

Tributaries

Tributaries

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EDITOR

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Editor's Note

This offering of *Tributaries* appears between Y2K and 2001, the year that is considered by many as the true beginning of the millennium. Our millennial issue will not depart in character from the first two issues in a special effort to commemorate this arbitrary time horizon. This is because *Tributaries* already reflects upon past and present cultural traditions and the processes that drive them. The big difference about this issue of *Tributaries* is the method of its production. The first two issues were funded by project grants from the Alabama State Council on the Arts to the Alabama Folklife Association. This issue is also funded by ASCA but as a “cooperative venture” with the AFA. In other words, we believe the journal to be so valuable to the public that we have foregone the competitive grants-making process to ensure its publication.

Tributaries No. 3 offers a long-awaited essay from cultural geographer GREGORY JEANE on the origins of the American graveshelter. Dr. Jeane, one of the nation's foremost authorities on the cemetery landscape, presents an alternative theory advocating a European origin for this folk architectural form. DAVID CAMPBELL relates the story of a group of Alabama folk musicians who became the focus of early public folklife inquiry. CAROLYN WARE profiles the University of Southern Mississippi's folklife research project in the Piney Woods section of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. PATRICK MCINTYRE brings us back to earth with a community-specific look at geophagy (dirt eating), one of the South's most misunderstood traditional practices.

Our reviewers offer in-depth profiles of some new documentary products. We have also added membership information about the Alabama Folklife Association and the documentary products that it sells. I appreciate the many suggestions by the AFA board and members and the efforts of Randall Williams as copyeditor for this issue. Vinnie Jones, the administrative assistant at the Alabama State Council on the Arts, also assisted in the production of this issue.

As always, we welcome suggestions, comments and contributions for the next issue.

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Southern Graveshelters and English Lych-gates: The Search for Culture Trait Origins

Gregory Jeane

Few American cultural landscapes are as intriguing as that of the Southern folk cemetery. It is an integral part of the Upland South culture as defined by Fred Kniffen and Milton B. Newton; the Upland South was the dominant culture type that had spread across the South by 1825 (Newton 1974). A material culture haven, the folk cemetery possesses artifacts of commemoration and memorialization that provide a powerful statement about local sentiment toward and respect for the dead. The folk burial landscape is in part characterized by hilltop location, scraped ground, mounded graves sited on an east-west axis, highly personalized and emotive forms of decoration, and cults of piety (annual rituals such as graveyard workday, decoration day, and homecoming which bring the community together in remembrance of the dead). Among the more expressive of the decorative artifacts is the graveshelter, a house-form structure of small to modest proportions commonly erected over individual graves (Figure 1).

There is little consensus on the nomenclature of the house-form structure built over graves. It is variously referred to as a grave shed, grave house [grave-house, gravehouse], lattice hut, grave-box, spirit house, and grave shelter (Jeane 1969:41; Price 1973:9; Swanton 1928:397; Stora 1971:145; Skinner 1921:261; Ball 1977:30; Sexton 1991:31; Frantom 1995:21; Jordan 1980:250; White 1952:261; Bushnell 1920:34; Cozzens 1972:8; Crawford 1989:19; Bible 1975:107). Each term connotes something different as a material artifact, and terminology has been problematical. First using the term “grave shed” in early work on Southern cemeteries (Jeane 1969), I later adopted “graveshelter” (Jeane 1978:900; 1987:62) as a more appropriate term. In much the same



FIGURE 1.

Graveshelters, Franklin County, Alabama. Note the larger of the two shelters covers two graves. (Photo by William Strong)



FIGURE 2.

