

# STRONG AS STEEL



## THE REBIRTH OF WEIRTON

by Savannah Schroll-Guz,  
President/Executive Director  
Weirton Area Museum & Cultural Center

Once upon a time, the area now known as Weirton was dotted with sheep farms and apple orchards. Its rambling banks along the Ohio River were pastoral, sparsely populated. But the area underwent rapid transformation starting in 1909, when Ernest T. Weir arrived at Crawford's Crossing (now the northernmost end of Weirton) and turned a large swath of fallow pasture into one of the most productive industrial sites in twentieth-century America with the foundation of Weirton Steel. It changed again on July 1, 1947, when the unincorporated company town of Weirton absorbed three formerly independent neighboring towns and emerged as an incorporated city. Its name was still Weirton, but now it was something new.

What some might call Weirton's "Golden Age" spanned the 1950s, when the steel mill boomed and sparkling infrastructure projects burnished the new city's public identity as a wholesome, industrious town. It became a quintessential American melting pot as immigrants flowed in to find employment, homes, and better lives. However, by the late 1970s foreign imports began to eat away at Weirton Steel's market share (now as part of a larger conglomerate, National Steel), and by 1982, the company gave its workers an ultimatum: the employees could buy the corporation or face massive job losses.

If the mill died, it would precipitate a community-wide economic crisis. Family-owned businesses that relied on mill orders or millworker customers would close. Funding for public programs and municipal initiatives would dry up. And ultimately, the young people of Weirton would start to leave the town—and the state—in search of better jobs. On September 23, 1983, the Employee Stock Ownership Program (ESOP) achieved a favorable vote from 7,000 millworkers, and National Steel officially transferred its holdings to the employees in January 1984. More than just a bid to save their jobs, it was a battle for their town.

However, despite city efforts to preserve its century-old community and lifestyle, Weirton still lost nearly 20 percent of its population between the early 1980s and 1990. Economic decline continued into the new century. From 2000 to 2019, Hancock County experienced a 20% drop in employment. And our community is, in 2022, again at a crossroads. For this reason, the Smithsonian *Crossroads: Change in Rural America* exhibit comes to our city at the perfect time. While Weirton itself wouldn't now be considered rural in any traditional sense of the word, *Crossroads'* overarching themes of Land, Persistence, Managing Change, and Identity are incredibly relevant to the issues that now confront our city and the two counties it straddles.

Weirton is on the threshold of a cultural and financial renaissance. Weirton Heights, now the city's commercial district, is filled with a variety of new businesses that have successfully weathered the pandemic. Family-owned restaurants offering Italian, Greek, and other traditional cuisines can be found throughout the city, making us less a food desert than we were a decade ago. Gyms and wellness centers, including yoga studios and spas, are also thriving.

Perhaps most exciting is that the arts are beginning to flourish in Weirton, not only through the efforts of secondary educators, who are collaborating with regional artists to bring innovative projects to their classrooms, but also through galleries like Summit, part of the Top of West Virginia Convention & Visitor's Bureau, which features the work of local and regional artists. The Weirton Area Museum &

# THE BROAD SIDE

Cultural Center (WAMCC) has also been working to unite our mission of education and preservation with celebrations of our local creative culture. Our new gift shop is filled with the work of regional artists and makers. And in early 2021, we became the home stage for the Ohio Valley Cloak and Dagger Company, which opens its fifth season at WAMCC in February 2022. We at WAMCC want to help lead the movement towards positive cultural change.

As we continue to evolve as a community, we remain resolute in our efforts to revitalize, to repurpose brownfield lands, and to forge a new postindustrial identity. For the five weeks of *Crossroads'* stay in our community, we'll tell Weirton's story through a companion three-poster exhibition that will appear in area libraries; we'll commemorate a family business that achieved a century serving the community, yet closed due to changing market forces; and we'll be celebrating our creative culture, definitive historical figures, and the ingenuity of Hancock and Brooke County residents.

