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# VIRGINIA

## LIVING

**Creative Economy**  
*Sustainability in the Southwest*

SPECIAL REPRINT from *Virginia Living*

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Virginia's top anglers  
tell us why fly fishing is  
more than a sport.  
It is an art.

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Vive  
la France!

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This page: Heartwood, a 28,000-square-foot artisan's gateway in Abingdon. Facing page: The Crooked Road Music Trail.





BY TIM THORNTON

# THE BUSINESS OF CREATIVITY

The industries that fled Southwest Virginia over the last century left towns across the region languishing, struggling to redefine themselves and rebuild their economies. Today, an effort is underway to create a new and, more importantly, sustainable, economy in this culturally-rich part of the state.

**T**he gravel road forked and, for a second or two, it was hard to know which way to turn. But the plates and the bowls and the platters scattered along the edge of Acorn Lane like fairy tale breadcrumbs marked the path to Grim Pottery in Konnarock.

Owner Debbie Grim Yates' pottery studio fills the basement of her family's log home. It also fills a niche in an effort underway here to transform an economy long dependent on extractive industries and low wages.

"The land we're on was my great-great-grandparents'," says Yates, a lithe, blonde mother of two girls. "My dad and mom decided to move down here and live off the land."

It's hard to imagine anyone who isn't a hunter-gatherer living off the land around Konnarock. Much of it is rugged, steep and rocky. White Top, Virginia's second tallest mountain, dominates the skyline. Gainful employment is generally a long way off. Yates' mother used to drive an hour each way to work. For a while, Yates, who is also an old-time musician, drove two hours so she could teach people to play banjo. When she began selling her pottery more than 20 years ago, she hauled it from her basement studio to a shop in North Carolina, 45 minutes away on mountain roads.

A long time ago, work was much closer. Konnarock was built by the Hassinger Lumber Company, which cut about 18

million board feet of lumber from the surrounding mountains in the first part of the 20th century. That could make enough two-by-fours to stretch from New York to Los Angeles 25 times. And there would be a lot of boards left over.

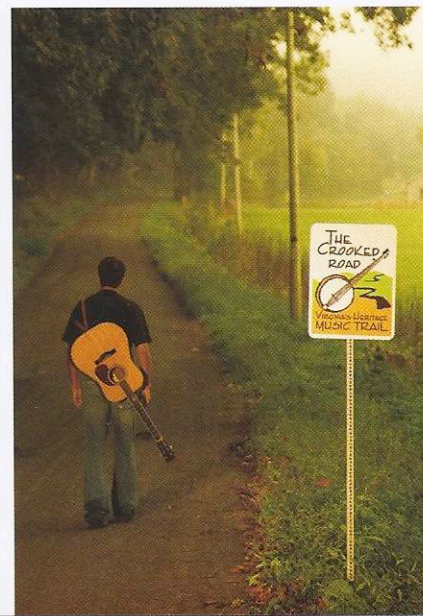
But Hassinger Lumber shut down in 1928. Konnarock, which used to have a hotel, a school and a rail line, doesn't even have its own post office now. Many Southwest Virginia communities have similar histories. When the trees were all cut, or the coal seam ran out, or the labor got cheaper somewhere else, the jobs were gone, and the community withered. The region still has loggers, coal miners and furniture factory workers, but today, it also has a lot of people building a very different kind of economy. This new economy is creative, entrepreneurial, sustainable—and it's being constructed largely from the culture, traditions and talents that people in these mountains have always had. Instead of hauling resources out, this new economy draws people, dollars and ideas in.

Todd Christensen, executive director of the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation, is the effort's point man. Funded in part by the Tobacco Indemnification and Community Revitalization Commission and the Appalachian Regional Commission, the foundation's mission is to connect the other organizations, local governments, small town boosters, artists, farmers, starry-eyed dreamers and utterly practical business people who have joined state officials and agencies to

transform the region's vision of itself.

"Downtowns are evolving from centers for goods and services to cultural centers," Christensen says. "Communities have to ask, 'Who are we? Why is there a town here?' If you notice, all the nice buildings in town were built around 1910. What was going on then that isn't going on now?"