Multiple graveshelters, Fort Dale Cemetery, Butler County, Alabama—1930s. The only shelter in this group still standing is the white graveshelter in the foreground. (Courtesy Library of Congress, HABS Collection)

way that the Association for Gravestone Studies has championed the more generic term “gravemarker” to encompass the variety of materials with which a grave might be memorialized (a tombstone, for example, is not an accurate descriptor of a wooden marker), the use of “graveshelter” has enough flexibility to encompass a variety of structures, including those of house-form. The traditional graveshelter is a rectangular, wooden structure with gables at the head and foot of the grave. The roof would have split shingles, construction would use mortise-and-tenon jointing, and the sides would be enclosed with a picket fence. The typical structure would be four to six feet wide, seven to eight feet long, and approximately eight feet high (Figure 2). While few traditional structures are built today, the practice of building a protective shelter continues. Contemporary graveshelters, however, are seldom house-form, are metal, and are more likely to resemble a carport than a house. Thus, gravehouse might be appropriate in describing a folk structure, but the term is inaccurate in describing contemporary structures. Graveshelter is more inclusive, leaving the particulars of description to convey changes in form over time.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: a) to explore when graveshelters became an integral part of the folk tradition in the rural Southern cemetery, b) to challenge some current theories of origin, and c) to suggest other alternatives by which the trait might have established itself in the Upland South. Primary research on the origin of Southern folk cemetery traits has been my work and that of Terry Jordan. While there is much we agree on, we disagree on the origin of two significant traits: scraped ground and graveshelters. I reject the notion that the folk graveshelter is Native American in origin, looking instead to the ancient tradition in the British Isles of using lych-gates, dominantly rectangular, wooden house-form structures at the entrance to churchyards which served the specific function of protecting the corpse and its mourners from the raw elements until a priest arrived to conduct the funeral party into consecrated ground (Figure 3). Like the graveshelter, the lych-gate exists in a variety of forms, has evolved over time, and is decreasing both in usage and in construction.

The Southern practice of building graveshelters is largely past, although one still comes across an occasional structure that shows evidence of recent construction. The graveshelter is widely distributed across the South. Unlike



FIGURE 3.

Lych-gate, Gringley on the Hill, Nottinghamshire, England. Reconstructed lych-gate, circa 1900. (Photo by the author)

the folk cemetery that literally peppers the Southern landscape, the graveshelter has a distribution broad enough to suggest a long history of development and diffusion, but at the same time is erratic enough to eliminate a clearly defined core area from whence it might have diffused to other parts of the Upland South. In many ways it is an enigma.

Because the graveshelter is a form of decoration, the decision to build one is personal, depending upon the tastes and rationale of the individual family. Not every folk cemetery had one, some cemeteries would have one or more scattered across their extents, and the horizon in others would be dominated by a half dozen or more. The Talbert, or Pine Grove, Cemetery in Vernon Parish, Louisiana, for example, contains fifteen graveshelters, certainly one of the largest assemblages of the artifact found in the South (Frantom 1995:29). The common practice of building graveshelters warranted little special attention in Southern communities and, like so many other aspects of our material culture, now begs for explanation.

No systematic regional survey of Southern graveshelters has ever been conducted. Most data is contained in large-scale surveys of specific counties widely dispersed across the region, and no meaningful distribution map exists. The extraordinarily dispersed pattern of occurrence (graveshelters exist from Virginia to Texas and from Kentucky to Florida) does not yield many clues suggesting a common date of origin nor a single explanation for the onset of the practice, but several of the explanations offered do not satisfy. For example, Frantom suggests that the practice is linked to the migration of the timber industry as it moved westward from the Atlantic seaboard (unpublished manuscript, no date). This does not account for the presence of graveshelters in areas where major timber industry activity was not implemented. Thus, it may explain the distribution in Louisiana, but it does not adequately explain the practice for the entire Upland South.

Likewise, Jordan's work on Texas graveyards indicates his preference for an Indian origin for graveshelters (1982:34), and the idea is reiterated in his and Kaups's revisionist text on the backwoods frontier (1989:87). Their argument that Indian influence was generally pervasive does not seem accurate for the realm of mortuary customs. Although some Indian cultures did have house-form mortuary practices, none of the ones who consistently practiced such a tradition, other than the Seminoles and Creeks, were Southern tribes (Watson 1950:102; Ellsworth and Dysart 1981). The Creek tradition of west Florida cannot be authenticated to pre-European contact, and their graveshelters bear a striking resemblance to the most sophisticated forms constructed by whites (Ellsworth and Dysart 1981). The fact that Cherokees practiced the tradition after removal to Oklahoma is not proof they built graveshelters while in the Carolinas and Georgia. To my knowledge, there is no ethnographic evidence or historical descriptions of Cherokee mortuary practices that mention the practice of building graveshelters. That would suggest the practice in Oklahoma was acquired after their migration and might have been influenced by their contacts with whites who practiced the tradition.

