, support posts add to the overarching “Craftsman” feel, a term popularized at the turn of the century by architect and furniture designer Gustav Stickley as ... “a house reduced to its simplest form... its low, broad proportions and absolute lack of ornamentation gives it a character so natural and unaffected that it seems to... blend with any landscape.”

The farmhouse is practically square in its footprint, thirty-six feet wide and thirty-three feet deep. The exterior is unpainted, beveled weatherboard. The roof retains its original scallop-pattern, tin covering. Exterior windows are four-glass panes over one and exterior doors are four-glass panes over wood panel. All interior walls and ceilings throughout the house are beaded board, doors are five-panel, and the floors are tongue-and-groove, many still sporting their original oil-cloth coverings. Inside rooms open off a central hallway. Railed stairways located in the hallways lead not only to the second floor, but to the third floor / attic space as well – which is itself divided into several rooms.

Life and Times

In the United States, urban areas and their immediate regions, especially those located within the corridor linking the eastern seaboard and the northeast, went through major social and industrial transitions throughout the 19th century. However, it was not until the early decades of the 20th century that many parts of the nation, including the Southern Appalachians, felt the cultural impact of increased inter- and intra-community contact and the slow but unavoidable

shift from an agrarian lifestyle to one characterized by “public work.” Without a doubt, Edna and Edith Monteith were fashioned by, and contributed to, this 20th century Appalachian environment. Born in the first two decades of the 1900s, the Monteith sisters experienced the conflict and the resulting adaptations that, regardless of race, gender, or class, confronted regional residents during this period.

With lives spanning virtually the entire 20th century, the sisters’ experiences were in many senses unique. That unique experience, however, does not detract from the common bond they shared with other citizens of rural Appalachia – a common disconnectedness as they joined a nation and a world characterized by international war, economic upheaval, and finally a capitalist system based on consumption, self-awareness and a missionary interpretation of the world.

Religion

Like the majority of Appalachia, the Monteith family was Baptist. They were lifetime members of Jarrett Memorial Baptist Church in Dillsboro. At the time of their deaths in the 1950s, both E.B and his wife, Mary, were the oldest members of the church. The location of Jarrett Memorial, in the heart of Dillsboro, is a symbol of the “proximity of community” that played such an important role in the lives of the Monteiths and other families. Kinship, vocations, civic activities, education, religion, commerce, avocations – all naturally, practically, and usually, occurred within walking distance of home for most mountain residents. Of note, Edna and Edith, by the end of their lives, rarely attended religious services.

Education

Edna, the elder sister, attended Sylva Collegiate Institute. SCI was a private (tuition-required) Baptist school located just above downtown Sylva and approximately one mile from

the Monteith Farmstead. The school offered classes for kindergarten through 12th grade, with about one-third of its students boarding on-campus. Its years of operation are important, 1898 through 1932. It opened during the growing cultural conflict that positioned the Gilded Age on the secular side of ideology against the Social Gospel representing a spiritual opposition. Eventually, SCI was forced to close at the beginning of the Great Depression when the majority of its students could no longer afford tuition or fees and the NC Baptist State Convention was unable to continue providing adequate subsidies. By the 1920s, SCI had developed a reputation for excellence and its academic rigors were only rivaled by those from the nearby Cullowhee Normal School (today's Western Carolina University). In many accounts, and in no small part due to its Baptist affiliation, SCI earned higher regards for its academic curriculum than did the school in Cullowhee. The school also boasted the first football team in Jackson County. SCI was an extremely visible component within the Sylva / Dillsboro community - because of its physical location, its primarily local student population, and its requirement that all students attend and be active in the church of their choice. As was the case for Edna Monteith, the majority of SCI students and faculty walked to or lived on campus (autos were scarce at the time). SCI is evidence that education quite plainly linked with community, recreation, civic activity, and church in the Appalachian communities of the early 20th century. In addition, Edna's tenure at SCI is evidence of an increasing opportunity for organized academic training that was steadily making its way from rare to common, from luxury to necessity, from urban to rural, from "when economically possible" to continuous, from affluent to average, and from male to *both* male and female.

Politics

Few were the individuals living in southern Appalachia that did not identify with a specific political party. Throughout the early decades of the 20th century, the only reliable variable that accommodated both for membership and continued loyalty and support was family-based. By in large, if a father was Republican or Democrat so were his father, his grandfather, and his children. Political involvement was a duty for men and, after passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, an exciting privilege for women. Apolitical positions were rare as were non-participants. That E.B. Monteith was Republican fell primarily on his heritage.

Work & “Public Work”

As the 20th century approached, rural folks in Jackson County increasingly sought public work (work outside the home). As a result, a commodity-based, community economy began to emerge. Various stores opened to sell merchandise produced by both small and large regional manufacturers. These goods were in demand by the growing, local population.

