

Regional America

"Regional America" cuts across all the other sections of the Festival by looking at the assemblages of different peoples scattered across our land. In this area, therefore, you will see working people and children, ethnics and Blacks and Native Americans brought together to celebrate not so much their individual identities but the space in which they all live together, their home-place within the wide American land.

A region is a hard thing to create on the Mall; it is an abstract made up of a thousand concrete details: the lay of the land, the slant of the sunlight, the way a person says "Good morning," the particular records on the jukeboxes in the diner, the depth of the topsoil, the smell of Sunday dinner. So in Regional America we bring together the people who live in a particular place and ask them to demonstrate the arts and the skills that make it possible to live in that place and which most powerfully characterize it. It is the sense of home that we try to capture here.



This walrus was crafted by Bill Holmes of Cambridge, Idaho, who is a Regional America participant during Week 6 (The Great West, July 21-25). Photo by Suzi Jones, Area Coordinator, Regional America

Regional Traditions in American Folk Architecture

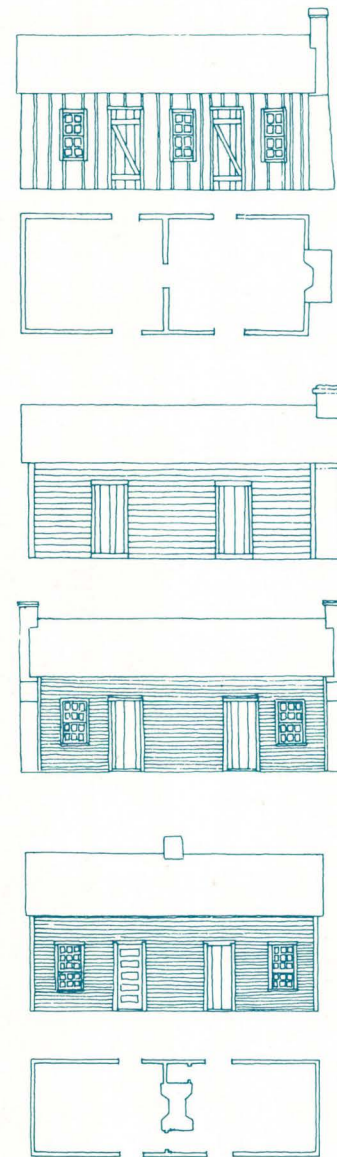
by John Michael Vlach

How can we measure the spatial limits of a tradition? When a group of people share a similar way of life, political or geographical dividing lines are of little consequence. A clear demonstration of this fact is found in Indiana. The southern third of the state is culturally part of the Upland South. The rest of Indiana follows a midwestern pattern except for the fringe area near Lake Michigan which is northern in orientation. The mighty Ohio river, Indiana's southern boundary, is usually considered the northern limit of the South. Yet, we can find significant elements of southern culture—modes of log cabin construction, agricultural practices, song style—120 miles north of Louisville.

What signs or guides can we then use to show us where one culture ends and another begins? Any item may be used to describe a region if it appears consistently throughout the entire area. The distribution of a folksong or a dialect term, for example, may very likely approximate the limits of a region. Architectural forms can also be used as an index of regionality and have the distinct advantage that houses and barns are not often carried outside of a region in the way that a song or word can be. Buildings are fixed on the land and can be easily mapped. Their distribution patterns are probably the clearest statement we will ever be able to produce of America's folk regions.

