



ARTISTS "RETURN" TO THE SMOKIES

They Weren't Born Here, But it Sure Feels Like Home. You can barely find the walls of Heath Creations Studio and Gallery, located across from the old train depot in Bryson City, North Carolina. Those walls are almost entirely covered with the owner's paintings, drawings and photos. There is, however, one item that is not a Charles Heath creation. "It's my great-grandfather's badge," explains Charles. "He was sheriff here in Swain County during Prohibition. The old-timers tell me he didn't catch a lot of moonshiners," chuckles the affable artist. "If anything, he warned them about approaching 'revenuers'."

Charles Heath was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, but he spent his vacations visiting relatives all over the state, including Swain County. A look around the gallery reflects his varied experiences, recorded in pen and ink, oils, acrylics, watercolors and photos. The subjects include lighthouses and boats from his days on the coast, as well as scenes from Mexico City (wife, Cristina Heath's home) and especially the mountains, coves and people of Western North Carolina, the place he now calls home.

Have a Soda and a Nice Watercolor. Even before you notice the many works of art displayed at The Artists' House Gallery in Bryson City, your eye is drawn to the 20-foot marble soda counter. "The counter was once a focal point of the old Bennett's Drugs," says artist/owner Peggy Duncan. "Local folks remember sitting at this counter for their first date," she adds. "It lends a bit of charm to the gallery."

Nowadays, Peggy Duncan offers her own pastels, oils and acrylics, as well as two- and three-dimensional art from local, regional and national artists. "We also have handmade furnishings, pottery, turned wood and antique Persian rugs," adds Peggy, "as well as jewelry, hand-woven wearables, and an extensive collection of all-natural handmade bath and body products."

Somewhere Over the Hardware. Another of Bryson City's artists has found inspiring space to create unique paintings. Elizabeth Ellison Watercolors is located in the old Clampitt Hardware building right on the town square. "I have my studio and most of my work displayed upstairs, and also I have gallery space at street level," says Elizabeth. "My work most often depicts wildflowers, animals, human inhabitants and landscapes of the Smokies." Most of Elizabeth's work is in watercolor, in which she often incorporates her handmade paper. She also works in oil and acrylic on canvas. Elizabeth freelances as an illustrator, but admits her favorite working partner is husband, George.

Preserving Their New Home. Like all Swain County residents, Bryson City artists who came home to the mountains are concerned with preserving the natural beauty of the area. Elizabeth Ellison makes a lot of her paper from sustainable, native plants. Peggy Duncan sells many organic, environmentally friendly products in her store. Charles Heath recycles wood chips left over from framing. And they're all glad to have found their home in the mountains of Swain County. "I believe it was meant to be," says Charles. "After moving here, I discovered that my grandfather worked in the building that is now my studio. Yeah, it just feels like home."

For more information on touring the Smokies, contact the Swain County Chamber of Commerce, 210 Main Street, P.O. Box 509, Bryson City, NC 28713; chamber@greatsmokies.com; or 800-867-9246.