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# CITIZEN TIMES

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WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

## ‘We are children of the Smokies’



Bill and Alice Hart pause at a North Carolina overlook after a recent spring day trip to the Smokies. PROVIDED BY THE HARTS

### Love of place inspired remarkable regional history collection

Jennifer Fulford Special to Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

Bill and Alice Hart know each other’s stories by heart, have been known to finish each other’s sentences, and share an obvious trait — the calm satisfaction of having led purpose-filled lives. • The seeds of that satisfaction began the old-fashioned way — through courtship. William “Bill” Hart of rural Buncombe County, North Carolina, met Alice Huff of Sylva, North Carolina, 67 years ago at Western Carolina Teachers College. They fell for each other, notably on a hike in the Smokies. In September 1960, they married at the Sylva First Baptist Church, honeymooned in Gatlinburg, and soon started a family. Early on, they resolved to spend their lives in Western North Carolina and began a lifelong study of the area’s history and culture.

Bill is a sixth-generation Western North Carolinian, a descendant of one of the first settlers in the Sandy Mush region of Buncombe County, who arrived in 1799. Alice, also a native North Carolinian, has ancestors who were original settlers of Jackson and Madison counties. Her grandfather taught Bill’s mother at what was then called Mars Hill College.

“We are children of the Smokies,” Alice said in her living room during an afternoon visit. “And we spend our time together there. It’s just part of who we are.”

Their love for the Smokies began when Bill and Alice were young, experiencing Great Smoky Mountains National Park for the first time on childhood trips. But their factual knowledge of the land was thin.

“Back in the mid ’60s, I was scheduled to go on a fishing trip in the Smokies and really didn’t know much about the park,” Bill said.

That is when he purchased some books to gain understanding. Those volumes marked their library’s beginning. Bill and Alice became serious collectors of regional materials, all while raising a



A nearly complete collection of Smoky Mountains Hiking Club handbooks and other rare Smokies publications can be found in the archive. PROVIDED BY UNC ASHEVILLE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

See **SMOKIES**, Page 6A

## Experts discuss future of AI in NC

Clayton Henkel  
 NC Newsline

Leading experts in research, government and industry innovators gathered at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill campus this week to discuss how artificial intelligence can be responsibly designed and used for the public good.

UNC-Chapel Hill Provost Magnus Egerstedt said one of the greatest challenges in higher education is producing an AI-ready workforce in a world that is changing faster than curricula can adapt. Egerstedt said while students are already using some generative AI tools, they must have a baseline of AI literacy and understand the constraints that come from using this evolving technology in their chosen field.

“You’ve got to be able to use the tools,” said Egerstedt. “It’s going to take people that can see around corners, who can make new connections, who can keep a finger on the pulse of the future with very limited and often-times contradictory information.”

### AI and medical advances

Ashok Krishnamurthy, director of the Renaissance Computing Institute,

See **AI**, Page 4A

## Iran reopens Strait of Hormuz

Trump says naval blockade to continue

Zac Anderson, Christopher Cann, Andrea Riquier and Michael Loria  
 USA TODAY

Iran declared the Strait of Hormuz “completely open” to all commercial vessels, the country’s foreign minister said, meeting a central demand of the United States as the two countries teased another round of peace talks and the clock wound down on a delicate two-week ceasefire.

In his April 17 announcement, Seyed Abbas Araghchi said the declaration was made possible by a separate 10-day ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel implemented the day before, which appeared to be holding.

“In line with the ceasefire in Lebanon, the passage for all commercial vessels through Strait of Hormuz is declared completely open for the remaining period of ceasefire,” Araghchi wrote on X.

See **IRAN**, Page 9A



# Smokies

Continued from Page 1A

family and pursuing professional careers—Bill in human resources and Alice in education.

As his interest grew, Bill cultivated a habit of purchasing materials for reference and finding resources in every nook and cranny. Two Asheville antiquarian booksellers mentored Bill and placed many important and rare items in the Harts' possession. Year after year, the Harts' knowledge and collection expanded.

"One day, we looked around, and we had a library," Bill said. "I liked to say, 'I never let one get away.'"

From bookstores, friends, flea markets, and online sources like e-Bay, they collected thousands of historical treasures: books, documents, pamphlets, letters, magazines, advertisements, hiking and trail guides, audio recordings, photographs, and ephemera of the Smokies, Appalachia, and Western North Carolina. Bill had collected so much information, in fact, that they built a house with a library and file room dedicated to their acquisitions.

Not only did the collection change their home, on occasion it changed their lives. One book he acquired, an early edition of Colin Fletcher's *A Complete Walker*, affected how he hiked—he switched to a particular down sleeping bag brand that he used for 50 years.

## The Hart donations

Not long after their 80th birthdays, the Harts decided to secure their treasures for posterity. Almost all of the items they acquired about regional and Smokies lore now live in special collections at the University of North Carolina Asheville and Western Carolina University. At UNC Asheville, one portion spans 25 linear feet, slightly longer than a bowling lane. The shelves are higher than Bill is tall. By scholarly standards, the quantity and quality of the materials they've saved is virtually priceless.

