

# FOLKLIFE IN KENTUCKY

Lynwood Montell

*In the Appalachian South, Kentucky led in the establishment and proliferation of revival institutions using folk traditions in education and economic development. The Fireside Industries, launched by Berea College President William Frost in 1893, still enable Berea students to pay for their education through broom tying, woodworking, and weaving. Proposals for elementary schools based on the Berea example led to the founding in 1902 of the Hindman Settlement School. Here native folk music and craft training were combined with basic education, sewing, and cooking classes.*

*It was in August 1917 at the Pine Mountain Settlement School in Harlan County that the noted English folksong collectors, Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles first saw the Kentucky running set, an Appalachian survival of the British contra dance or reel. Jean Ritchie and her sisters were educated at Hindman School. Perhaps the earliest southern singer of mountain songs on the New York concert stage was John Jacob Niles; and pioneer folk festival organizers, Sarah Gertrude Knott, Annabel Morris Buchanan, and Jean Thomas are Kentucky women.*

*The Festival of American Folklife, while recognizing the importance of the craft and music revivals, has emphasized survivals of cultural traditions. (It is not always possible to distinguish between the two.) We cannot celebrate Kentucky folk traditions without acknowledging the innovative roles of institutions and individuals within the Commonwealth whose influences are felt in many parts of the world.*

Ralph Rinzler  
Festival Director

The dominant folk culture strains in Kentucky are of English, Scots-Irish and African ancestry. Every portion of the state exudes characteristics that bear the imprint of ideas which were inherited from early immigrants to the New World. The character of folksong, folktale, and legend repertoires attest to this, and language survivals are readily discernible in most parts of the state.

The Anglo-Saxon blanket by no means covers every bed in the state. There are large clusters of Afro-Americans in urban areas. Black people comprise a sizeable percentage of the population in Louisville and Lexington and are also dispersed across Kentucky in every county seat.

Scattered colonies of Swiss, Italians, and Welsh are found in Kentucky, mainly in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. Germans left indelible imprints in Louisville and western sectors of the state. And Fancy Farm, a Jackson Purchase settlement founded by English Catholics in the 1830s, is now famous for its traditional fall political picnic, which kicks off every statewide political race.

The mountains of eastern Kentucky are virtually synonymous with early folklore collecting in the United States. Cecil Sharp's work in 1917-1918 resulted in the richest single collection of ballads and songs from Appalachia, but even before Sharp's visit, Kentucky gave up many of its folksongs and tunes to industrious teachers and students associated with the mountain settlement schools. Their

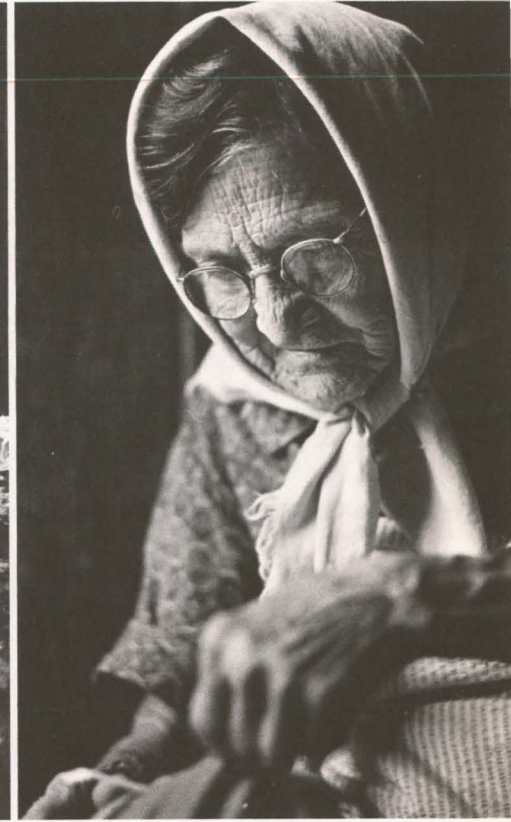
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*William McClure makes bowls in his tobacco barn in Mt. Vernon, Kentucky. Photo by Jan Faul.*



*Mrs. Francine Alvey of Wax, Kentucky, has been making white oak baskets for over sixty years. Photo by David Sutherland.*

collections have never been equaled, and stand as priceless documents attesting to a way of life when things were not so complex. With the impetus provided by those early years, folksong collecting continued apace until the outbreak of World War II.

Folk beliefs, superstitions, and folktales claimed their rightful places in the scheme of scholarly folklore collecting in Kentucky by the late 1920s, but they were not accorded an equal status with folksongs, tunes, and dances in those early years. None of the important tale collections appeared in print prior to 1950. These, too, came entirely from the mountain areas.