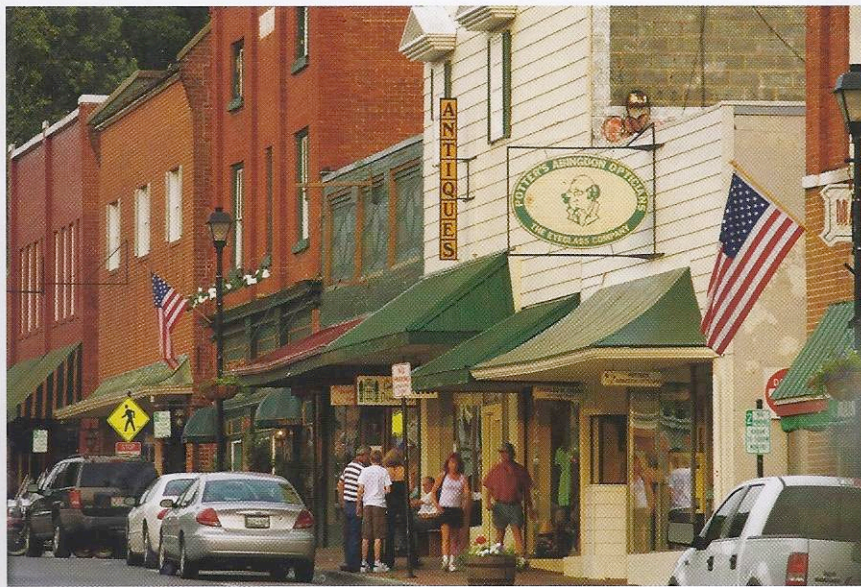
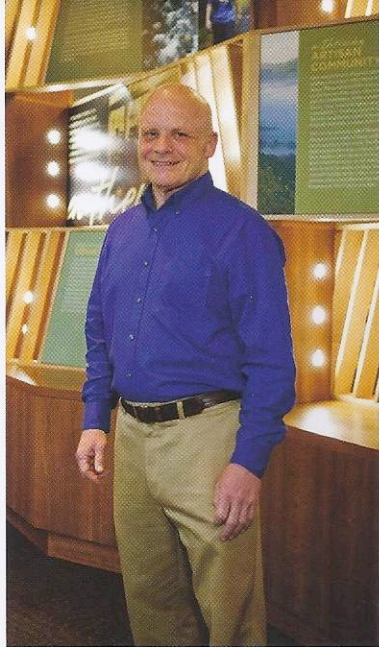
Christensen is on extended—perhaps permanent—loan from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development. Soft-spoken but strong-willed, Christensen grew up in Elgin, Illinois. When he was a boy, the town lost the watch factory that shared its name for 100 years. That loss inspired



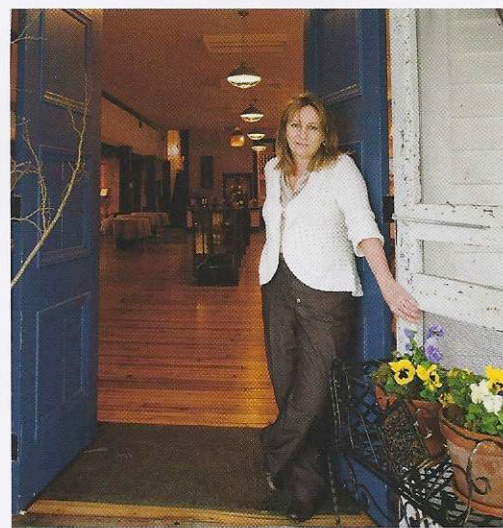
SCOTT K. BROWN, COURTESY VIRGINIA TOURISM CORPORATION.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STACEY EVANS





Clockwise from top left: Todd Christensen; Abingdon; Draper Mercantile owner Debbie Gardner; Michael Dees canes a chair at CSCA in Galax; Crooked Road Executive Director Hinshelwood.



Christensen to spend more than 25 years following his graduation from the College of William & Mary working on community development before becoming the foundation's director.

The symbolic center of this new world is a \$16.5 million, 28,000-square-foot building in Abingdon that looks like an exploded barn. Heartwood, "Southwest Virginia's Artisan Gateway," displays the work of more than 260 regional artists and artisans, and is Southwest Virginia through and through. The wood in the floors and the rocks in the countertops came from the region. Even the coffee is roasted locally.

