

Original Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture

Mary Sloop, Bertha Cone planted seeds of success

BY JUDITH PHOENIX
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It is almost time for the annual Farm Tour, sponsored by Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture.

Ashe County led the way on June 27 and will be followed by Watauga County on July 19. The purpose of the Farm Tour is to connect citizens with their local food providers, to enjoy the beautiful High Country landscape and to celebrate our agricultural heritage.

Women, as practitioners and advocates of good farming practices, have two early 20th-century pioneers, who are not usually associated with agriculture because of their other accomplishments.

Bertha L. Cone is known primarily as the wife of Moses Cone and "the hostess" of Flat Top Manor in Blowing Rock. Dr. Mary T. Sloop was a physician and the founder of Crossnore School.

The purpose of Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture is to strengthen the local food system by supporting women farmers and their families with resources and education. These commitments fall easily upon the work of two amazing women. Here is a brief version of their stories.

DR. MARY TURPIN MARTIN SLOOP (1873-1962)

In the 1920s, moonshine was a main source of income for local farmers.

To provide for another income stream, Mary Sloop advocated selling farm crops (corn, cabbage, beans, onions, Irish potatoes and sorghum). However, the lack of



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Bertha Cone found herself a widow at 50. Flat Top Manor in Blowing Rock was a 3,600-acre farm valued at \$48,000. She purchased several more tracts of land after the death of her husband, denim magnate Moses Cone.

good roads to transport the crops to market was a major barrier in limiting sales, thus keeping the Avery citizens in poverty and isolation.

But then things changed. One of the men, Mr. Jim, said to Dr. Mary Sloop, "I made a mistake, I planted too many potatoes."



Mary T. Martin Sloop was known as the 'Grand Lady of the Blue Ridge.'

Dr. Sloop replied, "That is great. You can sell them!"

The man said, "Who ever heard about anyone who wanted to buy an Irish potato?"

Dr. Sloop replied, "They buy them where I come from, down in Davidson County."

Mr. Jim said, "I can't get them there. The roads would tear up my wagon long before I was out of the county."

Dr. Sloop knew these were good potatoes, but she didn't know just how good until she contacted the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, which sent a man to Crossnore to evaluate the best crops for that area. The expert from Raleigh spoke at a citizens' meeting.

"You folks have a gold mine here," he said. "Right now, the best seed potatoes come from Maine, the only state with farms above 3,000 feet. You have a whole valley floor at 3,200! Why, you could grow the best seed potatoes ever!"

Following his exact instructions, several men raised a plot of potatoes and sent them to Washington, D.C. to be tested. Avery seed potatoes were rated better than Maine potatoes!

Better roads still were required to bring the potatoes and other crops to markets in Boone, Blowing Rock and off the mountain.

Thanks to extensive lobbying efforts by Dr. Sloop, the state government gave \$50 million dollars to build a school and roads. Avery County seed potatoes were soon considered to be the best seed potato in the southeastern United States. Raleigh gave additional funds to build two large warehouses for winter storage. The success of the potatoes was followed by beans and cabbage that were sold as far away as Texas and New York. In addition to helping the men learn new farming methods, agricultural classes were taught to the younger boys at the Crossnore School.

The local women also had food needs. An ambitious housewife could put up a hundred cans of beans in a single summer, only to lose 75 percent of them to mold!

Dr. Sloop learned that the women sterilized their jars by putting them on a stick stuck into the ground and allowing the sun to shine through them.

Dr. Sloop arranged for a home economics specialist to come to Crossnore from Raleigh to teach the women about canning.

To preserve food safely, the specialist only needed what every woman already had: flour sacks, a big kettle and plenty of water. The sacks were used for blanching, and the jars were sterilized in boiling water. Excited by their new skills, the women requested the home demonstration agent to teach them cake decoration. Soon, they successfully competed at county fairs.

At age 78, Mary T. Martin Sloop was nicknamed "Grand Lady of the Blue Ridge."

BERTHA LINDAU CONE (1858-1947)

Bertha Cone found herself a widow at 50. Flat Top Manor in Blowing Rock was a 3,600-acre farm valued at \$48,000. She purchased several more tracts of land after the death of her husband, denim magnate Moses Cone. Managing the estate was not a role Bertha had "been groomed for."

It required maintaining the mansion and out-buildings, constructing and repairing roads and the selling of farm produce. She monitored the behavior of "her" farm laborers, forbidding alcohol and stressing education and cleanliness. She developed her agricultural expertise with the help of her foreman and subscribing to farm journals.

She carried on an active correspondence with experts on raising dairy cows, the selection of apple trees and the control of apple pathogens. She served on the committee that planned the first Watauga County Fair and operated Flat Top Estate as a model farm.

Moses Cone was known for his prize-winning apples. To better manage the steep and rugged slopes of the China

Apple orchard, Bertha arranged for the construction of an apple narrow gauge tramway. The apples were loaded in wooden cars and drawn 1,700 feet downhill.

To further improve agricultural methods, she arranged free training for local apple growers. A state "scientific apple man" demonstrated the best method of gathering and packing apples.

During World War I, she regularly sent apples to Europe to help feed American soldiers.

In 1913, a carefully designed, 12-stall dairy barn was constructed with milk and feed rooms. The Flat Top Manor Dairy became Watauga County's first Grade A dairy farm, selling milk to Blowing Rock hotels and Appalachian State Teachers College.

Bertha kept sheep, cattle, horses, mules, chickens and turkeys. Her profit margins were smaller than those of her apple and dairy operations, but she was known for her quality cattle and raised fees from breeding her bulls. Bertha managed the operations for 39 years. She proved to be an excellent financial manager, making the Cone Estate the major economic force in Blowing Rock.

By the 1920s, the four apple orchards had grown from their early mountain ruggedness to beautiful orchards. Other, now mature trees, as well as hydrangeas, hedgerows and rhododendrons at last made the manor house and farm look like a natural part of the landscape, rather than what it had been — an imposition.

In conclusion, two of our High Country women pioneers took an active role in developing and promoting agriculture.

Today, Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture represents modern-day women's efforts to improve the local food system by supporting farmers through grants to develop new ideas, educational workshops and the Farm Tour, connecting farmers to their consumers.

For more information, visit www.brwia.org, or call (828) 386-1537.

Welcoming Dr. Susan Almquist

Dr. Beverly Womack, Dr. Cecilia Grasinger, Dr. Lynda Gioia-Flynt, Dr. Camile Andrews, Carrington Pertation, CNM, and April Greene, DNP, CNM welcome Dr. Susan Almquist to Harmony Center for Women's Health & Vitality. Dr. Almquist specializes in Obstetrics & Gynecology and is pleased to assist you with your healthcare needs.

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381 Deerfield Road
Boone, NC 28607
harmony@apprhs.org
(828) 268-8970
www.apprhs.org

