## Henson from 1B

slacks seemingly not bound for anywhere too specific. For Henson, walking or driving was not the way to go as he was known for navigating Gilmer's streets and two lane back roads atop a worn-in, heavily-shellacked bicycle adorned with tin cans, oversized mirrors and working, honking brass horns.

According to nephew Tibbetts, the bike was Henson's primary mode of transport for nearly 20 years. As the bike aged, its rusty gears began to fight back, leading Henson to create multiple pairs of metal-reinforced footwear weighing over five pounds a shoe. Despite their considerable bulk, the medieval looking boots and sneakers made the bike easier to steer and pedal, says Tibbetts. At least that was Henson's theory.

Thanks to that piece of uniquely decorated transportation, which served its rider until his passing almost three years ago, many still refer to Henson simply as "The Bicycle Man." But, that was not the only nickname by which he was known.

Some knew Henson better as "The Bird Man," thanks to a self-made contraption he hoped would allow him to "fly like Icarus" over his hometown. A 1972 *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* article by Leonard Ray Teel on display at the open house detailed how Henson had dreamt for years about being able to fly and the visions of self-propulsion that led him to create the manmade wings. "Anytime I get something started on paper, I always finish it. I won't be backing out," Henson told the reporter. Those attending the open house had little trouble discovering this.

Several visitors remembered Henson's insatiable fondness for found junk. He was prone to finding it, fixing it and often coating it with multiple layers of shellac to protect and reinforce. Often, the discarded junk would serve a greater purpose for Henson. If these worn fragments of rock, metal, plastic and wood didn't wind up attached to his bike or used in a piece of artwork, they would most likely become part of his rotating stable of odd but useful inventions.

Said Tibbetts, R.T. Henson was regarded by some as troubled and by others as brilliant. Going on stories told by Tibbetts and those who knew him, he was likely a highly capable combination of both. "I think his mind was not understood well by the average person. To me," continued Tibbetts, "he was about 100 years ahead of his time. Every once in a while an advanced guy like that comes along who sees the world in a different kind of way than the rest of us are accustomed to."

**Beyond the front door**

One didn't have to venture far past the home's front door to see that Henson's former abode was never a run-of-the mill one bedroom, one bath bungalow. As shuttles offered by Henson's place of worship, the Ellijay Church of Christ, bussed visitors up and down the steep, winding roads of Corbin Hill, whispers of curiosity could be heard from both those coming and going.

"He was so misunderstood," said some climbing back on the bus, while others who'd just arrived stood fascinated by the set of wood-framed circular windows that allowed Henson to gaze upon the lower streets of Ellijay and the night skies above with a fully functioning telescope. Like most of the other creature comforts on display, R.T. made the patchwork telescope himself from found and donated parts.

Everywhere you turned, Henson's brightly colored paintings lined the living room walls. With subjects ranging from the nearby Skyline Drive to more intricate titles like "Life From the 5th State," each one bore his stout, all-caps print signature.

Within a cozy kitchen, attendees marveled at the glass-encased collection of letters written and received by Henson. One, bearing the letterhead of the Pisa Provincial Office of Tourism thanked "Mr. R.T. Henson" for his suggestions and sketches outlining a proposed "consolidation" of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Hand-drawn blueprints, also protected under glass, detailed subsequent inventions such as stereoscopic vision binoculars and a mysterious machine that, when completed, would "make things very, very big or very, very small."

Another exchange, perhaps the most legendary correspondence on display, was between Henson and the Aircraft Spruce and Specialty Company of Fullerton, California. The handful of letters concerned the possibility of marketing Henson's "Soaring Man" flying machine - a full-size set of sail-cloth and steel cable wings complete with an aluminum steering device and a reinforced plastic helmet - with which Henson sought to fly like a bird over Ellijay or, ultimately, wherever he pleased. 'We're ready for man-powered flight. Are you?" declared a black and white blueprint of the device mailed to Henson by the interested company. It didn't take much to ascertain that this man was ready as humanly possible.

Tibbetts says he doesn't think that his uncle ever actually embarked on a maiden flight using the wings. He is not sure why, though one could only assume someone who knew of Henson's plan talked him out of it with fear for his safety. Nonetheless, the collected correspondences between R.T. and the aircraft company, as well as with various scientists and scholars including French astrophysicist Jacques Valee, proved those who believed he simply toiled absent mindedly and without purpose in his mountain hermitage were greatly mistaken.

**Treasures built from trash**

Roped off behind bright yellow link chain stood Henson's trademark modified bike accompanied by a painting of a pedaling R.T. during his later years. Across the room, an array of old photographs showed Henson during his younger days as a lanky man with jet black hair and a piercing stare, long before his hair went grey and he began to sport a scraggly beard.

In his immaculately penned writings and drawings, many of them hand dated, Henson more than vaguely predicted such technological advancements as modern, highly functioning computers and, as Larry Davis pointed out in a 2002 piece published in the *Times-Courier*, the television remote control. The story goes that Henson ran a wire to the inner workings of his old-timey, big knob TV set and controlled the knobs with a handheld device. Rudimentary it may have been, but he was the only person in Ellijay, if not one of a handful in the entire country, to possess such an invention in the time between black and white and cable-ready television.

One could also argue that he was a forerunner when it came to self-recycling. If he wished to listen to music, Henson did not turn on a store bought hi-fi. Instead, he planned and constructed a stereo system of his own design from bits and pieces of loose material. The working record player sported a carved wooden stylus, rotary motor, self-lifting arm and a twisted metal support mechanism with a blue coreless swirl marble decorating its exterior.