Heartwood is called a gateway, not a center, because it isn't meant to be a destination. It's designed to show people what waits outside Heartwood's doors. At Heartwood, visitors can buy pottery or sculpture or wine or a dulcimer made in a 19-county area. Or they can use touch screens near the entrance to plan a trip through that area that might include a historic reenactment, a music festival, a winery tour and a trip down the New River. "I like to think of it as Southwest Virginia's porch," says Jack Hinshelwood. "It's almost like a port of entry to Southwest Virginia."

Hinshelwood, a fiddler and guitar player with a receding hairline and an outgoing personality, is executive director of the Crooked Road, Virginia's Heritage Music Trail. Southwest Virginia has a unique and significant musical heritage that stretches back to fiddle tunes and ballads carried by the area's first settlers from England, Scotland and Ireland. Those songs mixed with instruments and influences brought by Africans, Germans and others to create a new kind of music. What

Johnny Cash called "the single most important event in the history of country music" happened in 1927 when Ralph Peer, a Victor Talking Machine Company producer, set up a temporary recording studio in an old hat factory in Bristol. The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers were among those who came for a chance at \$50 and a percentage of record sales. It's commonly called the big bang of country music.

But it wasn't easy to convince people to travel the winding roads to Clintwood to visit the Ralph Stanley Museum and Traditional Music Center, even after the film "O Brother Where Art Thou?" made Stanley famous again. So Christensen, who had helped get the Stanley museum started, and Joe Wilson, who manages the Blue Ridge Music Center and is chairman of the National Council for the Traditional Arts, came up with a better idea: a trail of venues that would entice visitors to the area.

"You don't get people to come to one place," Hinshelwood says. "You get them to come to eight places, eight major music venues."

That's why the Crooked Road stretches more than 300 miles west from Franklin County along the bottom of the Commonwealth, curling through the coalfields to Breaks Interstate Park on the Virginia-Kentucky Border. In addition to the eight major venues are a number of smaller ones and more than 20 roadside kiosks with information, photographs and recorded presentations that broadcast to anyone who parks close enough and tunes to the right FM frequency.

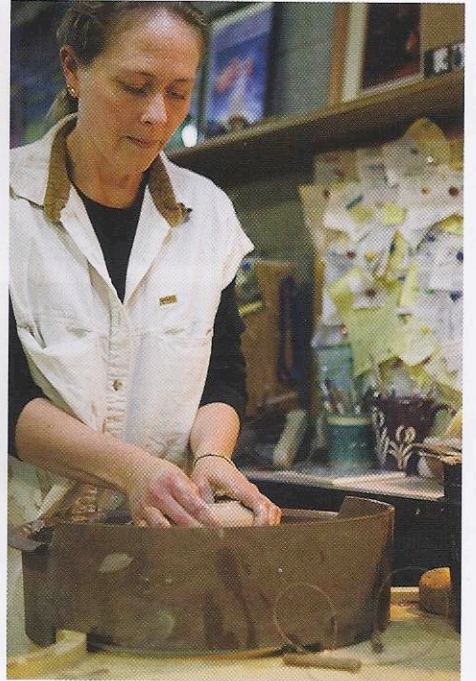
"It's these down home, authentic venues that have these wonderful histories behind them that people can come and be immersed in, be a part

of," explains Hinshelwood. "They can pull a chair right up around the Fries jam session and hear some of the best old time musicians in the world. They can chat with people about music or whatever at those gatherings. There's a real intimacy. I think people who enjoy that sort of thing really dig the Crooked Road and go home with a 'wow' experience, I guess you'd say."

The Floyd Country Store is one of those authentic venues. Within sight of Floyd County's only traffic light, the store has been in and out of business for more than 100 years. For about 40 years—even some years when it wasn't really a store—people have gathered there on Friday nights to hear and to dance to bluegrass and old time music. A few years ago, Woody Crenshaw and his wife Jackie bought the place and renovated it. Now there are three bands on the stage every Friday night, jams on Sunday afternoons, monthly performances styled after old-time radio shows and all sorts of special events, musical and otherwise. The store has benches out front and an alley on its south side that fills with musicians on Friday nights when the weather is nice. Inside is a mix of ice cream, bibbed overalls, a lunch counter, arts, crafts, preserves, kitchen gadgets, books, CDs, a stage and room to dance.

