Tennessee Folklife: Three Rooms Under One Roof

by Robert Cogswell

"The Three Grand Divisions" is Tennessee's official designation for the diversity within its borders. Referring to East, Middle, and West Tennessee, it offers a suspiciously simple and balanced scheme for partitioning "The Volunteer State." Unlike the drawing of many political boundaries, however, this division corresponds to real differences in cultural geography and sectional identity, for Tennessee consists of three distinct folk regions, arranged symmetrically almost as if by conscious design.

Tennessee's regional alignment might be compared to a recurrent floorplan in Southern folk architecture, in which many houses are constructed with a series of three rooms joined side-by-side. This form is evident in the earliest dogtrot houses, which feature an open breezeway between two log pens, as well as in subsequent central-hall house types. Just as the architectural plan defined the spaces in which much of Tennessee folklife has been lived, so the state itself, in bracketing the arc of the Tennessee River Valley, houses three cultural rooms in a common structure.

Like the roof of a dogtrot house running between two large stone chimneys, Tennessee is culturally situated between the dominant pillars of Southern folklife—to the east, the upland traditions of the Appalachian Mountains; and to the west, the folkways of the Deep South. Tennessee's regions form a continuum between these extremes, shaped by geography, settlement patterns, and cultural adaptation during the state's formative years.

East Tennessee was populated first, as the massive trans-Appalachian migrations beginning in the late 1700s brought settlers down the diagonal tributaries of the Tennessee River to its great eastern valley. Along these early arteries and in remote corners, like the coves of the Smoky Mountains, Scotch-Irish and Germanic traditions spawned archetypal Appalachian culture. Rugged terrain and relative isolation fostered a pattern of small, self-sufficient farms, close identification with kin and immediate community, and resourceful application of traditional skills. Elements of European folk heritage survived in the practices of midwifery and folk medicine, household handcrafts, and British ballads and instrumental music.

To the west, highland settlers and their folklife penetrated the Cumberland Plateau, which forms a geographical transition zone with Middle Tennessee. This broad escarpment presented an obstacle to successive waves of settlers, many of whom reached more hospitable expanses by river, following the route of the Tennessee's "Big Bend" through northern Alabama. Tidewater and Piedmont influences from the Carolinas and Virginia loomed stronger in Middle

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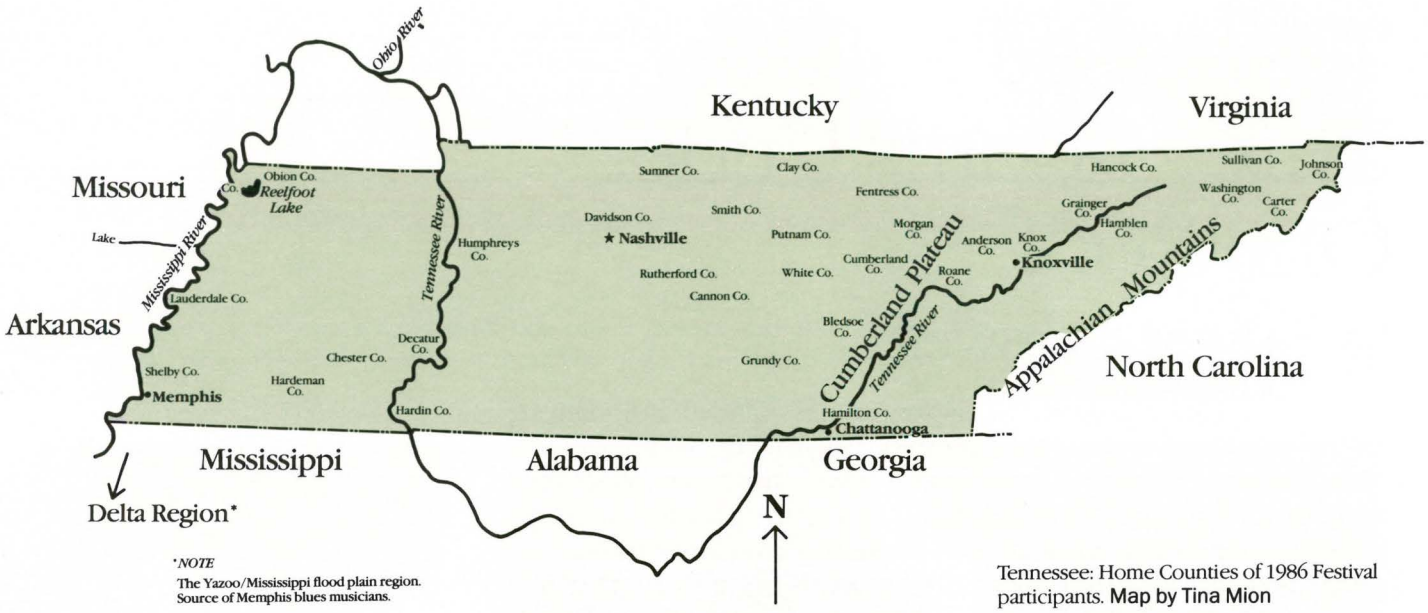