Virtually no folk traditions of any variety were bagged prior to mid-century from the Blue Grass region, from northern Kentucky, southcentral Kentucky, or from the entire western portion of the state. With the arrival of professional folklorists at Murray, Western, and the University of Kentucky, the imbalance has been partially righted. Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, with its four full-time folklorists, offers an undergraduate degree program in folklore, and recently instituted the only Masters degree in Folk Studies in the southeastern United States.

Collecting folklore for the sake of accumulating raw texts is no longer stressed as it was in those early years. The preservation of fragile antiques is no longer descriptive of folkloric and folklife fieldwork and research. Notice the use of a new word, folklife. The term denotes the whole spectrum of folk traditions from text to context, from songs and

riddles to barns and fences. While earlier collectors focused on verbal materials only, contemporary Kentucky students and scholars of folklife are interested in the total ways of life of those Kentuckians who treasure cultural stability rather than social change. But they are equally interested in "the folk" wherever they may be in a rural or urban setting.

Certain traditional activities which heretofore were ignored by scholars are now considered within the scope of material folk culture and life style research. Thus folklife scholars read relevance into the historic patterns of action and behavior practiced among folk groups, whether such activities weathered the ocean passage or grew up in response to the demands of a harsh and relentless frontier environment. Traditional cooking habits, for example, are alive and vigorous in every part of the Commonwealth. Foods fit for a gourmet are still much in evidence at family reunions, community picnics, and dinners-on-the-ground observed by many rural Kentucky church groups. The butter, home-butchered meats, deviled eggs, pastries, and home-produced vegetables cooked according to time-honored recipes, are as much a part of the folk process as the Nine Patch quilt or the handmade comfort.

Not all folk traditions persist indefinitely. Some existed only as products of their unique roles at a precise time in Kentucky's history. The shivaree, which was the traditional dangerous frolicking after marriages; the Friday afternoon ciphering matches in





*With a practiced hand Mrs. Francine Alvey fills the ribs of a new basket with a tight mesh of split oak. Photo by David Sutherland.*

## BASKETS AND FOLKLIFE IN EDMONSON COUNTY, KENTUCKY

Andy Wallace

rural schools; the party games in lieu of square dances; the candy breakings, corn huskings, and various other frontier social institutions, all have passed from the stage. Any occurrence of these activities today is generally staged for the purpose of depicting a bit of yesterday's life styles.

Stemming from earlier periods in Kentucky's history are many artifacts of material culture which are generally long lived because of traditional skills and materials employed in construction. The observant folklife researcher can hardly avoid noticing houses, barns, corncribs, and other essential architectural forms that reflect the cultural heritage of their builders in the same way that folk speech, songs, and legends do. Persons traveling across the state from one region to another are likely to remark on the clustering of building types on the culture landscape: "Aren't the tobacco barns here in Western Kentucky rather tall and skinny?" or "Notice how a few of the barns here in the Bluegrass are built against a bank," or "Wonder if all mining camps have two-story shotgun houses?"

Kentucky's regional folk houses and barns and other forms of artistic and functional craftsmanship are symbols of honest and exacting work, and of the daring and resourcefulness of pioneer forefathers whose legacy reaches into the present. We can speculate that in our age of rapid technological change, some people feel a need to reach back, to rediscover continuity in their culture, to keep their balance in the present through reminders of the past.

For some 175 years Haskel Skaggs' kin have lived in Edmonson County, Kentucky. "Hack" works as a guide at Mammoth Cave National Park, which now comprises about half the county, and employs many of the natives of the area. It's an area rich in traditional lore of all types and remained fairly isolated up until the Second World War, largely because of a lack of adequate roads. The county is split almost evenly in half by the Green River, and no bridge spanned it until a few years ago, with ferries carrying essential traffic up to that time. The population of the area has been stable for over a century, and many of the families have been in Edmonson County since the first settlement. The people are predominately Scots-Irish, and were all English speaking when they arrived. They are traditional, conservative people, in the best sense of the word.

I was lucky enough to have Hack Skaggs and his wife Bertha introduce me to a number of rich tradition bearers in the Mammoth Cave area. I had called at Mammoth Cave National Park to let them know that I was in the area on a field trip for the Festival of American Folklife. The Superintendent suggested that I might take Hack along with me, as he was familiar with most everyone in the county. It proved a fortuitous choice.

Hack and Bertha Skaggs have never taken a course in folklore; I doubt they know precisely what the term means, but they knew what I meant by "traditional", "old-time", "handed down." For a week we visited with neighbors, relatives and friends and

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