

Storytelling is his whole life

By **MARK HYLER**

Bristol Herald Courier

JONESBOROUGH — As a boy, David Joe Miller sat spellbound listening to yarns being spun 25 years ago at the first-ever National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough.

And the tales he heard each subsequent year at the event made such an impact on the Johnson City native that he's finally plunged full-time into the ancient calling — quitting his job this year to devote his life to preserving the craft through his own narrative.

During that inaugural festival in



1973, then only 13, Miller fell in love with storytelling, which was

David Joe Miller stands in front of the 200-year-old Chester Inn in Jonesborough. The inn is headquarters for the National Storytelling Association, which restored the building.

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only beginning a re-emergence as
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A tale teller's gift:

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JONESBOROUGH — A long time ago in a place not so far away, a young boy developed a keen interest in language — particularly the spoken word — and how it could be used to captivate an audience.

As he grew older, the boy listened to and read as many stories as he could. He studied and

researched their origins in hopes that, like his favorite authors and storytellers, he too would one day be able to pass along tales that would entertain and educate others.

That youngster was David Joe Miller. Now 38, Miller lives in an antiquated building that formerly housed Jonesborough's five-and-dime store. He has not

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a performance art in America.

Years later, Miller would begin helping with the fledgling event, and eventually left behind a management career at area auto dealerships to focus on helping the festival grow, and protecting and enhancing the ambience of the town where it was founded.

"I found that I liked not only listening to the stories, but also researching them and telling them," Miller said. "And people began telling me I was pretty good at it."

Six years ago Miller took a job with the National Storytelling Association and in 1994 founded the Jonesborough Storytellers Guild, to help promote professional storytelling and find new venues for artists to ply their talents.

"This year I took a leap of faith, and quit my job to be a storyteller full-time," Miller explained as he sat in the historic Chester Inn — a 200-year-old wood and brick structure nestled in the heart of Jonesborough, Tennessee's oldest town.

The NSA has been instrumental in restoring the inn, which has played host to past American Presidents Andrew Jackson, Andrew Johnson and James K. Polk, and was more recently visited by Vice President Al Gore. The inn now serves as headquarters for the NSA, and portions of it are open to

the public for tours.

Behind the building, construction continues on a storytelling park, attesting to the growing popularity of the festival, which drew only about 60 people in its first year. Next weekend's edition is expected to be attended by upward of 12,000, when 28 storytellers from across the country — as far away as Ireland and New Zealand — bring a myriad of traditional and original contemporary tales to stages around the picturesque town.

"What we're seeing is not only the growth of the festival, but (storytelling) is also becoming a more mainstream art form," Miller said. "And it's not just for children."

One of the misconceptions about the festival, particularly in the early days, has been that it is geared solely toward children. Most of the material at the event — presented under a number of tents, and featuring different types of tales — is entertaining for listeners of all ages. However, organizers advise that the Ghost Story Concerts — held late Friday and Saturday nights — may be too intense for children under age 6, and the Midnight Cabaret both nights targets a grown-up audience.

"Before there were radios, before there were televisions, this is the way our grandparents communicated life's lessons to us," Miller said of storytelling. "It

wasn't just an entertainment form. You look back at the old Jack Tales and other old stories — they teach us about mankind; they teach us morals; and they teach us right from wrong. Storytelling was more of an education process."

Many local storytellers, Miller among them, include in their routines tales that divulge the history and ancestry of the Appalachian region.

"The Jack Tales, for instance, were brought over from Ireland and Scotland, and there are a lot of people living here today from that background," Miller said.

"You can find many of the same stories in Irish and German culture throughout Europe, only they will use different names for the

characters," he said. "The moral of the story is always the same."

Other "tellers" such as Mary Carter Smith and the husband-wife team of Taifa, bring life to stories and songs steeped in African-American heritage.

Like many of his peers, Miller likes to sometimes put a modern spin on a traditional story, especially when it espouses traditional values.

"When ever I find a story where it's so evident that it teaches us something, it's like finding a treasure," he said. "And by putting a contemporary twist to it, you can actually educate people, as well as entertain them."

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only learned the craft of storytelling, he's developed a knack for writing, and he recently made the art his sole means of income.

Miller will be among more than two dozen storytellers next weekend when the 25th edition of the National Storytelling Festival is held in downtown Jonesborough.

When they gather amid the aging brick, wood frame and log buildings of Tennessee's oldest town, the "tellers" will espouse humorous remembrances of their own lives; parables to teach and strengthen values; stories about adventure, danger and frightful occurrences; and ancient tales of kings and queens from lands far across the sea.

On a recent afternoon in a second-floor parlor of Jonesborough's 200-year-old Chester Inn, an animated Miller related a favorite Irish legend that's surely tempted many a listener to try their hand at storytelling:

There was a king who ruled the land, and he was a very generous man who had a very kind heart. And there was one thing that the king loved more than anything else, and that was the clothes that he wore.

The clothes that the king wore were made by a tailor there in town, who loved nothing more than working for the king. The tailor worked day in and day out, and all he did was make clothes — beautiful clothes — for the king. And the king wore them proudly.

One day the king was at the tailor's shop, and he looked at the tailor, and the tailor was wearing rags. The king, who was generous and honest, told the tailor that it was time for him to make himself a suit of clothes.

But the tailor said he didn't have

time to do that because he was too busy making clothes for the king. So the king said 'I want you to take a day off, and do nothing more on that day than make yourself a suit of clothes.'

The king sent his servants out, and his servants purchased the finest material they could find. The tailor spent the whole day making himself a beautiful coat from that material, and when he finished with it, it looked magnificent. It was the most beautiful coat he had ever seen, of the finest material he had ever seen in his life.

He put the coat on and he wore it. He wore that coat every day, and he wore it and wore it until he wore it out. He took off the coat and looked at it sadly for a long time, and he determined that there was just enough material left in that coat to make a jacket.

So he took his scissors and he cut, and cut, then he sewed and sewed. And when he finished he had a jacket; a jacket made of the finest material he'd ever seen. And he wore that jacket proudly every day, he wore it in and he wore it out, until he finally wore it completely out.

And he held up the jacket and he looked at it a long time, sadly. And he decided that there was just enough material left in that jacket to make a vest. So he got his scissors, and he cut, and cut, and cut; and he sewed, and sewed, and sewed. And when he was finished he had a beautiful vest — the finest vest he'd ever seen before, made from the most beautiful material he'd ever touched.

He wore that vest every day. He wore it in, and he wore it out, and he wore it, and wore it until he finally wore it completely out. So he looked at the vest one day, and he determined that there was just enough material left in that vest to make a cap. So he took his scissors

out and he cut, and cut, and cut; and he sewed, and sewed, and sewed, and when he was done he had a beautiful cap — a cap made out of the same beautiful material as the coat.

And he wore that cap; he wore it every day. He wore it in and he wore it out, until finally he completely wore it out. He was holding the cap up one day, and he was looking at it very sadly. But then he determined that there was just enough material left in that cap to make a cloth button.

So he took his scissors and he cut and cut, and he sewed and sewed, and when he was done he

had a beautiful button — a button of the finest material he'd ever seen. He wore that button on a shirt, and he wore it every day. He wore it in and he wore it out until he finally — finally wore that button out.

He looked at that button one day, and he determined that it might be the end of that material.

But he looked at it very closely, and he held it up to the light and determined that there was just enough material left to make up a story. And he took that material and he made this story. He gave that story to me, and now I give it to you.