In the corner of the basement, which now sports a concrete floor Henson never got around to pouring himself, stood several junk-centric devices created for use around the home place. One, demonstrated by Tibbetts, was a weedeater, yes, but a Black and Decker handheld it was not. Henson had combined an old broomstick, steel chopping blade, egg beater handle and a liberated light switch to create the unique grass-chopper powered by a fully-wired electrical chord connected to the switch.

Even with his mechanical and artistic virtuosity, Henson was not known for coming off as a know-it-all. In fact, he became so quiet and introverted over the years, Tibbetts says his uncle probably took a great many of his theories, inventions and predictions to the grave.

"He was my idol when I was younger. We weren't that far apart in age, so we were more like brothers," Tibbetts remembered. "A lot of folks who just saw him out in public probably thought he was off his rocker, but there was much more to him. Scientists are just now beginning to touch some of the stuff he was tapping into back in the '80s and that are explained in some of the writings we've found."

During the last years of his life, said Tibbetts, R.T. focused primarily on retraining his brain so that he could virtually time travel using his mind as a machine. "He'd say, "recalled Tibbetts, "You stand next to a wall and you just see the wall. But, if you back up, you see the windows and the bricks and the doors.' Keep backing up, you will eventually see the whole picture and how things really work. Strange as that may sound at first, it really does make sense."

**A story not yet finished**

With so much to be curious about, many of the weekend's visitors had questions about Henson and how he lived, what he did to earn money and how he was able to do such seemingly impossible things as successfully navigate nearby steep curves with a chopped-down, soon-to-be-carved pine tree fastened to his bike. Others wanted to know where his love of circles came from or if he ever drove a car.

Tibbetts was virtually the only person on hand that could answer these questions and he gladly did so to the best of his ability.

"He'd come work for me and get up enough money to get by for a while," said Henson's nephew. Tibbetts, a resident of Woodstock, has made a career from building custom-made pool cues for a stable of pro clients. "I don't think R.T. ever sold any of his art," Tibbetts added. "He'd do a sketch for someone, tear it out and just give it away." As for the recurring circles motif, Tibbetts says his uncle ultimately viewed life as one continuous circle with birth and death always occurring simultaneously. He did drive, but one day laid down his keys for good in favor of the bike.

Perhaps the most-asked question was, "What will happen to all his," as one young visitor put it, "cool stuff?" Tibbetts now owns the house. He, Hall, Day and others transport the art, inventions and curios to and from the premises for each individual showing. Enough items have been salvaged that several different exhibits could be staged. But, the home is not officially a museum and probably will not become one for the time being.

Tibbetts said that fulfilling such a project would be such a giant undertaking, what with securing financing and dealing with zoning issues, that it would take a dedicated team and a much increased cash flow to make it possible. Funds garnered partly from sold prints of Henson's paintings make it possible for the free tours to take place on a limited basis.

Several visitors remarked that some of the items on display should be enshrined in the Smithsonian. After taking a close look at the intricately designed menagerie, it would be hard to argue with such a sentiment.

**The legacy lives on**

Whether Henson's life work will live on in a museum is yet to be determined. It is for certain, though, that in the years since he passed R.T. Henson has gone from being one of Gilmer County's most reclusive and mysterious citizens to one of its most celebrated.

Tibbetts and his son, Brian, have put together a Web site, www.rthenson.com, through which the curious can learn more about the man and future displays of his work. The Ellijay City Council recently declared May 9, 2009, "R.T. Henson Day." The Dedicated Ellijay Merchants and Associates recently announced a commemorative Christmas ornament that features the beloved bike and, for the date-conscious, there's a tribute calendar available with images of Henson at various stages in his life. Local artist and Ellijay Better Hometown Manager Day is currently piecing together a coffee table book dedicated to Henson's life and work.

"It will be a book dedicated to his life, certainly," says Day, "but also focusing on his writings, architecture and sculpture. It will also feature lots of photographs so people can have it and enjoy it for years to come. He was so multifaceted I felt you could write a narrative about his life, or simply just show people what he did and what made him special.

I think that is something a lot of people took away from the open house is that everyone has something that makes them special," continued Day, "and, if you judge people just by what's on the outside, you could wind up missing out on what they are passionate about and what truly makes them unique. This was a very unique, unusual man who was also a local treasure." Day says anyone that has photos of or stories about Henson they would like to contribute can contact her at the Better Hometown office located in Ellijay City Hall or by email at bh@ellijay.com.

All this posthumous commemoration begs a question that, too, that was asked by some who attended the open house – "Would he have wanted all this attention?" Tibbetts says that, in his lifetime, Henson probably would've shunned such a fuss. But, a person capable of creating so much substance from virtually nothing would arguably not have done so if he had not, one day, want others to view and be inspired by his work. Both Tibbetts and Day agree that R.T. lived a happy and fulfilling life and that he did not seek recognition, fame or fortune for his creations or hypotheses. Rather, he just tried to enjoy whatever new experience was at hand.

And, though Henson is now gone in the physical sense, it's just as easy to imagine that he finally achieved his long-term ambition of time traveling using his mind for propulsion. Instead of leaving his earthly home by traditional means, it would appear just as probable that he disintegrated into microscopic particles absorbed by the outer stratosphere.

For the average everyman, this may seem a mighty peculiar way to go. For R.T. Henson, though, it would be an almost perfect wrap to his fascinating and inspirational life story.

## Taste from 1B

Street, from the square to the area where the old Perry House stood, will be blocked off much of the morning and afternoon due to the yard sale. Hipp Street, which connects College and North Main Street, will also be closed, says Kamholz.

Parking for the events will be available along River Street and in the courthouse parking area. Event attendees may also park in the Ellijay Elementary lot, as well.

Attendees will not be able to park in front of businesses located around the square or on North Main Street, adds Kamholz.

### *Minute with the Bible*

Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. — Luke 12:22-23

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