

Monument Magician

When Mary Ruden moved from South Florida to East Tennessee 12 years ago, she took a look around the historic squares and parks of her new home and saw a problem. The markers and monuments commemorating the region's rich Revolutionary War history were in disrepair. Bronze plaques had corroded to the point of being unreadable, and stone statues were cracking and crumbling. Fortunately for her community, Ms. Ruden is a qualified restoration specialist.

As an artist and welder who frequently works with bronze and metals, Ms. Ruden wasted no time offering her services. Her first project was restoring the monument to the Overmountain Men at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park in Elizabethton, Tenn.

Installed in 1999, the 13-foot bronze statue had never been restored and had become extremely corroded. "It should really be restored about every five years," said Ms. Ruden, member of Spencer Clack DAR Chapter, Sevierville, Tenn. "Bronze is an alloy of many metals, namely copper, which needs restoration and protection from the elements as it undergoes discoloration from oxidation. It can become damaged if neglected, too."

Soon after this first project, she was hired to restore the 14-foot Fort Watauga monument, which required expertise in both metals and stonework. First erected in 1909, the three-sided DAR monument marks the spot where the settlers' fort was built west of the Alleghany Mountains in 1770. A century later, its bronze components had corroded, the Tennessee limestone base had cracked, and the capstone had fallen off and was nowhere to be found.

"The state regent called, saying everyone was afraid to touch it, that's how bad off it was," Ms. Ruden said. "The cracks were so wide you could stick a pencil in them."

Undaunted by the tough project, Ms. Ruden assembled scaffolding and got

to work, restoring the monument from morning until sundown for a full week. She even helped locate the missing capstone, though the local fire department had to be the ones to return it to the top. "Now the monument looks like the way it was intended," she said. "People who see it today can better appreciate these events that happened so long ago."



Mary Ruden
Ms. Ruden's bronze statue of Mary Patton has been displayed in a famous Tennesseans exhibit at the Governor's Mansion in Nashville.

Ms. Ruden is leaving her mark on East Tennessee in other ways, too. She recently learned about Mary Patton, a pioneer gunpowder manufacturer whose donation of hundreds of pounds of gunpowder contributed to the Patriots' victory at the



Mary Ruden works to restore the monument to the Overmountain Men at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park in Elizabethton, Tenn.

Battle of King's Mountain, a turning point in the Revolutionary War. Realizing that Patton has received little recognition to date, Ms. Ruden created a bronze sculpture in her honor.

"When you think of women in the Revolution, you think of Betsy Ross, but what about Mary Patton?" she said. "I was so amazed no statues exist of her and that she was a lesser-known figure."*

The statue, the first in a series celebrating Tennessee's historically significant women, depicts Patton mixing gunpowder in a kettle. Ms. Ruden modeled the kettle after an actual one owned by Patton, and her dress is typical for the time period, too. Her face, however, is obscured, because, as Ms. Ruden said, "There were no photographs or tin-types, so nobody knows for sure what she looked like."

The statue took more than a year to finish, in part because Ms. Ruden works on multiple projects at the same time. In between her bronze sculpture series and restoration work, she also creates public art. A six-foot-tall "Quilt Fiddle" is on display in Virginia, while her "Guitar Cow" is part of the famous Cow Parade in Austin, Texas. Her latest public art, a seven-foot sundial, was recently installed at a public park in North Carolina. An avid gardener, she also paints natural subjects such as botanicals and butterflies. ☀

*Since Mary Patton's husband would have been credited with any patriotic service regarding supplying materials for the war effort, she is unable to be recognized by the DAR for any services she provided due to the coverture laws of the time.