

'MISTER, CAN YOU TELL ME WHERE THIS ROAD GOES?'

by Mack McCormick



SUNDAY MORNING: A brush arbor 'sing' in Stone County, Arkansas.
Photograph by Mack McCormick.

Hughes, Arkansas.

It's just about dusk.

Two men are standing on the porch of a small grocery store, telling things to a stranger.

"You'll probably find lots around here who do such things as make their own hominy. But I wouldn't know just who—"

"And there's some make wine for themselves," the other man put in.

"That's that scuppernon wine. They go out in a thicket and get these wild grapes and use them . . . but those grapes don't come in season till next fall."

The other man nodded. "That's just the same as going out and picking these wild greens like water-

cross and poke salit." He turned to the stranger. "If you come back in the right time of year I could carry you out in the bottoms and show you how to find some of the best food you'd ever put in your mouth."

A third man joined them, adding what he could to answer the stranger's questions.

"You're looking for people who *do* things, is that what?"

One of the men snapped his fingers, saying, "That fellow that makes John boats—what was his name?"

They glanced at one another. No one knew his name or what had become of him.

"I think he moved off somewhere," one said.

The talk covered a dozen or more possibilities. Mention was made of a lady who passes time making toys for children and of an herb doctor and of a garrulous fellow who tells an hour-long account of a wildcat chase. The conversation touched on a man who makes sorghum molasses and on a blacksmith and on house parties where youngsters make their own music with homemade instruments.

The talk continually verged on possibilities but somehow shied away from anything more definite. It never quite offered a lead or a set of directions to someone who might be induced to go to Washington this summer.

It looked like a dry run.

Goodnights and good wishes were passed around. The stranger walked down the steps and started along the road.

He was about thirty feet away when one of the men called after him, "Of course—there's that fellow out toward Forrest City that makes baskets."

The stranger stopped.

"He's right out there, about three miles down the road."

"What sort of baskets?"

"Those old time cotton-picking baskets. It's a man named Tim Sparks makes those."

"What kind of house would I look for?"

"You can't miss it. It's a white house on the left-hand side. You'll see a big post in front of his place where he splits the oak he uses. . . . He just weaves those baskets with his hands. It's amazing to me to watch it."

That conversation took place one evening last November. It's typical. And it's part of what might be offered in answer to the questions that come as people visit the Festival of American Folklife.

How do they get all this together? Where do they find the people?

If the undertaking is to represent, well and fully, the life and diversity and tradition of a state like Arkansas, where do they begin?

The answer, quite simply, is this: They go knocking on doors.

They ask questions. They go where the answers take them.

They talk to newspaper editors and deputy sheriffs and people in the state capitol and they talk to three men on the porch of a country grocery store.

And they begin, each of them, by asking questions of themselves:

Wonder if we can find someone who knows that classic bit of Americana with the lines

I read the evening paper until at last
I saw—Ten thousand men were wanted
in the State of Arkansas.

And then what about the song about that train that runs straight as the crow flies, the one that goes

“Flying Crow” takes water in Texarkana,
heads out for Ashdown . . .
“Flying Crow” got a red and a green
light behind
The red means trouble—the green
means a rambling mind!

Or could we find a team that can do that dialogue with the familiar punch line. “That road don’t go nowhere—it just lays right there.”

Each one marshals his questions, and finds there’s too much to be learned, too much to ask, too much to wonder about:

Are there lumber-loading contests down around El Dorado?

What about rope tricksters and rodeo riders up at Conway?

And what of the Swiss community at Altus?

What will Helena offer? Dumas? Search? Hope? Jonesboro?

Who around Harrison makes acorn coffee and ties his fences with vine ropes?

What of tales of Stackolee and men who can Hew timbers with a broadax?

What of Ozark fiddling families and Delta bluesmen—are they to be found?

What of a congregation with one great soaring voice?

Is there a chairmaker, a knifemaker, a quiltmaker or a man whose hands can shape a barrel?

Are there ragtime piano players in Texarkana—Scott Joplin’s hometown? Is there a blues band in West Memphis? Or a western swing combo in Fort Smith?

What became of the Pearl Dickson who recorded “Little Rock Blues” in 1928, and what of the Arkansas Barefoot Boys who recorded that piece “Benton County Hog Thief?”

What of the roots of such people as Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Johnny Cash? What’s to be found in their home communities?

What of some kids who play hambone?

Is there a gaggle of ladies who’d like to come and cook a church supper for thousands?

What of the storytelling families that Richard Dorson found in Pine Bluff?

And what of the mountain people who gave Vance Randolph his four-volume treasury of songs?

Is there a puppet show? Or a group of clog-dancers?

Are there adults who play marbles and old men who while their time playing croquet in the town square and children whose sly fingers will twist a bit of string into a “cat’s cradle” and is there a horny-handed fellow who splices cables for the Mississippi River boats?

In a bountiful state like Arkansas, there are too

many questions. Only some of them can be answered.

You knock on doors. You talk to people and they tell you about their neighbors. And you go and talk to them about spending the Fourth of July in Washington.

Gradually it comes together.

The questions are merely words, but the answers they bring are the people themselves—those who journey this long way to sketch for us a picture of Arkansas folklife.

Mrs. Grace L. Wilson and her granddaughter; Marvell, Arkansas. Putting finishing touches on a recently completed quilt.

Photo by Mack McCormick.

