Man on an accidental mission: the quest for a perfect sundial

BY ANDREW MARSHALL

Roger Gilbertson was sitting in his easy chair, watching shadows move across his house when he suddenly became curious about sundials. He went to Lowes to purchase one, but they were out of stock. So he decided to make one himself.

Gilbertson, a Minnesota-by-way-of-Texas transplant to Haywood County, isn't your average Joe. A retired aerospace engineer who specialized in orbital mechanics, the 86-year-old helped NASA land men on the moon and once stood on stage with famed rocket pioneer Wernher von Braun. So, as you'd expect with that resume, Gilbertson's early backyard experiments with sticks, rocks, and cardboard quickly gave way to increasingly more sophisticated sundials.

The end result is an eye-catching sundial the Folkmoot Friendship Center, the Waynesville institution dedicated to the culture, arts, education, and traditions of Western North Carolina. According to Gilbertson, it's the most accurate horizontal sundial in the world.

"It's another example of the collaborations we have with the community of artists and community in general within Haywood County and Western North Carolina," said Jeff Haynes, interim board chairman of Folkmoot. "At the end of the day, it's about the legacy we leave for the ones who are here after we're gone."

With a 5-foot radius, sturdy aluminum construction, and concrete base, the Folkmoot sundial will certainly be around for a while. But what makes it so accurate?

A crash course on sundials

It's easy to get lost in the mechanics of how sundials work. But to put it simply as possible, a horizontal sundial has two parts. The first part is the

Sundial continues on 7A

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SUNDIAL CONNOISSEUR — Retired aerospace engineer Roger Gilbertson decided to make his own sundials after watching shadows move across his living room.