Crenshaw came to Floyd after his father died. He wanted to keep his father's custom lighting business going, but he didn't want to live in Raleigh where it was located. So he brought Cren-





Clockwise from above: Bakers Donna Capozzi Speaks and daughter Lauren at the Merc; local foods for sale in the Merc's Marketplace; Debbie Grim Yates' pottery; Yates; New River Retreat cabin; Mark Nichols performing at the Merc.

shaw Lighting and its 45 jobs to Floyd County. "You come here because you appreciate living here," Crenshaw says. "You integrate the business into the lifestyle and the community."

Crenshaw has the look of an outdoorsy English professor and the mind and the drive of a community-developing entrepreneur. He has been instrumental in establishing a farmers market in Floyd and transforming two old buildings into retail centers that offer everything from artwork to Beowulf's favorite beverage, mead. Crenshaw helped create 'Round the Mountain, an organization that means to do for artists what the Crooked Road has done for musicians. Floyd has become a music, arts and cultural center that's drawn the attention of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, National Public Radio and *Mother Earth News*.

In Draper, a Pulaski County town near Claytor Lake State Park and even nearer to New River Trail State Park, the new economy means a new life for the Draper Mercantile. It's difficult to tell when its old life began. Newspaper stories say the Mercantile was built in 1885. And 1865. And 1812. The "Merc" was Draper's post office and library and soda fountain, but mostly it was the kind of general store that sold everything from coal to coffee to coffins. A white clapboard building with a wide front porch, the Mercantile has had additions and expansions over the years, so now it rambles over more than 8,000 square feet. The store was closed for a year before Debbie and Bill

Gardner bought it in 2008. The plan was to use the old store as an office for New River Retreat, the Gardner's cabin rental business, but the plan changed. It was soon clear the Merc could be much more than that. And it became apparent that the community wanted the Merc to be more than that. Today it is a gathering place for people and organizations, as well as a venue where area farmers, artists, musicians and writers can offer their work. Guided excursions and mountain bike rentals are scheduled to start this summer.

The Gardners' daughter, Ashlee VanMeter, handles marketing for New River Retreat and the Merc. She lived inside the Merc for a few months during its renovation.

"I cannot tell you how many times people walked in those double doors the same way they probably have for 70 years and then were very embarrassed to see that someone had a little house set up in there," VanMeter says. "I got to meet a lot of people that way."

She realized these things, too.

"I realized this was almost like a grandmother to people. ... It's where they'd gather. They'd get their needs here. I had one woman come up here and say, 'If it was not for the Draper Mercantile, my family would have frozen or been hungry in the winter.'" They'd get coal and food on credit in the winter and bring lambs and produce to pay off the debt the following spring and summer.

"That was true for so many people here," VanMeter says. "And you realize that you have something in your hand that is considered a family member to this community."

In Galax, once a center for furniture manufacturing, the city runs the renovated Rex Theater where shows include Friday night concerts broadcast by WBRF. The Rex's neon-lit marquee looks like a lot of old theaters', but the rows of seats inside stop well before the stage. There's more room for dancing that way. Just

up Grayson Street, a 1920 bank building houses the Chestnut Creek School of the Arts, which promotes traditional arts and local artists and offers classes that range from photography to flat footin'.

Across the region, leftover pieces of the old economy have been repurposed for the new. In Wise County, Mountain Rose Vineyard grows grapes on an old strip mine. The Virginia Creeper Trail and New River Trail State Park have turned railroad beds into recreational trails. The whole region is reconsidering assets it may not have appreciated before.

"I think it's just the beginning," Crenshaw says. "I think over the next decade and over the next generation Southwest Virginia will be a national destination."

Christensen is aiming even higher, comparing Southwest Virginia to Tuscany and to England's Lake District. Outsiders find the regional culture exotic, he says: "You're so used to it that you don't know it's there."

Some people know.

Back at Grim Pottery, banjo player and fiddler Debbie Grim Yates says 'Round the Mountain and Heartwood have increased the demand for her pottery so dramatically she's had to turn down some orders.

"I'm very blessed to be able to have this whole thing going on right now," she says. "I love where I live. ... I like to hear the birds and crickets and the frogs and be back up in the woods and see a bear every now and then." ●

►► For a listing of venues and upcoming events in Southwest Virginia, go to [VirginiaLiving.com](http://VirginiaLiving.com)



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