“Tell me a story” is one of the first things a child learns to say — right after being taught how to address Mom and Dad.

But while wanting to hear a good story is an innate desire of nearly everyone, the ability to tell one is just as common, according to a master storyteller who displayed that art Saturday at Mount Airy Museum of Regional History.

“I think everyone is a storyteller,” Terri Ingalls said just before launching into a series of folk tales during an afternoon program that concluded a summer storytelling series at the museum.

“Not everyone is a performer,” Ingalls added of the dramatic and other skills that can enhance the process. “But everyone is a storyteller.”

Ingalls is a member of a group called the Surry County Storytelling Guild, which promotes that art for adults and children throughout the area and meets on the first Tuesday night of each month at the Mount Airy Public Library. As many as 20 storytellers will gather to engage in activities that hone their craft and, yes, swap tall tales of one kind or another for purposes of critique.

Yet the emphasis Saturday afternoon was strictly on entertainment, as Ingalls demonstrated the talents that have made her a highly respected part of the region's theatrical as well as storytelling community.

Though she stood alone in front of about 25 listeners without benefit of eye-catching props or costumes, Ingalls quickly had the audience enthralled. Her stories whisked the group from a third-floor meeting room in Mount Airy to faraway lands.

The first tale she spun was about two brothers and a magic box, which began with Ingalls asking some audience members about a recent trip to the beach and the reality of not being able to drink ocean water because it is salty.

Ingalls' story explained how the water got to be that way, which arose after one of the brothers in her story gave rice cakes to a starving old man although he was hungry himself. The old man then was transformed into a handsome figure who repaid the act of kindness by giving the brother a special green jade box that would grant all his wishes. The brother used its powers to conjure up a big house for himself and lots of food and wine along with new clothes, with a simple "thank you" required to end the items resulting from each wish. He also threw a big party so everyone could enjoy the bounty, including his greedy older brother who subsequently stole the magic box for his own. While escaping in a rowboat, the bad brother ate rice cakes and requested some salt from the magic box to make them taste better. But not knowing that he needed to say thanks to the box to end that request, the salt kept flowing out and eventually filled the boat — causing it to sink. That magic box is still putting out salt to this day, Ingalls concluded. "And that's why the ocean is salty."

The storyteller kept the audience riveted by using rising inflections in her voice to emphasize dramatic moments or soft tones for quieter ones, or relying on wild gestures with her arms to simulate action sequences. When Ingalls pointed to the ceiling and vividly described lanterns hanging from imaginary trees during a party scene, the audience could almost see them. And as she slowly paced across the room to emphasize a suspenseful moment in another tale centering on cats, the old wooden floor of the museum creaked in cooperation.

The appreciative audience members included Doug and Denise Lincoln, a couple visiting from Cape Girardeau, Mo., who had read a newspaper article about the program at the museum and decided to attend. “She’s a great storyteller,” Doug Lincoln said. Mrs. Lincoln mentioned how some practitioners of the art can be intimidating or overly boisterous in their approach. “It wasn’t overbearing,” she said of Ingalls’ style.

Ingalls said one needn’t be a professional storyteller to entertain others, although there are mechanisms to sharpen one’s skills to the fullest. For example, she mentioned East Tennessee State University, which now offers a master’s degree program in reading/storytelling. Many times the art of storytelling unfolds simply, Ingalls explained, perhaps when a family is gathered at the dinner table and hears the story of Uncle Fred falling through the floor while in a bathtub. The family might have heard the same account 10 times, but it can be just as interesting the 11th time if the teller makes it so with his or her technique, she added. “I think you have to love the stories — you have to enjoy the stories,” Ingalls said of what it takes to be a good presenter.

“And, of course, being a bit of a ham helps as well.”