



**left:** Officials plan to expand the museum by adding a 1900s general store and an American Indian exhibit. **below:** “Kids use all their senses here,” says one museum volunteer. “They can smell food cooking, touch fibers being spun, and hear rifles explode.”



PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK SANDLIN

## Pioneering Spirit

A small but growing regional museum illuminates the rich heritage of southwest Virginia.

The Historic Crab Orchard Museum and Pioneer Park sits at the side of busy U.S. 19/460, just west of Tazewell, Virginia. It's a startling sight for motorists. The 14 log-and-stone cabins assembled here blend beautifully with the mountainous countryside, yet the tiny village seems oddly out of place in today's world. This incongruent scene issues an invitation for travelers to stop and explore.

### Long, Winding Road

People have always come together in this southwest Virginia valley. Long before Jamestown was settled, the area was home to a thriving American Indian village. In the 1770s, Thomas Witten settled his family here, building a fort and planting the seeds of a community still known as Pisgah. It's fitting, then, that this spot now shelters a regional museum that paints a fascinating picture of life on the American frontier.

The museum itself houses a wide range of local artifacts, some dating back to prehistoric times. There's a gastropod fossil (the remnant of a snail thought to be 570 million years old), as well as the tusk, teeth, and a leg bone of a woolly mammoth, estimated to be 400 million years old.

Relics from more recent years include a collection of rare and original maps dating back to the time when European explorers believed the Pacific Ocean lay at the edge of what's now West Virginia. Indian artifacts include original pottery, tools, beadwork, and weapons discovered nearby.

### On the Frontier

Still, it's at Pioneer Park that visitors truly get a peek into the life of a Virginia settler. The museum features an old farmhouse, a blacksmith's shop, and a replica of Fort Witten built in 1926 using some of the original logs.

During special events and when arranged in advance for groups, artisans and costumed interpreters breathe life into the village. They give demon-



Watching wool being spun into yarn generates questions from these children.

strations of everything from making a dugout canoe to spinning wool.

### Passing the Torch

While the museum boasts a stable of able volunteers, it has also made involving young people a priority. Each year, interns are recruited to help with educational programs; plus, a summer Youth Apprentice Camp gives kids the necessary experience to become volunteers.

Emily Whitted became an apprentice two summers ago. During training, she cooked pancakes on an open fire, made soap, shot an arrow, learned to crochet, and danced the Virginia reel. Despite these lessons, it seems the 10-year-old prefers the life of a modern girl after all. “I wouldn't be a very good pioneer girl,” she admits. “Girls back then had to wear bonnets and keep their hair tied back, and I do not like that. Life must've been tough back then!”

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**Historic Crab Orchard Museum and Pioneer Park:** (276) 988-6755 or [www.craborchardmuseum.com](http://www.craborchardmuseum.com). ♦