



Teddy Bear maker, Connie Stark, with some of her creations looking on. Connie is in "The Herb Sampler" shop, also offering Herbal Crafts, Potpourri and more.

Spruce Forest Artisan Village

A Walk Through the Woods

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On an early summer morning, the spruce covered mountains of Garrett County flirt with a contrary sky, a sky that cannot make up its mind what color it wants to wear for the day. A soft breeze kisses the flowers awake, their petals stretching open like a child yawning. The smell of a wood fire set for a chilly late spent evening and doused long before the sunrise still lingers in the air, mixed with the aroma of baked goods and breakfast from the restaurant located just a paved parking lot away.

A rooster pecks the ground and then crosses the asphalt road that once supported every piece of traffic heading west. Answering the age-old riddle, a chicken watches the rooster cautiously, decides she too can cross, and follows him to a safe and more promising piece of property.

A friendly black dog nobody, and yet everybody, claims bounces playfully among the woods, his tongue and tail wagging in tandem as he leaps from door to door among the wooden structures here.

The unofficial town crier, the mutt whimpers softly for attention and gets it from a first time visitor who pets the dog on the head and follows the animal over a small covered bridge, leaving his car, his cares, and his trappings behind.

The visitor—a tourist—had noticed an array of what appeared to be authentic log cabins while driving on Route 68. Curiosity getting the better of him, he decided to exit and explore. He finds that the area he has just stepped into seems unchanged by time, unspoiled by corporate America, and untouched by politics or pretentiousness. When he crossed that threshold of the bridge, his feet touched soil once moved by Native Americans, trod by pioneers, trod by captains of the Army and captains of industry.

Now, the acreage is just as alive with lush greenery as it is with a vision started by a humble newspaper columnist nearly 50 years ago. This is the Spruce Forest Artisan Village at Penn Alps near Grantsville.

Located on two banks of the winding Casselman River and just at the base of the historic Casselman's Bridge, the village is the working home for eight resident artists situated in at least one of eleven relocated colonial cabins on the property. Here, artists prepare their wares for the public, carving out a living by carving...and painting, tatting, weaving, sewing, and molding clay into useable and cherished works of art.

Here, artists have denied conventional or modern studio spaces in the larger cities and complexes to return to nature, to be inspired, to fellowship with one another, to create and to breathe in a permanent log cabin setting, nestled in the woods. And they wouldn't have it any other way.



Spruce Forest Artisan Village is located at Penn Alps, near Grantsville, Maryland, just off I-68 at Exit 19.

Spruce Forest Artisan Village — continued



Master bird sculptor Gary Yoder, in his shop, displaying many fine lifelike sculptures. He gets many requests and has a waiting list for his realistic carved feather (foreground).

Gary Yoder has been coming to work every day at Artisans Village for nearly 33 years. He has never punched a time clock, never answered to a supervisor other than himself, and never feared a company wide lay off. His passion for art is all he has known.

“I remember my high school guidance counselor telling me I should pursue some type of vocation in case this art thing didn’t work out,” he says with an infectious laugh.

Yoder closes his studio cabin in the winter months to the public, but it doesn’t mean he is not there. He tends to his craft in the dead of December but does not hibernate. He keeps busy taking on larger scale projects and gearing himself for the busy tourist season that descends upon the park in the late spring through November. For Yoder, this is the life; this is the way the artist was meant to make a living.

“The bloom has not rubbed off the rose,” he said, from behind the desk in his cabin, the Markley House, built in 1775 and moved to its present location in 1985. “If I tried working at home, it’s not as focused. When I come here, it’s specific. I’m here to do this. This is what I have always done. I have never done anything else.”

“It’s fun and I enjoy it,” Yoder said. “It’s good exposure. I continue to learn from every angle. There are other artists here you can bounce ideas off of. I don’t know if there is one best thing. Being here is a package deal. Working here has made me a better artist.”

Yoder came to the village first when he was 11 years old. He wasn’t called to work in the field of art and to be an artist with his own rustic studio. The vocation instead repeated to whisper hints in his reluctant ears for many years.

“When I was younger, I wasn’t sure I wanted to work here,” says Yoder. “But then you start out with why do you want to do this and then you figure out a way how.”

His “how” was Alta Schrock. The journalist founder of the village saw a creative spark in the young man who came to the area from time to time. She personally invited Yoder to take courses and pursue his talents.

“She was the one who talked me into coming here to work,” he said. “She had a major impact. I had to be given a gentle nudge. I was very unsure of myself at first.”

Schrock founded the village originally in the late 1950’s as a place for artists to come and create with one another, as a

networking tool for each other and an educational tool for the public. Her cabin was the first and she spent those initial few years penning a newspaper column and then eventually managing the growing village.

Ironically, in one of her columns published in 1958, Schrock wrote: “The spirit of a community is an intangible thing, but potentially its greatest asset or detriment, depending on its people.”