Three regions are revealed in the variations of one folk house type alone. Known to scholars as an *I-house*, this dwelling is, in plan, two-rooms wide, one-room deep, and two-stories high. It was introduced into the United States from England in the colonial period and hence has been known from

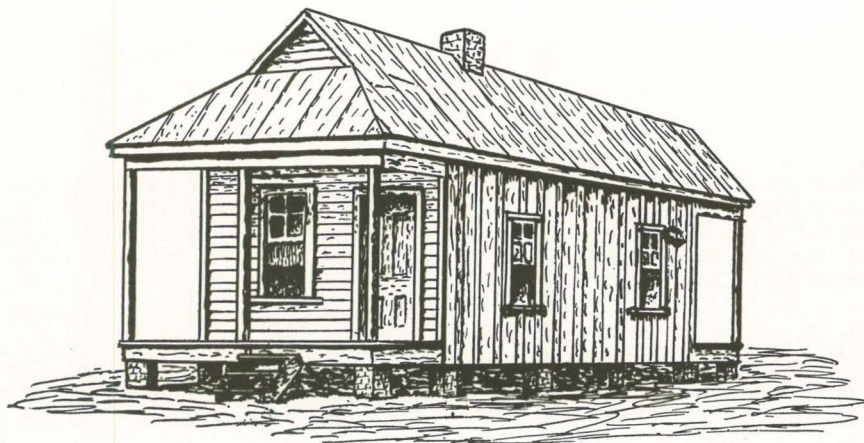
John Michael Vlach, a graduate of the University of California, received his masters and doctorate degrees from Indiana University. His special interests are material culture and folksong and he has done extensive fieldwork in Africa, Haiti, and the Southern United States. Presently he is on the faculty at the University of Maryland.



Double Pen House of the Lowland South—a legacy of the plantation system and sure sign of the Lowland South.

Maine to Georgia since the 17th century. In New England the house is built with a massive central chimney. The Mid-Atlantic version has its fireplaces set flush with the gable walls, while southern I-houses have gable fire places set completely outside the walls. Southern examples also have large gallery-like front porches. This feature contrasts markedly with New England houses which often have no porches at all. When traveling from Boston to Savannah one needs only to watch for changes in chimney placement to know when he is entering a new cultural region. Other house types eventually became more popular than the I-houses in the coastal and Piedmont areas but by that time the I-house plan had been carried into the then Appalachian frontier. It remains today the most prominent material expression of Upland South culture.

Buildings based on images of Greek temples were initially the height of sophisticated architectural design shortly after American independence, but by the early 1800's the Greek Revival style was having an influence on all levels of architecture. Decorative details were draped over the outside of traditional building plans. Cape Cod houses, for example, were transformed by the addition of the cornice and eaves decoration into "classic cottages." In New England, upstate New York, northern Pennsylvania, and eventually the entire Great Lakes area, the attraction to classically-styled houses was so great that folk builders developed an imitation of high style *temple form houses*. The folk version typically has a story-and-a-half or two-story central element whose gable faces the front, which is flanked by two smaller wings to either side. A frequently encountered sub-type of the temple form house has a wing added only to one side. This particular variation is commonplace west of the Alleghenies. While Greek revival influences can be found in the folk architecture of every region in the United States, this style clearly had its strongest impact in the North.



Shotgun House—drawn from Afro-American origins, brought to New Orleans at the beginning of the 19th century, it is a strong indicator of the regional impact of cultural migration.

It provided that region with a new “democratic” image for housing and the temple form house is still a clear index of northern folk culture.

The South possesses a number of house types: one- and two-story Georgian houses, I-houses, hall-and-parlor houses, “dog-trots.” The most wide-spread building is also the one most commonly found in rural areas. It is a one-story, two-room house with two front doors. Known to scholars as a *double-pen house*, this dwelling type evolved from the *single-pen cabins* of the mountain and coastal settlements. This developmental link is underscored by the fact that during the slave era double-pen structures were used on plantations to house two families. This simple rectangular house often has a large front porch, a shed-roofed kitchen across the back, and other additional storage sheds attached to the rear of the building. Most double-pen houses are built of frame and today are commonly covered with a brownish yellow tar paper patterned with imitation bricks. These simple houses are one of the legacies of the plantation system and can serve the knowledgeable traveler as a cultural sign post that he has reached the Lowland South.

