

LOCAL/STATE

Foundation helping kids in Coal Creek area

Youth learn about heritage

By Fred Brown
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BRICEVILLE — This is how you make a difference in people's lives: You go into a community, soak up the history, locate the central elementary school, and start teaching the children they matter and that they are descended from Welsh Lords of the Isles.

And then you begin encouraging those elementary school-children to get excited about their roots, reading and responsibilities.

That is precisely what Barry Thacker and Carol Moore of Geo/Environmental Associates Inc., a Knoxville engineering firm, have done.

Thacker is president and principal geoenvironmental engineer, and Moore is in charge of the firm's business administration and development, as well as handling the firm's extensive Internet presence at <http://www.coalcreekaml.com/index.htm>.

About a dozen years ago, Thacker, a mining engineer, discovered that students in the Coal Creek area were not going to college in the same numbers as students in the rest of the state were.

And yet, Briceville Elementary School, just up the road from Lake City (formerly known as Coal Creek) in Anderson County, had won a national education award.

"Our volunteer effort began as a way to generate engineering work for our business," Thacker said.

He had just finished a coal mine reclamation design in Virginia for the U.S. Office of Surface Mining and wanted to do one in Tennessee.

A trout fisherman who is fond of the waters of the Clinch River below Norris Dam, Thacker began looking at the stream where Coal Creek feeds into the river. Cleaning up Coal Creek, he figured, would help his trout fishing.

On his first cleanup effort, Coal Creek residents showed up with protest signs.

"They said the needs of people take precedence over those of fish," he said.

Those arguments, Thacker said, motivated him to adjust his focus — he had to change the hearts and minds of the people of Coal Creek. To do that, he began with Briceville students, making them understand that education comes first. They had to finish



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Carol Moore, right, of Geo/Environmental Associates Inc., helps Briceville Elementary School students, left to right, Alexis Brown, Madison Byrge and Rebecca Byrge ring the bell in the 124-year-old Briceville Church on Thursday. The students heard a lecture by Harvard University professor Eirug Davies about the Welsh of Tennessee in the church that was built by Welsh coal miners. Moore and Barry Thacker operate the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation.



Barry Thacker, center, recognizes Harvard University professor Eirug Davies after a lecture in Briceville Church on Thursday. Davies spoke to Briceville Elementary School's fourth- and fifth-graders about the Welsh of Tennessee. The church was built by Welsh coal miners, and Davies was given a piece of the building.

high school and go to college.

Thacker and Moore formed the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation and kicked off their Scholars Program. Since that beginning, 32 students from the Briceville area have received CCWF scholarships.

"If you had told me then that the project would have snowballed into what it has become, I would have thought you were crazy," Moore said, adding that the volunteer work has changed her life.

"It makes you feel so good to think you are contributing something to others. What ends up happening is that it contributes more happiness and richness to your own life," she said. "You don't have to go overseas to volunteer; you can walk right out your own front door."

CCWF has 12 students on scholarships in area colleges and universities.

Beginning with the elementary school students, CCWF gave them projects such as cleaning

up area mountain streams, taking history field trips, learning about their heritage when Welsh coal miners came to the area in the 19th century to work in the coal mines, participating in "eisteddfods" — written essays about their culture and heritage based on Welsh tradition.

High school students who come out of the CCWF Scholars Program and are graduates of Briceville Elementary in Coal Creek are required to complete a number of community projects as well as write an essay.

This includes performing community service projects in the Coal Creek Watershed organized and sponsored by the CCWF.

That's just a partial list. It gets even more stringent for students who are competing for one of the \$2,500 per year CCWF scholarships, known as the Nantglo Scholarships.

The Nantglo Scholarship takes its name in honor of Welsh coal miners who settled Coal Creek after the Civil War. Nantglo is a Welsh word for Coal Creek.

One of the major requirements for the \$10,000 college scholarship is an essay on "Improving the Quality of Life in the Coal Creek Watershed."

One of those major history projects for the students has been

learning about the "Coal Creek Mine War," which took place after the end of the Civil War.

In 1891-92 in Anderson County, unscrupulous mine operators in cahoots with the state government devised a plan to use convicts as free labor in the coal mines, putting hundreds of miners out of work.

The history of that event has been told through CCWF historical markers on Militia Hill above Coal Creek, where state militia dug in and set up artillery and Gatlin guns with which to fight the miners.

In 2005 and again in 2007, the CCWF acquired from heirs of the mountain land the hillsides and valleys where the fighting took place.

Over time, Briceville Elementary students, as well as the older Coal Creek Scholars, have spent weekends installing historical markers that the CCWF purchased.

Efforts on Militia Hill by students include removing illegal trash dumps and litter; building a parking area; planting American chestnuts; installing the first four historical markers in November 2010; and building a trail bench at a site overlooking Coal Creek.

Last month, 14 high school students helped with another important step in the development of the Coal Creek Motor Discovery Trail to bring tourists to the watershed by installing seven more markers at Fort Anderson on Militia Hill as well as signs at the base of Vowell Mountain.

Fort Anderson — named for Confederate Col. Keller Anderson — on Militia Hill was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2011. A dedication ceremony for Fort Anderson's listing is set for May 17, 2013.

Victoria Wright, a 17-year-old senior at Anderson County High School, is one of the Briceville students who helped with the recent marker installation.

Thacker calls her "the poster child for our Coal Creek scholars program. Carol and I fell in love with her when she was in kindergarten."

Wright said she is competing for one of the CCWF scholarships.

"My plan is to go to the University of Tennessee to study engineering," she said on a recent cold day on Militia Hill.

Now, that's something the Lords of the Isles could appreciate: a maiden becoming educated in the ways of iron.