

Celebrating History at BMCA
By Jessica Klarp

This is the first of a four-part series documenting the evolution of the Black Mountain Center for the Arts in celebration of its 20th anniversary.

From the outside, the Black Mountain Center for the Arts building at 225 West State Street bears its original purpose carved into the limestone lintel above the front doors: City Hall.

Constructed in 1927, according to Ann Chesky Smith's book *Then and Now: Black Mountain*, this multi-purpose building was joined to the fire house next door (which was built by Richard Sharp Smith) and soon housed the town offices, the Black Mountain Police Department, a two-bed jail, the library, and by 1937, the Chamber of Commerce. The building had an entry into the fire station on the upper level where the fire fighters slept. By the 1940's the facility also housed the Western Union Telegraph office and the Red Cross.

Wendell Begley, president of Black Mountain Savings Bank and board president of the Swannanoa Valley History Museum for the last 20 years, grew up with the building since his father Marcus was on the town council and a magistrate.

"It was really the hub of the town," says Begley. "It was where all the public meetings, the board meetings, the alderman meetings and all the business took place. The library was upstairs. With the fire department and the police, everything that happened in town went through those doors."

In the 1950's the courtroom on the main level relocated to a new City Hall building (behind the current fire station on Montreat Road) and the Western Union moved as well. By 1968, the library moved to its current location on N. Dougherty after years of fundraising by the Friends of the Library. In 1971, the police department moved out of the aging building and the town garage which maintained their fleet out of an adjacent building off the back parking lot was also abandoned around this time. Records show that by 1990 the building was vacant.

In 1995 Betty Tyson purchased the building to save it from demolition. Tyson along with a motivated group of art-loving community minded citizens started the process of fundraising and applying for non-profit status to create the Black Mountain Center for the Arts. A years long effort provided the funding to afford to hire architects and engineers, renovate the building and hire staff. For the past 20 years, BMCA has grown to become what its founders had only dreamed of creating.

Today, the BMCA, open from 10am-5pm Monday through Friday, in honor of its 20th anniversary, is in the process of creating a historical display that will include a timeline of the building's evolution, expanded information about the permanent art collection and our donors and supporters over the years, and images dating back to the 1920s. BMCA received a grant from the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina's Black Mountain-Swannanoa Valley Endowment Fund to fund the display now located in the lower level off the back parking lot.

Part two of this series will detail the fundraising process and renovation of the old City Hall into the Black Mountain Center for the Arts. For more information call 828-669-0930 or visit blackmountainarts.org