While most regions encompass rather

large areas, the regional concept can also be applied to tightly confined zones such as the rivers of America’s heartlands. The banks of the Mississippi, Ohio, and Missouri rivers are noteworthy for the presence of *shotgun houses*. Every town from New Orleans to St. Louis has an aggregation of these thin, narrow buildings. If we then turn east and move up the Ohio, we will find shotgun houses well beyond Cincinnati. In like manner we can also trace these house types along the Missouri as far as St. Joseph. The shotgun house was brought to New Orleans at the beginning of the 19th century from Haiti by free black refugees. River travel was at that time the primary mode of migration and hence the diffusion of cultural influences from Louisiana follow the meandering path of the Mississippi. While the shotgun is of major importance because of its Afro-American origins, it is also a prime indicator of the regional impact of cultural migration.

Since architecture is the totality of a built environment, it comprises many different kinds of structures and uses of space including bridges, fences, outbuildings, town plans, and even garden plots and fields. The variety in each of these categories could help us to delineate different cultural regions. The examples already given should be enough proof that it is important to observe carefully the ordinary architecture around us. Then as we cruise along some interstate highway, we might know where we are culturally, as well as when we’ll reach the next Howard Johnson’s.

Earl Collins: Hoedown Fiddler Takes the Lead

Barbara LaPan Rahm, editor

He was a man of his generation, of his time, and of his region, and his life story follows a classic pattern.

Earl Collins was born in Douglass County, Missouri in 1911. In 1917 his family moved to Oklahoma, where they share-cropped and Earl augmented their income by playing fiddle at square dances through the bitter early years of the depression. He married in 1931 and he and his wife moved to Los Angeles, California in 1935 where Earl turned his hand to any job he could get: hod carrier, truck driver, trash hauler, machinist, welder, mechanic. He retired in 1969 because of his always fragile health. For years he tried to convert his skill as a fiddler into a money-making occupation. He never made it, and in 1949, he put his fiddle away and did not play again until 1965, when his sons persuaded him to take it up again. Earl’s extraordinary technique and musicianship made him a star on the old time fiddler’s circuit in California; almost every weekend until his death in 1975 he played at one or another local contest or jam session. In the following, Earl tells his story in his own words, which have been excerpted from a series of taped interviews conducted by Barbara LaPan Rahm.

My grandfather fiddled, and his father fiddled. There’s been fiddling through the Collins’s since . . . I don’t know how far the generation goes back. In the summertime my father always went out on the front porch and sat in a chair. I’ve heard people tell him, “We heard you play fiddle last night, and we could tell just exactly what you was playing.” And they lived two miles away. That’s how far a fiddle would carry. Nice clear climate, you know.

Those springs in Missouri that come out of the hills are colder than the ice cubes you

get out of that box. That water is so cold that you can’t walk in it. Clean pure. You know, the water’s so clear down there that it can be 25 feet deep, you can throw a nickel in and tell which is up, heads or tails. But it’s mostly just hills and rocks. Just rolling hills. Just up one hill and down, up another and down. You know, Missouri is made out of rocks. I don’t care what kind of rock you want, what size, you can find it. Rocks seemed to grow up out of the ground. We’d



“It’s a touch on the strings and smooth bowing that makes a fiddler.”

load them in the wagon and haul them off so that we could farm the land next year, and next year there’s the rocks back up there again. If you could find five acres that you could put a little corn on or a little wheat or something, why, you were doing pretty good. They don’t farm any more down there.

When I was seven, like I said, we moved to Wynnewood, Oklahoma, stayed there a year and went to Shawnee. Shawnee’s an awful poor country. If it wasn’t for that Tinker Air Base up there, Shawnee would fold up the sidewalks and quit. See, they just farmed Oklahoma to death. Cotton and corn, cotton and corn, cotton and corn. The first thing you knew there was no fertile ground and you couldn’t make cotton or corn either. I picked cotton, hon. I would

Barbara LaPan Rahm came from California to the Folklife Festival as Program Coordinator of Regional America. She has her M.A. in Anthropology from California State University at Northridge where she specialized in folklore studies.