On January 31, WAMCC will open *Crossroads* with a reception and ribbon-cutting, featuring "History in the Hills" columnist Paul J. Zuros. Top of West Virginia Arts Council members will share the genesis of their companion artworks. On February 5, we'll host a panel discussion with three Brooke County homesteads whose business plans and collaborative events are collectively advancing local tourism. On February 12, historical reenactor Molly Mossor will portray locally famous historian and painter Mary Shakley Ferguson during our "Tea with Mary" event. Singer and guitarist R. J. Gaudio will provide a date-night experience with our "Music at the Museum" on February 16, while February 19 will see esteemed scholar and Chatham University professor Lou Martin explore Hancock County's pre-industrial past and postindustrial present.

February 28 will be action-packed, as we welcome respected Heinz History curator and lecturer Samuel W. Black in the morning and enjoy exhibition-themed entertainment by the Ohio Valley Cloak & Dagger Company in the evening. On March 5, we'll be celebrating the city of Weirton's 75th anniversary with cake and a kid-friendly museum scavenger hunt. The entire five-week span provides us with an opportunity to deliberate, educate, and inspire. *Crossroads* offers Weirton—and, more broadly, our state—the chance to recognize how we approach and understand ourselves so that we can more consciously create our future, both as Weirtonians and as West Virginians.

We are no longer a region reliant upon or defined by a single industry. Instead, we are expanding our definition to incorporate new approaches to changing fiscal and societal demands. While WAMCC as a museum will always function as a memory-keeper, we are also a forum for bigger issues and broader perspectives. *Crossroads* provides us with the perfect opportunity to talk about who we are as a community—and what we can become.



(See photo on back)

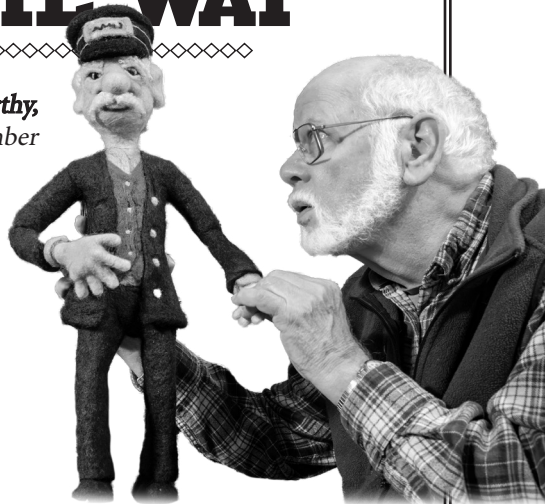
**The Crossroads: Change in Rural America Smithsonian exhibit tour will open at WAMCC on January 31, 2022 and run through March 7, 2022.**

To see the rest of the tour's West Virginia itinerary, visit [www.wvhumanities.org/programs/crossroads](http://www.wvhumanities.org/programs/crossroads)

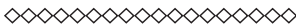
# THE NEEDLE POINTS THE WAY



by Dan McCarthy,  
Board Member



Felt artisan John Terry positions one of his creations: a train conductor. Terry's love of trains has lead to more than one railroad-themed needle felt sculpture. Photo by John Terry



I was thumbing through the November 2021 edition of *Wonderful West Virginia* when I came across a story written by Belinda Anderson about the Mountain Weavers Guild in Elkins, WV. One segment of the article featured the work of John Terry, needle felt sculptor (pictured), and by the end of the piece, I was "hooked" (pun intended).

Seeking to learn more, I discovered that needle felting itself is a production technique developed in the mid-19th century. One of its most well-known applications is the production of tennis balls, but its use extends to a very diverse set of products including automobile carpets, Kevlar body armor and even the production of space shuttle tiles. Intrigued with this art form previously unknown to me, I reached out to John Terry to learn more.

