Some niche marketing and a little free association rhyming were the tools used by a local institution to build on an existing New Year's Eve event.

"We've been doing the badge raising for five years now, and we're always looking for a way to build on that," said Matt Edwards, executive director of the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History.

The "badge raising" refers to a large, lighted sheriff's badge that is levitated up the side of the museum's clock tower at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, an event which references New York's Times Square ball drop combined with an homage to "The Andy Griffith Show" and Mount Airy native Andy Griffith's role as the sheriff of Mayberry on the show.

"Nine years ago, when we started with New Year's Eve, we were the only thing in town," said Edwards, "but this year there are seven or eight events just in Mount Airy, and even more as you go out into the county."

Indeed, within a block or two of the museum, there was a black tie Gatsby party at Thirsty Souls Brewing, a masquerade at Soho Bar and Grill and an elegant dinner service at Old North State. Cross Creek Country Club was hosting a Habitat for Humanity gala and Edwards said the need for traditional New Year's Eve events geared to adult revelry was being met.

"We can't compete with the black-tie galas," said Edwards. "We wanted something to tie in better with our badge raising, that was a good way to reach out to families."

According to Edwards, there are plenty of things for adults to do on New Year's Eve, and there are things for children, but there was nothing for families.

"That is the need that was not being met," he said. "We wanted something for the people who would otherwise be home in their pajamas."

“A pajama party,” suggested someone in a brainstorming session. Edwards doesn’t remember who had the original idea, but a little free-associating quickly led the group from pajamas to llamas, and it wasn’t long until they landed at llamas in pajamas, and they had a theme.

“It’s everywhere,” said museum administrative assistant Karen Nealis at the front desk, as she welcomed patrons and passed out party hats and paraphernalia at the beginning of the evening. “Everywhere,” she repeated.

From dance parties alternating with ghost stories in the museum’s brick-paved basement, a space perfect for both activities as the bricks on the floor (salvaged from a 1990s fire) gave the feelings of a medieval dungeon, to the top of the clock tower, from which balloons were dropped at ten o’clock for early bed-timers, and the badge was raised outside at midnight to cap off the night, the whole museum was in play for the evening.

The excitement crested earlier than expected when someone somewhere set off the fire alarm, and Edwards went outside to greet Mount Airy’s Bravest, saying, “All the fire trucks are here.” Shortly thereafter, the firefighters ascertained that the museum was not on fire, and the evening’s regularly scheduled events resumed.

A kid’s PJ contest at 9 p.m. in the children’s area on the third floor was won by four-year-old Addison Etringer. Activity quickly moved downstairs to the courtyard when Greg Hall arrived with Peepicheep and Sir Spotsalot Pongo, two llamas in pajamas who were the guests of honor for the evening. They began posing for llama selfies shortly before 9:30 p.m. and soon began to draw a crowd, as revelers exiting Old North State were drawn across the street for a photo and some “llama sugar,” as Hall called it.

When someone posed with one or both of the llamas, Hall would give the llamas a treat and say “sugar,” at which point the llamas would dutifully give the person beside them a sloppy llama kiss on the cheek, a process enjoyed by some folks more than others, but which never failed to bring loud cheers and laughter from everyone standing outside of llama-smooching range.

Peepicheep and Pongo later served as ceremonial badge raisers in their capacity as guests of

honor. After the badge was raised, spontaneous dancing broke out in the courtyard, and 2019 was underway.