The Monteith family had been farmers for years. But more importantly, they were hard workers with an entrepreneurial spirit. As a young man, E.B. supplemented his farming income by working for Frank Jarrett as a postal clerk at the nearby Dillsboro post office. Eventually, E.B. went into business for himself, operating a mercantile store with his brother, Sam. The store was located near Sylva’s busy tannery, the present site of Jackson Paper. When the business failed, E.B. returned to farming and, eventually, the post office. From that point on, the U.S. Post Office figures prominently in the Monteith story.

E.B. was the postmaster in Dillsboro for eighteen years, from 1928 until his retirement in 1946. During that era, the postmaster “owned” the post office, purchasing the physical boxes labeled with the names of the town’s residents and, by exclusive government designation,

providing the service for the community. When a postmaster retired or left employment, he took his “post office” with him – requiring his replacement to purchase (or construct) his own. When E.B retired, his “post office” was removed and relocated to his Farmstead, where it remained until Edith’s death in 2001.

Edna, following her father, became a postal clerk in 1928 at age twenty. She remained with the Dillsboro post office for 45 years. Never the postmaster, but always the “face” of the post office, Edna retired from *public* work in 1973. Even today, the memories and stories of her tenure at the post office are abundant. (E.B’s wife, Mary, and their youngest daughter, Edith, never worked away from home.) Noting the proximity of the Dillsboro post office to the Farmstead, for the better part of the 20th century one or two Monteiths walked and worked there while the rest of the family remained behind, tending to the house and farm. For all practical purposes, both the Monteith Farmstead and the Dillsboro post office were certainly a “family business,” representing the relationship of the home sphere with public work.

Whether conscious or not, the Monteith sisters’ lifetime arrangement, with Edna working outside the home and Edith staying home, represented a sense of both pride and preservation. The women were undoubtedly fiercely proud and loyal to their family heritage. That pride was strengthened by a determination to preserve what had been left to them by their parents - and to their parents by their grandparents.

General & Personal

Edna and Edith lived together on the Farmstead after the deaths of their parents in the 1950s – and remained there the rest of their lives. The stories that circulate about their activities, personalities, and lifestyles are widespread and, in many instances, have become questionable folklore. Most infamous are the various accounts of Edith’s matrimony to Clyde Frizzell.

Depending on the source, the marriage lasted between one day and one week, existed either on the Farmstead or in the Little Savannah Community, and ended due either to the haunt of familial disapproval or the unbearable homesick blues that overwhelmed the new, “unworldly” bride.

Community perceptions of the Monteith sisters are problematic. They include the odd: that the sisters never drove but always owned an auto; that they bought more cat food than human fare; that they never threw anything away. They include the mean: that the sisters disliked children, tolerated and distrusted most acquaintances, and were loners who had little use for strangers. They include the caring: that the sisters developed an appreciative bond with those they trusted; that Edna personally handed down the mail to children that visited her at the post office, that they respected privacy and avoided gossip, and of course, that they were willing to do anything for one another.

Recent History

In 2001 Edith died. In 2002, executor Dr. Cliff Faull began the process of settling the estate. In 2003, the Town of Dillsboro, with the assistance of a N.C. Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Grant, purchased the entire Farmstead for development into a public facility. There was concern about the structural integrity of both the main house and the outbuildings – and the probability of their removal was discussed. Bowing to the wishes of hundreds of concerned citizens, a professional inspection was scheduled and it was determined that the buildings were in disrepair but far from structurally unsound.

Thus, the Town decided to keep the Farmstead intact and begin the process of restoration. The farmhouse and outbuildings, when restored, will become the Appalachian Women’s Museum, a cultural heritage tourism site that will honor and recognize generations of

Appalachian women for their work both in and out of the home. That facility will be restored, constructed and overseen by the Monteith Farmstead/Appalachian Women's Museum Committee, headed by Dillsboro resident Emma Wertenberger. Plans include permanent displays of Monteith artifacts, traveling exhibits and educational shows, and a restored landscape plan that will showcase local heritage and heirloom gardening. In 2007, the site made application to the National Register of Historic Places and hired Asheville architect Jane Gianvito Mathews to complete a Master Plan detailing the stabilization and restoration work necessary for completion. National Register designation is still underway, and teams of local volunteers have begun the process of cleaning and cataloguing the site and its contents. As the restoration and preservation of the farmstead is under consideration, of primary inspiration are the contents of the main house and the outbuilding. There are numerous images of, as well as written and oral narratives about, the Monteiths, their home, and their history circulating throughout the community. However, the discovery of a lifetime of personal artifacts belonging to the family, and kept on site by the sisters, has both added context to and raised questions about the assumed "truths" that have come to be accepted as fact. The analysis of this treasure of personal effects will strengthen the accuracy of the historic narrative of both the Monteiths and of the community. In fact, future studies focusing on the period, Appalachia, and women will benefit from the artifacts "found" on the Monteith Farmstead.

The surrounding 12 acres will be maintained by the Town of Dillsboro for public use, and will include facilities such as picnic areas, a playground, public restrooms, a fishing pier, an outdoor amphitheater and walking trails connecting to the Jackson County Greenway. Future plans will hopefully include the installation of a community theater and conference building on the far end of the site.