Schrock’s column, while written about the undying helpful spirit of the Mennonite and Amish communities to help one another, proved to be prophetic words. On the same newspaper page as her editorial piece is a photo of a woman demonstrating the art of hooking a rug and there is also a small article mentioning that a new organization in the area known as Penn Alps was making “elaborate plans for the future.”

Schrock worked and ran the village until her death in November 2001 at age 90. Her passing left behind a legacy of the arts in the Appalachia that continues to resonate and flourish.

While Schrock’s cabin would be the first on the property, it would not be the last. As more historic log cabins came to the property, more master and fine arts crafters located here, finding the fresh mountain atmosphere beneficial to airing out the cobwebs of an artistic mind.

“I don’t think it was intended to be used for artists,” said Yoder. “But they started bringing cabins in and the artists came as the cabins became available.”

Yoder is now considered one of the nation’s premiere bird sculptors.

“I started with an interest in birds. I had always sketched and painted birds. I don’t have an answer to why,” he said. “I tend to carve what I see. Inspiration can come from different things but the genesis of it all comes back to the birds.”

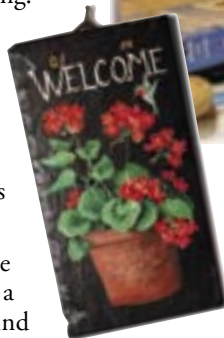
Yoder was the benefactor of a donation by an artist carver at the village. Charles Fisher, a New Hampshire native, had come to the village to create his art in a relaxed and inspiring setting. He, like others, had discovered the property while traveling Interstate 68 heading west. Other artists, like Fisher, have come and gone. Yoder has been here the longest.

Coming in for a close second in the years logged in the logs is potter and Kansas native Lynn Lais.

“I haven’t had a real job since 1979,” he said. “I tell people I work 10 to 12 hours a day, six days a week, I don’t have time to find a real job.”



Artisans at work in their shops. Top photo: Meriam Brode, Artistic Basket Weaving and Wools of quality heritage. Center photo: Weaver, Anne Jones, at one of many looms in her shop. Rich colors and many weave types make her products very desirable. Bottom photo: Peggy Nixon of Slate Painting, Etc., offers unique hand painted slates.



Spruce Forest Artisan Village — continued

After a short six-week stint as a carpenter's assistant, Lais decided he was better suited with his hands in clay.

"My pots are born out of folk traditions, Northern European, Japanese, Northern Italy, early America," he said. "I'm not a fad potter. I use two finishes and two colors. I'm very disciplined. I have a highly disciplined philosophy. I'm very programmatic. I used to have to keep a certain amount of hours a day to feel productive but then I grew up."

After a short search for adequate studio space, Lais found the artisans village and he felt at home.

"I needed a venue, a studio, a place to work," he said. "At the time, a basement of a cabin sounded pretty good."

Lais originally went to work in the sub level of the Winterberg House, a structure first built in 1820 as a stagecoach shop on the National Road. It was reconstructed at Spruce Forest in Penn Alps in 1967. In 1989, an addition was added to the rear of the structure as a workshop for Lais and he moved upstairs.

"This is my livelihood," he said. "I got married and had to be responsible. We looked at a lot of places but staying here was easy. I had established myself here and if it hadn't been for the gift this organization gave me, who knows where I would be."

Meriam Brode, a resident basket maker and weaver at the village, said she felt as if she was "called" to the forest to join the ranks of her fellow artisans.

With double educational degrees in foreign languages and secondary education, Brode was a schoolteacher for both the public and parochial systems for 18 years. She also sold real estate for a time. But it was when she saw the property at Spruce Forest that she was sold.

"I kind of eased into things here in a serendipitous way," she said. "My kids had left the parochial schools and I saw this as my way out. I needed to see what else was out there."

Brode at first only sold her products in the shops that border the village. It wasn't until a few years later that she officially began working in Spruce Forest.

"When my kids graduated, I asked for a place here," she said. "I started out in a beginner's cabin. It was so small that I had to keep my supplies in my car and when people saw me stand up, they thought it was time to leave."

Brode said she remains centered on her work when she is in her cabin.

"A lot of my inspiration comes from inside," she said. "I have learned here to connect my left brain with my right brain."

Brode's studio was originally built in 1913 and situated a few miles south of Jennings. The structure served as a log cabin one room schoolhouse for Mennonite students until 1952. The building was moved to Penn Alps in 1994.

"The difference in working here and anywhere else is the 'should haves.' I should be doing my laundry. I should be starting the housework," she said.

Her work may keep her grounded but the sense of fellowship among the other artists keeps her coming back to work. She's been a permanent fixture in the village for 18 years now.

"The friendships keep me here. It's a self-discovery. I find out more about me the longer I'm here," said Brode. "The people who visit me also inspire me. They have ideas about forms and colors. They know what they want and I love being able to give people exactly what they need."