John adds: "As the *Wonderful WV* article states, a felting needle has several barbs which catch the wool fibers on the 'in stroke' and release when withdrawn. Sheep's wool has microscopic scales which entangle with each other, preventing the fibers from returning to their 'fluffy' state. Other animal fibers can entwine, and 'stick together' as a felt (as in Wet Felting), but it takes a sheep to make a solid, sculptural, indestructible object."

Indestructible? "I may have overstated the qualities of sheep's wool a bit," John wryly admits.

He adds that, "While felt has been made since the dawn of humanity (or perhaps the dawn of sheep), it was only recently that artists removed commercial felting needles from mechanical felting apparatus and were foolish enough to imagine that they could construct three-dimensional figures and objects, one jab at a time."

The threads of John's story also add dimension to his felting work. He would be the first to tell you he isn't a West Virginian. He originally came to our state about 20 years ago while on a trip to photograph wildflowers (another of John's artistic talents). An acquaintance recommended he visit Elkins for better photographic opportunities. John did—and soon purchased a small farm, which now houses his needle felting studio.

John discovered needle felting several years later while visiting Helvetia, West Virginia. He was in a store featuring handicrafts and noticed a needle felted "sculpture" of a shepherd and several sheep. His curiosity led him to enroll in a needle felting course at the Augusta Festival at Davis & Elkins College several years later. In one week of "nose to the grindstone work," he produced his first needle felted sculpture.

This combination of being a property owner in West Virginia, discovering needle felting here, and having the support of the Mountain Weaver's Guild has led John to associate his needle felt sculpturing more or less exclusively with the Mountain State. He chooses to practice the art form only during the months he is in residence here.

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STRONG AS STEEL

(Continued from front)