Tennessee: Home Counties of 1986 Festival participants. **Map by Tina Mion**

"I-House" on farmstead near Lynchburg, Moore County. **Photo by Joe Clark, HBSS**

Tennessee dogtrot house built on Belle Meade Plantation near Nashville in 1809. This photo, made ca. 1890, shows "Uncle" Bob Green, former slave and renowned horse trainer. **Photo courtesy Tennessee State Library and Archives**

Tennessee, where the Central Basin developed more stratified cultural affinities with Kentucky's Bluegrass region. Cash crop agriculture, tied to downriver trade, emerged on this prime farmland and on the rolling elevations of the Highland Rim that surround it. The region became known for the raising of stock, especially mules and horses, and, in the bow of the Cumberland River, for the cultivation of dark-fired tobacco, which differs from the burley grown elsewhere in the state.

The northward course of the Tennessee River marks the boundary of the Western Tennessee region, and with the Mississippi at its opposite flank, this region has felt varied cultural currents flowing between inland waterways and the Gulf. Its swampy bottoms and flat alluvial fields resemble the Delta region, to which it is culturally and ecologically linked. The territory opened for settlement in 1818, and the quick spread of cotton economy and the plantation system brought West Tennessee the state's strongest infusion of Afro-American culture. With the later swelling of its Black urban population, and the vibrant activity in the Beale Street entertainment district, the commercial hub of Memphis earned a claim as the "Home of the Blues." As tenant farming succeeded slavery, Black and white traditions maintained a rural coexistence. In peripheral areas, river occupations and subsistence agriculture lent diversity to regional folklife.

In the classic dogtrot house, interior doors facilitated easy and constant movement between rooms; similarly, despite their differences, Tennessee's regional rooms have shared traditions and exchanged cultural traffic. While certain traditions are unique to each region—Reelfoot Lake's "stump jumper" boats in the west, the "rolley hole" marble game of upper Cumberland counties, or the "Old Harp" sings and cantilever barns of East Tennessee—many folklife traits appear in all three. Tennessee's early reputation as the "Hog and Hominy State," for instance, grew out of preferences for both pork and corn which are still reflected in traditional agriculture and foodway patterns across the state. Fundamentalist folk religion, trapping and root-digging, and the making of sorghum molasses and moonshine liquor are among other general Southern features found throughout Tennessee. Even characteristics typical of particular sections can often be considered statewide cultural properties as well. For example, commercial fishing lore and traditions of Black music—both strongest in the west—have a secondary presence in East Tennessee. Although Anglo-American oak basketmaking is most closely associated with Appalachian folklife, Middle Tennessee's Cannon County may be the largest stronghold of this craft tradition in the entire nation. The craft has practitioners in West Tennessee as well. In this way, although from varied origins, through cultural sharing the occupants of Tennessee's rooms are part of an extended Southern family.

Just as dogtrot and other older folk house types have experienced changes over the years, with breezeways being enclosed, new windows created, and additions and siding applied, Tennessee's folk culture has experienced alteration and modernization. The process was underway even as present regions were being shaped. The displacement of Native American populations, culminating in the Cher-

Chairmaker Willie Doss and Ruth Doss, Jamestown, Fentress County. **Photo by Robert Fulcher**

Lexie Leonard in a traditional "stumpjumper" nets a fish on one of his snag lines, Reelfoot Lake, Lake County. **Photo by Greg Hansen and Janet Norris, Weldon Library**

Split-oak basketmaker Emanuel Dupre of Chickasaw, Hardeman County. **Photo by Robert Jeffrey, Tennessee State Parks Folklife Project**

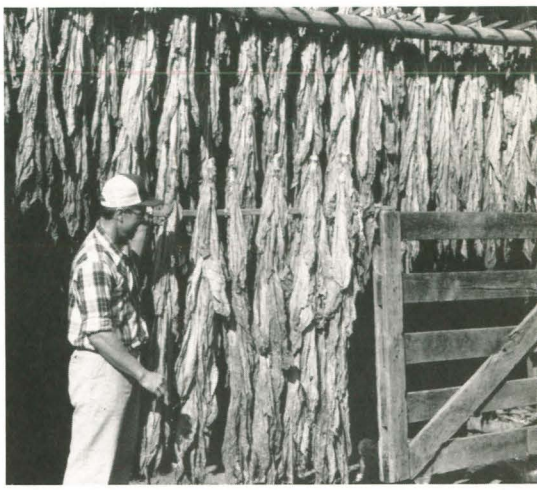
okee "Trail of Tears" removal to Oklahoma in the 1830s, diminished the imprint of once-thriving Indian cultures, although their contributions lived on in place names, routes of travel, and more subtle aspects of traditional know-how.

