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## 'Appalachian girl' lives pride for home, heritage

ELIZABETHTON – Gwen Creek grew up proud of her Southern Appalachian roots.

And now she gets to put her high regard of home, and its culture and history, into practice with a recurring role in *Liberty!*.

The Official Outdoor Drama of Tennessee commences its 2010 season on July 15 and continues Thursdays-Saturdays through July 31, beginning nightly at 7:30 in the Fort Watauga Amphitheater at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area.

Creek joined the cast in 2003 and has performed several roles, including a couple of different incarnations of her favorite character, "Aggie."

"She was a small part to begin with," Creek said. "She has been a busybody and a kind of contrary person. Now we are doing something very different with her. Now she is the sort of warm, generous person that really personifies the Southern Appalachian woman."

A Washington County native, Creek

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**Buck and Brady Rogers and Gwen Creek at the Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area statue of the Overmountain Man.**





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lived in Roan Mountain for a time and went to school in Burbank before moving back to Tennessee's first county. She and her late husband, Gene, had five children, all of whom have been in the drama. Creek's great-granddaughter, Samantha, joined the cast at age 2.

"The pride I feel for our ancestors and our heritage, and where we came from, is very strong. Our history is so important. I am a very rooted person and I feel very lucky. There is not anywhere else in the world that I would rather be. I couldn't be happy anywhere else," Creek said.

"I love this drama, and all the people who are in it. It's family-oriented, and friendly. I'm so happy that I can, in this way, be a part of my heritage," Creek said.

Creek's Aggie is teamed with Brady Rogers, who is also undertaking a new version of his character, "Jimmy Denton." Rogers' Jimmy previously was famous as the settlement's young "sneak-thief," who found many ways to snatch one of Aggie's pies – from wherever she had the misfortune to put it.

Creek's character – who will be familiar to anyone who ever walked through the door to a mother or grandmother's house filled with the aroma of freshly baked dessert – is hailed as the maker of the best cobbler in the settlement.

In the new story line, Jimmy is a young orphan who loses his family to renegades on the way to the frontier. Nearly starving, the youngster comes across Aggie's cabin on



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**Gwen Creek**

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the outskirts of the Watauga settlement and helps himself to the tempting creation cooling in her window.

Aggie winds up befriending the orphan until his family can be located. Her cooking, and her teaching, make a powerful impression on Jimmy, revealed in a poignant reunion on his return in the second act.

“Sometimes something simple makes the most impact – in this case, just a spoonful of delicious food,” Creek said.

The son of Jill and Phillip Rogers, Rogers returns for his fourth season with the drama. The young actor/historian says he is “very proud to be in the play” and “constantly” encourages his classmates at Boones Creek Elementary School to come and see the show, and to be in it as well. “There’s so much for them to see and learn,” Brady said.

This is such a historical place. And it’s a great honor to come and act out all of our heroes from the 1700s. I think that’s real special,” Brady said.

Brady still has his actor’s eyes set on taking over yet another role. “I’m hoping one day to become either John Sevier or John Carter. I like them both.”

His connection to the drama began when his grandfather, Norman “Buck” Rogers, a retired Daniel Boone High School teacher, coach and assistant principal, took Brady to a reenactment at Fort Watauga, which serves as the backdrop for the drama. “One of the men invited him to stay and watch. Brady followed him everywhere, most of the day, and he was completely taken with it.”

Buck portrays the frontier developer Jacob Brown, whose purchase of the Nolichucky Valley in 1775 opened the way for a new series of settlements, beginning with Jonesborough, Tennessee’s first town.

“We have the best time down here that you can imagine,” Buck says. “The people

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**Brady Rogers**



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are like family. They all call each other by their character names. I'll tell you, it's a lot of fun."

A taste of Aggie's cobbler – and perhaps even her secret recipe – will be available for drama patrons, along with a selection of other delicious period foods offered in the new Carter's Trading Post, named to honor the first such establishment on the frontier, opened by Watauga Association leader John Carter and his partner, William Parker, shortly after their arrival in 1771.

Like Aggie, Creek has a cobbler specialty – peach – and says "there doesn't seem to be any problem with it being eaten when I put it on the table."

And, like Brady and Buck Rogers, Creek is always working, encouraging friends to come and enjoy the outdoor drama experience.



**Gwen Creek and Brady Rogers work lines.**

"I've talked to so many people who've said they meant to come and, for one reason or another, didn't get to. I hope that people will come and support this story and all the hard work that goes into the telling."

She also believes it is educational in other ways, showing not only how important women were on the frontier, but how much progress has been made in the more than two centuries since they helped settle America's first frontier.

"I think women are doing better in our society now. But I think we've got a ways to go still. We're probably not as far along here as in some of the bigger cities..." She pauses and reflects for a moment, and then grins again. "I'm not so sure we want to go that far. But, then, I'm just a good ol' Southern Appalachian girl," she says with a wink.

*(Liberty! runs Thursdays-Saturdays, July 15-31, in the Fort Watauga Amphitheater at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area in Elizabethton. Performances begin nightly at 7:30. Tickets are \$12 for adults, \$10 for seniors, and \$8 for students. Children 5 and under are admitted free. For more information, call SSSHA at (423) 543-5808).*

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