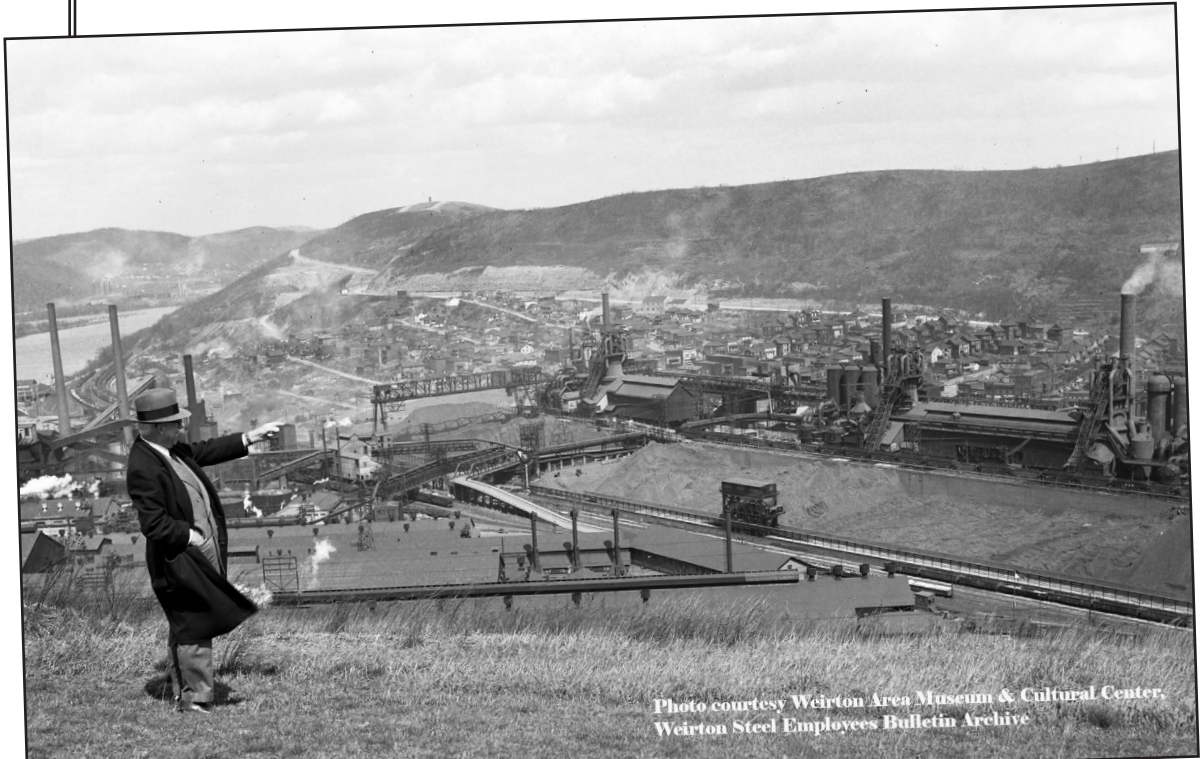


Photo courtesy Weirton Area Museum & Cultural Center, Weirton Steel Employees Bulletin Archive

Pittsburgh-born E.T. Weir overlooks Crawford's Crossing in 1957. The town originally consisted of 105 acres of farmland that Weir purchased from Hancock County-born oil speculator Cyrus Ferguson in 1909. Weir then used the property to build his vision of a fully integrated steel mill. Weir's push for industrialization birthed the present-day town of Weirton and set the stage for the town's next century of explosive development, postindustrial decline, and rebirth.

Photo courtesy Weirton Steel Employees Bulletin, Weirton Area Museum & Cultural Center.

For more information on Weirton's Smithsonian programming, visit [www.weirtonareamuseum.com](http://www.weirtonareamuseum.com)

THE NEEDLE POINTS THE WAY

(Continued from front)

John has other roots in Appalachia, too. His father "was the son of a Kentucky sharecropper who, when my grandmother died, was given with his three sisters to an aunt to raise." He was only about four years old. "He spent his youth behind mules in the tobacco fields, until he left 'to seek his fortune,'" John says. That background was the inspiration one of John's recent needle felt sculptures of a mule and a farmer, pictured below. The sculpture won an award in the Gala exhibit at the Randolph County Community Arts Center in Elkins.

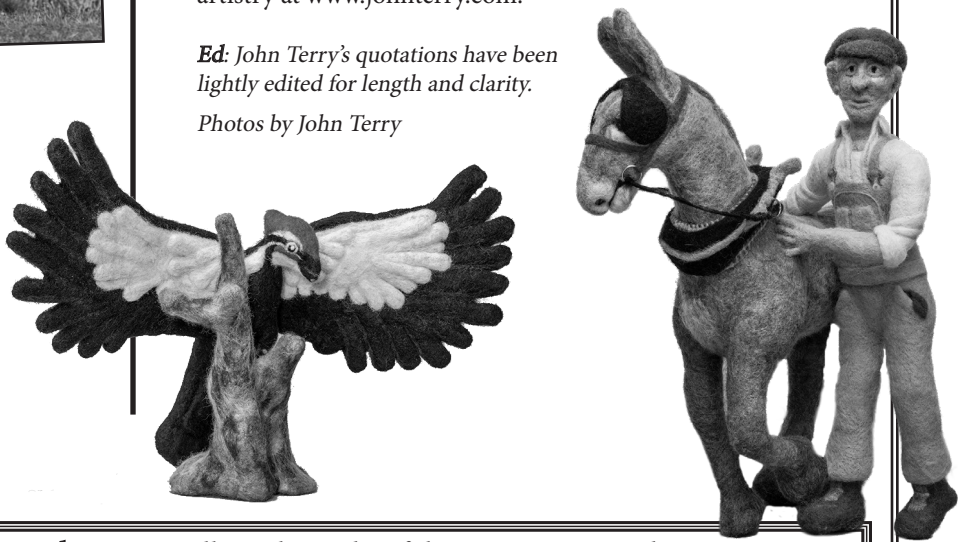
John's other passion is railroads, dating from a childhood filled with Marx model locomotives. This has carried through into his photography, painting and, of course, needle felting—including two recent sculptures of a railroad conductor and an engineer (pictured on front page).

