

Two instruments commissioned for “The Luthier’s Craft” exhibit at the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History will be unveiled Sunday at a concert and meet-and-greet. Wayne Henderson and The Virginia Luthiers will perform at the event, which begins at 3 p.m. at the museum. “This concert really is a celebration,” said Matthew Edwards, museum director. “It’s a lineage of really amazing artists and instrument builders in our community.” The museum began documenting that lineage with a traveling exhibit that opened locally in 2013, of which a Henderson guitar was a primary component. “Wayne has been a rock star in the guitar building world for 30, 40 years,” Edwards said of the world renowned luthier, who is based in Rugby, Virginia. “He’s probably most well known for telling Eric Clapton to get in line with everyone else.” Henderson, a recipient of a 1995 National Heritage Award presented by the National Endowment for the Arts, is also known for his top-notch finger-picking and has performed at Carnegie Hall. The current exhibit also features Johnny Gentry, a banjo craftsman from the Mountain Park area, and fiddle makers Chris Testerman and Audrey Ham Hash. It’s been successful since its launch, having been housed in locations such as the Earle Scruggs Center in Shelby, and will be on display in High Point during the National Folk Festival this spring.

About a year ago, the museum commissioned a guitar from Ken Hooper, of Elkin, and a mandolin from Spencer Strickland, of Lamsburg, Virginia. “The museum is working to document and record instrument builders in our area,” Edwards said. The added pieces will allow for the establishment of a permanent exhibit here in Mount Airy while a component can still travel to other locations. “It’s the next step in a long-term project for us,” Edwards said. “Not only do we collect from the past, we collect for the future. We think this is one of those stories we’ll want to tell down the line.” Both craftsmen carry on the Henderson tradition. “My primary influence has been Wayne,” Hooper said. “He’s kind of the fountain around here. We’ve all kind of spawned from him.” Strickland met Henderson and his apprentice, Gerald Anderson, at the Galax Fiddlers’ Convention when he was 12 years old. His father arranged for Anderson to build him a mandolin, and the more experienced musicians asked Strickland to play with them on stage. Their musical relationship continued and Strickland eventually apprenticed and formed a business partnership with Anderson. He set up shop by himself after moving back home to Lamsburg and still plays music with Henderson in The Virginia Luthiers group. Strickland and Hooper both noted that attention to pre-war quality craftsmanship are part of what make the region’s luthier tradition unique. “I build pre-war style guitars patterned after the old Martin and old Gibsons,” said Hooper, calling the instruments produced by C.F. Martin & Company in the decades before World War II “pretty much the gold standard.” “They were built lighter and the bracing was a bit different,” which was hand-crafted and hand shaped. The instrument tops were thinner and “voiced to maximize the sound.” The sound from factory-produced guitars just can’t compare.

Hooper, who has been building instruments for about 20 years and full-time for the past four, works from pre-war Martin blueprints and has poured over Henderson’s pre-war style designs

as well. "There's a lot of things you can't get today in a factory-built guitar," such as the use of hide glue, he said. "A lot of folks think that makes a difference. No factories really do that anymore." The guitar Hooper crafted for the museum was topped with red spruce wood sourced from the Maggie Valley. It features a "sunburst" colored top, where lighter colored wood near the center of the instrument gradually darkens towards the edges. Though he didn't invent the style, Hooper said he uses it frequently, and so the museum piece will bear his fingerprint in that way. The mandolin Strickland built for the exhibit was also built from red spruce and curly maple. "All those trees grow within an hour and a half of Mount Airy," said the craftsman, who designed the museum piece after a pre-war Gibson A-5 style mandolin. Those instruments, which feature a teardrop shape as opposed to the curling "scroll" style, built in the 1920s and 1930s, "were the best there ever has been," Strickland said. The luthiers noted that the deep musical roots of the region have helped form the local craft. "Most builders were musicians to begin with," Strickland said. "Most couldn't afford a high-end guitar but were pretty skilled with their hands, so they started building their own instruments. I know that's how Wayne got his start." He noted that two of the area's most recognizable features are music and furniture making. "People played a lot of music and did a lot of work with their hands," he said. "Making instruments is just as good a compromise between the two as you could have." Hooper said the prevalence of musicians also bolsters the craft. "They understand what good instruments are," he said. "That's our challenge as builders, to try to meet that demand." Both instruments will be played during the concert Sunday. "It's an opportunity for folks to come out and meet the luthiers helping to carry on the tradition for future generations," Edwards said. "There really is so much history in this area, most of it verbally passed down through the years. You know how that goes. Things get forgotten," Strickland said. "For the museum to capture this for generations to come is a wonderful thing." For more information or to purchase tickets call the museum at 786-4478.