



THE TABLE IS SET

**A partnership between
West Virginia State Parks and
Homer Laughlin yields a line
of collectible custom china.**

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY ZACK HAROLD





Jim Browning didn't know it at the time, but a trip he took with his wife on a spring day in 2017 would lead to a partnership between West Virginia State Parks and famous Mountain State dish manufacturer Homer Laughlin China, makers of the popular Fiestaware dinnerware.

At his wife Marian's behest, the pair drove about two hours from their home in Grafton to a Fiestaware tent sale at the company's factory in Newell, in Hancock County. Although Marian was looking to pick up some pieces for the house, Browning was also considering getting new dinnerware sets for the cabins at Tygart Lake State Park, where he works as park superintendent. "I just wanted to go ahead and do something nice for our cabins," he says.

Before the day was over, Browning ended up introducing himself to company officials and meeting with Dick Blatchford, the general sales manager for Homer Laughlin China's food service division. "He was as nice as he could be," Browning says. "He essentially stopped everything that he was doing and took us on a tour of the whole showroom. We walked

in and said, 'Hey we're looking for dishes for our park,' and they just rolled out the red carpet. It was great."

Browning passed along what he learned to Paul Redford, state parks district administrator, who took the idea and ran with it. "It just made good sense to take the next step with this dinnerware because Fiestaware—everybody's crazy about it," Browning says. "I just thought, 'Wow this will be good for the parks.'" As a result, custom Homer Laughlin china will soon be in use and for sale not only at Tygart Lake State Park but at parks throughout the state.

"It would have never happened if Marian was not insistent on getting in that car and going to the tent sale," Browning says.

Collect 'Em All

For the first phase of the program, each state park lodge restaurant except Stonewall Jackson State Park developed a featured dish to be served on a plate or platter from Homer Laughlin's "Carolyn" line. The dishes are marked with the individual state park's logo as well as the West Virginia State Parks logo.

The featured dishes vary from park to park. At Blackwater Falls, for instance, it's a barbecue sampler. Cacapon Resort serves a crab cake dinner on the

In addition to plates used in lodge restaurants, branded with the logos of their respective state parks, Homer Laughlin also created this china design for state park cabins.



Each West Virginia State Park lodge restaurant except Stonewall Jackson will feature custom-designed dinnerware by Homer Laughlin China.

special dishes. At North Bend, the featured dish is baked steak.

The parks will also sell the dishes in their gift shops. “So if the guests like the platter and the plate enough, then they can purchase it in the gift shop,” Redford said.

State parks have started serving coffee in Homer Laughlin china coffee mugs, too, which feature logos from the individual parks and the state park system. The new mugs are more functional than the ones parks previously used. “Some of our parks had these really small, little coffee mugs that it was almost like drinking out of a thimble,” Redford said. “It was very difficult for our elderly customers to be able to grip the mug very well.”

Along with the West Virginia-made mugs, the state parks are now serving coffee roasted in the Mountain State from Buckhannon-based Mountain Roasters and Mountaineer Roasting of Morgantown. “The cool thing about it is that you’ll be served your featured dish on a plate from West Virginia and you’ll be served your coffee in a coffee mug from West Virginia that has West Virginia roasted coffee in it,” Redford says.

For the second phase of the program, Homer Laughlin dinnerware sets will be stocked in state park cabins as they are renovated over the next three years. The pieces will all have a West Virginia State Park logo. Guests will be able to buy similar pieces in the state park gift shops, too—although the gift shop versions will vary slightly from the cabin versions, for good reason.

“It’s going to have the West Virginia logo on top of the plate and a little rhododendron flower on the bottom of the plate,” Redford says. “And the only reason why I did that is to ensure that the ones that are for the cabins won’t have the rhododendron on the bottom, so if I see it on eBay, I’ll know it was stolen out of the cabins.”

State park officials hope the Homer Laughlin pieces will encourage visitors to travel the state to assemble a complete set. “If you want to buy a Hawks Nest-logged Homer Laughlin China plate, you can only go to Hawks Nest to get it. If you want a Pipestem mug, you can only go to Pipestem. That is done by design. The intent of that is to encourage folks that want to collect these things to actually go and experience our parks to see what Hawks Nest and Pipestem are all about.”



A Commitment to West Virginia

The partnership with Homer Laughlin is just one way the parks system is promoting West Virginia-made products. Soap, shampoo, and lotion stocked in the state park lodge rooms and cabins are all made by Wild Mountain Soap Company in Fayetteville. The bottled water offered in the rooms comes from Berkeley Springs State Park. Even the mattresses are manufactured in Huntington, by Imperial Bedding.

As part of the ongoing renovations, state park cabins will also get fresh artwork by West Virginia artists. “Gone are the days that we’re hanging Home Interior pictures of Little Bo Peep or whatever,” Redford says. “It’s going to be something really nice.”

Next, the park system is looking at West Virginia furniture manufacturers for chairs and tables in the cabins. “There’s no better way to promote the state of West Virginia than in the West Virginia State Park lodge,” Redford says.

The partnership with Homer Laughlin is natural because the china company has a similar commitment to promoting West Virginia. “They take pride in keeping things local,” says Blatchford, who has since retired from his job as Homer Laughlin’s general sales manager. “The mission statement of the company is

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PAUL REDFORD
State Parks District Administrator

just like any other mission statement: We’re in business to make a value product at a very reasonable price. But the mission statement goes on to say ‘providing jobs in the Upper Ohio Valley.’ They have stuck to that mission statement all these years. So any time that we could do something for the state, we do.”