Today John splits his time between his home in New Jersey and his farm in West Virginia. When here in the Mountain State, he's likely to be working on a needle felt sculpture in his studio or displaying his work in a community-based exhibit or show. Like so many West Virginians and the art they produce, John Terry's work combines elements both old and new, traditional and 21st century. Like all of them, we're glad he's here.

Learn more about John Terry's artistry at [www.johnterry.com](http://www.johnterry.com).

**Ed:** John Terry's quotations have been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Photos by John Terry



EVENTS FEBRUARY - MARCH 2022

Always check with the venue or hosting organization of an event before attending, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as schedules may change without the knowledge of the Council.

- Jan 31** Crossroads ribbon cutting and reception in Weirton\* - Smithsonian exhibit with local speakers and refreshments, Weirton Area Museum & Cultural Center (WAMCC). 5:30pm
- Feb 5** Agrotourism, Century Farms, & Homesteads\* - Panel discussion, WAMCC Weirton. 11am
- Feb 12** Tea with Mary\* - Living history presentation of historian and painter Mary Shakley Ferguson. RSVP required, WAMCC Weirton. 1:30pm
- Feb 16** Music at the Museum\* - Performance by RJ Gaudio Troubador, WAMCC Weirton. 7-9pm
- Feb 19** Hancock County: From Pre-Industrial to Post-Industrial\* - Lecture by historian Lou Martin, WAMCC Weirton. 1:30pm
- Feb 26** Presentation by Samuel L. Black\* - Director of African American Programs at Heinz History Center of Pittsburgh, WAMCC Weirton. 11am

- Feb 26** Black History in Randolph County - Live Facebook presentation, [facebook.com/beverlyheritagecenter](https://facebook.com/beverlyheritagecenter). 1pm
- Mar 3** A.E. Stringer Visiting Writers Series - Women's History Month reading by Melissa Febos, Marshall University Memorial Student Center, Huntington. 7pm
- Mar 5** Celtic Calling - Celebration of Celtic culture, Hale Street Center, Charleston. 10am-4pm
- Mar 11** Crossroads opening reception in New Martinsville\* - Smithsonian exhibit opening at Wetzel County Museum. 7pm
- Mar 15** Burning Springs\* - Civil War documentary screening and filmmaker Q&A, The Movie House, New Martinsville. 7pm
- Mar 18** Crossroads crafting\* - Crafting activities for kids, Wetzel County Center for Children and Families, New Martinsville. 9am-4pm

- Mar 27** West Virginia's Election Integrity and Processes - Little Lecture by Dr. Erik Herron and Paige Wantlin. See [wvhumanities.org/programs/little-lectures](http://wvhumanities.org/programs/little-lectures) for details. 7pm
- Mar 31** Interpreting West Virginia's LGBTQ+ History - Presentation by Susan Ferentinos, WVU Downtown Campus Library, Morgantown. 7pm

\*Events marked with an asterisk are part of the Council-sponsored Crossroads Smithsonian tour. For general tour information, visit [www.wvhumanities.org/programs/crossroads](http://www.wvhumanities.org/programs/crossroads)

For local contact information on events and exhibit hours in Weirton, visit [www.weirtonareamuseum.com](http://www.weirtonareamuseum.com)

For local contact information on events and exhibit hours in New Martinsville, visit [www.visitwetzelcounty.com](http://www.visitwetzelcounty.com)

The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonpartisan nonprofit, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council is supported by the NEH, the State of West Virginia, and contributions from the private sector. The purposes of the West Virginia Humanities Council are educational, and its mission is to support a vigorous program in the humanities statewide in West Virginia.

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WEST VIRGINIA  
HUMANITIES COUNCIL