Teddy Bear maker and herbal specialist, Connie Stark, came to the Artisans Village in Spruce Forest first as a tourist. She brought her children to look around the cabins when they were toddlers.

"It seemed like a very peaceful place to be," she said. "I was a very frustrated artist and would come in and see people working and I was in awe of them and what they did. I finally worked up the courage to ask for a space."

"My inspirations come from nature and nature is all around us here in Garrett County," said Stark. "When I'm in a natural setting, ideas just seem to flow and come easy."

Stark said she is constantly impressed with the visitors who grace her shop every season.

"We keep a guest book and it's amazing the people who come in and how they find us," she said.

Built in 1880 on the Mason Dixon Line, Stark's studio cabin was constructed by a great uncle to campus founder, Alta Schrock. It was rebuilt on the property in 1976.

A trained graphic designer, Stark has been working in the village for seven years yet her fellow artists still refer to her as the "new kid on the block."

"I really enjoy being around people who are like minded," Stark said. "You feel more directed when you're here. You see yourself in people when they come in to visit. When I was in the community looking in, you saw this village as something unique and special."

Unique and special indeed. There reportedly is no other artisans' village in the eastern half of the United States, which boasts a collection of resident artists who work out of authentic log cabins.

"There are a lot of communities of artists but I don't think anything like this," according to Artisan Village administrator Natalie Atherton, appointed to her position in December of last





Susan Helbig, Pysanky Artist. Pysanky is an egg dying art done painstakingly with candle wax, scrapers, dye, a lot of patience and a steady hand. Susan does her art without emptying the contents of the egg—that's done after the egg is finished—a risky time to be poking holes. At times the egg has broken, destroying hours of hand work (Susan jokingly tells people she's saving the pieces for an egg mosaic). Some of the eggs are goose eggs, and at times ostrich (red egg at top right is a goose egg). Susan says it takes anywhere from 3 hours to 3 days to complete one egg. She calls her business "**Egg-cetera**" and teaches her art at several programs in the area. Susan is from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania but learned the art in the Annapolis, Maryland area, and now resides in Garrett County. Anyone interested in learning Pysanky or more about it is welcome to call Susan at **301-387-6720**.



James P. Cummings, Jr., shown in his stained glass shop, “Glass Expression” with “helpers” grandsons, Cody (left) and Colton (right). James proudly proclaims his grandsons as fourth generation glass cutters. James’ creative talents range from custom design stained glass to sandblasting and restoration. “A lot of people pass the shop without seeing it because it’s kinda’ hidden behind the covered bridge entrance to the Village,” says James. Be sure to look for the shop, you’ll be glad you did — Cody and Colton will be glad to see you.

year. “There are other places that have resident artists but nothing I have seen this unique. It’s common in the art world now to have communities like these but most of them are in larger commercial buildings or warehouses. This type of setting is unique to itself.”

A second aspect that keeps the artisans village in a setting and a class all its own is its accessibility to the public. The studios can be toured six days a week. The artists can be watched working. They can be viewed by visitors who simply want to marvel at the inner mechanisms of a talent at his or her craft.

“I think the artists’ village is a relatively new concept,” Lais said. “It was a demonstration village when I came in. The idea of us working fit in with what had come before. This is a very unique and cool thing. To the public, this is an incredibly unique opportunity for them to walk into a studio of an artist at any time during the day and talk to them while they are working. I think the village is under sung.”

“We talk to people countless times who want to know how we did this, how we made the leap,” said Brode. “People in the general work force are so cut-off because they don’t get that feedback in their jobs and they envy us.”

“I think we are making a difference just being here.”

The orange sun begins to sink behind the Garrett County Mountains now, casting shadows from the trees that embrace the

valley below. The sky has decided to wear a deep burgundy color on this warm evening. There should be no need for a fire in any of the stoves this evening, should any of the artists want to tarry.

A breeze kisses the flowers goodnight and closes the petals like eyelids of children exhausted from a day of joyful play.

The rooster and his chicken are nowhere to be found. They have returned to the coop for the evening and are nesting.

The black dog that has tagged along with the visitor for most of his stay sits waiting outside the last closing cabin to say goodnight with a friendly bark. The visitor pats the dog on the head.

“Good night, boy, thanks for the tour,” the tourist says and heads back to his parked car sitting beneath the bent limbs of a tree at least one hundred years his senior.

He again crosses the small covered bridge, returning to his vehicle, his cares, and his trappings.

It was a happy discovery he had made this day. He is glad he pulled off the Interstate to inspect the scenery and the structures. Looking in his rearview mirror as he pulls away, he watches the cabins grow smaller as his wheels touch pavement, reminding him he is back in the world made by man.

This was his first visit to Artisans Village in Spruce Forest at Penn Alps. He promises himself it won’t be his last.