At UNC Asheville, which acquired the materials in 2022, archivist Ashley Whittle praises the new additions there. Whittle had the pleasure of processing the innumerable items from the Harts with her predecessor, Gene Hyde, who has since retired but helped sort and record them. It was an archivist's dream.

"I'd be in my office and call out to Gene, 'You should see this,' more than once," Whittle said.

Bill has read nearly every item in the donated collection. He has equally extensive first-hand experience in the Smokies, making him a rare source of experiential knowledge. He has hiked thousands of miles in the Great Smokies, including all maintained trails in the national park. He wrote stories from his journeys and Alice compiled them into his book *3000 Miles in the Great Smokies* (Arcadia Publishing 2009). He also section-hiked the Appalachian Trail, completing it in 2002.

Bill has also written extensively about the remarkable life and legacy of Japanese photographer George Masa. Bill and Alice collected Masa materials for decades. In 2024, they donated their Masa collection to Western Carolina University, where it joined a larger



**Ashley Whittle, archivist at UNC Asheville Special Collections, spent hours parsing through the Harts' donation, often pleasantly surprised by the documents she and her predecessor Gene Hyde catalogued for posterity.**

PROVIDED BY JENNIFER FULFORD/ COURTESY OF SMOKIES LIFE

collection of Masa materials.

## A purpose-filled pursuit

More than once, friend and historian Daniel Pierce has turned to the Harts to flesh out his research. Pierce, a UNC Asheville emeritus professor of history, served on the board of Smokies Life (then Great Smoky Mountains Association) with Bill and also facilitated the transfer of most of Hart's documents to UNC Asheville. Pierce found the collection helpful for researching his book *Hazel Creek: The Life and Death of an Iconic Mountain Community* (Smokies Life 2017). The Hart collection included virtually every column by John Parris, a popular newspaper columnist in Asheville, North Carolina, whose writing in the 1940s informed *Hazel Creek*.

"Bill is highly unusual in terms of collecting," Pierce said. "Obsessive in a good way. He's always looking for anything related to the Smokies that he could clip and save."

As a historian, Pierce has deep respect for the Harts' dedication to learning and preservation. He said they demonstrate a pride of place that is rare these days.

"They are so proud of their heritage. They're so giv-

ing and humble," Pierce said. "There aren't enough Bill and Alice Harts in the world."

Bill credits his wife for supporting his collecting habits—and just about everything else. One of their most treasured books is *Gunn's Domestic Medicine*, once a widely used medical reference, which was first published in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1830 by Dr. John C. Gunn. Their edition was owned by Alice's great-grandparents. Being one-of-a-kind and a sentimental remembrance of family, the book remains in their personal home library.

If learning about history has been the Harts' desire, Bill and Alice are a study in contrast against the intensely online and often nomadic lives of a younger digital generation. They spent decades happily bird-dogging knowledge of the place they came from and never left. Their love of home and each other tied it together.

*Documents from the Bill and Alice Hart Collection at UNC Asheville Special Collections can be viewed by appointment, email [speccoll@unca.edu](mailto:speccoll@unca.edu). Video interviews with Bill about the collection are available online. For assistance viewing the George Masa collection of photos at WCU, contact [specialcollections@wcu.edu](mailto:specialcollections@wcu.edu).*

*Jennifer Fulford is editorial team manager for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at [SmokiesLife.org](http://SmokiesLife.org), or reach the author at [jennifer@smokieslife.org](mailto:jennifer@smokieslife.org).*

## A peek inside the collection

A sampling of items found in the Bill and Alice Hart Collection at UNC Asheville exemplifies Bill's attitude that nothing be left behind:

- *The Constitution and Laws of the Cherokee Nation*, 1875
- *The Balsam Groves of the Grandfather Mountain*, by Sheperd Monroe Dugger, signed copy, 1892
- *English Folk-Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, collected by Cecil J. Sharp, edited by Maud Karpeles, 1932
- *The Kingdom of the Happy Land*, by Sadie Smathers Patton, about an African American community in Henderson County, North Carolina, 1957
- *The Blazed Trail*, reissued edition by Stewart Edward White, 1955 (Bill read the book when he was 14, and it inspired him to experience the outdoors.)
- *The Jack Tales: Folk Tales from the Northern Appalachians Collected and Retold by Richard Chase*, 1972 (Alice hosted the writer, Chase, in her school classroom when she was a teacher.)
- *The Road*, by John Ehle, a novel about an ambitious railroad project to connect Western North Carolina with the East, 1967 (The Harts later met Ehle near Penland School of Craft.)
- *1927: The Good-Natured Chronicle of a Journey*, by Anthony Lord and Elizabeth Kostova, 1995 (one of only 300 copies)



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