Shifts in technology and commerce continually influenced Tennessee's folklife patterns, as versatility in traditional skills gave way to occupational specialties. During the 19th century, extraction industries profoundly altered folk practices in many areas. Timber trades assumed importance across the state, as log rafting linked secluded woodlands with regional markets. Broadaxes that once fashioned cabins and barns were put to work on railroad ties, and folklife gradually embraced mechanization, as sawmills cropped up everywhere. Coal mining changed much of East Tennessee, as ridges were deserted for company towns and European ethnic enclaves took root in the mountains. Elsewhere, marble and limestone quarrying and other mineral work emerged as focal points of local life.

Change has accelerated in the 20th century, some of it through conscious interventions in folkways. Especially in East Tennessee, settlement schools and other agents of social change sought to bring tenacious aspects of traditional life in line with national standards. Depression-era programs of road improvement and public works addressed similar goals, and the Tennessee Valley Authority harnessed the state's waterways and electrified its homes. Park and lake development encouraged outside contact through tourism, while resettlement programs were imposed that separated families from ancestral lands.

National trends have also increasingly affected the surface of regional life. Manufacturing has emerged as a common source of livelihood, from the pencil industry of Middle Tennessee's cedar glades to the widespread textile and garment plants that have drawn rural women into factory occupations. Since corporate America's rush to the Sun Belt, some Tennesseans supplement high-technology and factory work with weekend agriculture. Most full-time farmers have been forced to diversify crops. For example, burley tobacco growers across the state now face a potentially new way of life with the eminent demise of the domestic tobacco market. Jobs in Knoxville, Chattanooga, Nashville, Memphis, and smaller regional cities lure young people from the surrounding countryside, but hometown ties remain strong. Adding to their older European ethnic communities, these urban centers have in recent decades absorbed an array of new immigrant groups, most notably Asian, Middle Eastern, and Hispanic. The growth of Nashville and Memphis as recording centers has both tapped and influenced regional folk music, making Tennessee a crossroads in the national synthesis of traditional and popular performing arts.

The log walls of Tennessee's folk house are no longer exposed, but its three-part traditional structure is still apparent. The rooms contain elements of acquired regional character, common heritage, and recent experience, reflecting and shaping life for the Tennesseans within.



Mike Bell in his tobacco-curing barn, Hamblen County, Appalachian region. **Photo by Gilbert Rhodes, Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service**

Suggested reading

Federal Writers' Project. *The WPA Guide to Tennessee.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986 [1939].

Goehring, Eleanor E. *Tennessee Folk Culture: An Annotated Bibliography.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.

Hulan, Richard. "Middle Tennessee and the Dogtrot House." *Pioneer America* 5(July 1975):37-46.

Wolfe, Charles K. *Tennessee Strings: The Story of Country Music in Tennessee.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977.

Suggested recordings

Free Hill: A Sound Portrait of a Rural Afro-American Community (Tennessee Folklore Society, TFS-107).

The Hicks Family: A Cumberland Singing Tradition (Tennessee Folklore Society, TFS-104).

Historical Ballads of the Tennessee Valley (Tennessee Folklore Society, TFS-105).

Tennessee: The Folk Heritage, Volume 1: The Delta (Tennessee Folklore Society, TFS-102); Volume 2: The Mountains (TFS-103).

Suggested films

Alex Stewart: Cooper, by Thomas Burton and Jack Shrader. 14 min. color, 16mm. Tennessee Department of Conservation, Nashville, Tennessee.

Hamper McBee: Raw Mash, by Blane Dunlap and Sol Korine. 30 min. color videotape. Pie Productions, Atlanta, Georgia.

Showdown at the Hoedown, by Blane Dunlap and Sol Korine. 60 min. color videotape. Pie Productions, Atlanta, Georgia.

The Uncle Dave Macon Show, by Blane Dunlap and Sol Korine. 60 min. color videotape. Pie Productions, Atlanta, Georgia.