At any rate, the most persistent practice of building house-form structures among Native American tribes appears among the Menomini (Powell 1896:239), Chippewa (Levi 1956: 179, 1894; Walker 1950:240) and Ojibway (Jones 1861:99) in the upper Great Lakes region. Even among these Native

Americans there is no indication that the practice was diffused widely among neighboring tribes, much less among whites. In fact, Powell (1896:239) indicates that among the Menomini it is the *Christianized* tribal members who have adopted the building of spirit houses over the graves of their dead. The Native American practice appears too sporadic and contradictory to suggest it as a source for white communities.

Establishing the origin of graveshelters' construction might be easier if sufficient examples of authenticated historic structures still existed. However, the quality of construction varies widely and is often difficult to date accurately. Although an early antebellum origin is likely, it is simply not known how long graveshelters have been constructed across the South. Occasional examples from the mid-nineteenth century have survived in rare instances. And the sophisticated use of mortise-and-tenon joinery suggests that such a technique not only evolved out of folk techniques for house and barn construction, but that the practice was not new by the mid-nineteenth century. The majority of graveshelters still standing do not, however, exhibit sophisticated joinery, even when they can be reasonably authenticated to the mid-19th century. Even then the use of nails, sometimes wrought but more commonly wire, was commonplace. The period from 1880–1930 indicates a “golden age” of construction, based on the number of surviving shelters (Figure 4). Numbers decline during and after the decade of the 1930s.

Two general conditions militate against the survival of graveshelters: the tradition of building in wood and associated poor construction techniques. Considering the high quality of wood-building techniques in folk housing of the early and mid-19th century, the rapid decline in quality of construction is puzzling. Given the availability of requisite skills and the special symbolic nature of the structure, it is puzzling that graveshelters were apparently built hastily, commonly of green wood, and that little effort was made to systematically maintain the structures beyond occasionally replacing the roof. Although the use of mortise and tenon helps to identify the oldest structures, perhaps a first-generation graveshelter form, using green wood would negate the effectiveness of the folk technique. Once the structure deteriorated to the point of collapse, it was seldom ever replaced. On average the longevity of a typical graveshelter appears to be fifty–sixty years. Unless extraordinary care was taken to maintain



FIGURE 4.

Graveshelter with ornamentation, Ballard Freewill Baptist Cemetery, Byrd Community, Marion/Lamar County, Alabama, 1983. (Photo by Joey Brackner)

point beyond salvage and was generally torn down or allowed to collapse. In rare instances relict pieces of graveshelters indicate former existence; all too often, no trace remains (Figure 5). Thus, the survival of a graveshelter earlier than the last quarter of the nineteenth century is rare indeed.

The 1930s are a significant transition for the folk burial landscape. It became increasingly difficult to generate sufficient enthusiasm for the annual cemetery cleaning. The practice of scraping (“cleaning”) grass and weeds from the cemetery was a principal, visible means by which communities expressed their devotion for and respect toward their ancestors. Multiple reprints of newspaper cemetery cleaning notices and occasional editorials bemoaning the community embarrassment of unkempt burial grounds underscore the change.

World War II generated still another hiatus in the practice of local traditions. Spatial and demographic changes occurring prior to the War pale compared to what followed. The broad-based advent of the blacktop road and the automobile in the boom period following the War ushered in a new era for the rural South. Returning veterans commonly did not go back to the family farms, instead taking up residence in the county seats and other “urbanized” locales where they could apply skills and trades acquired in the military toward new careers. Rural communities favoring continuation of the traditional, labor-intensive cults of piety found it increasingly difficult to get enough people to perform the necessary cemetery maintenance. The folk cemetery had come upon hard times, and it never recovered.

The characteristics that identified the folk burial ground changed at such a rapid pace that a new Southern cemetery landscape emerged, one retaining elements of the traditional but incorporating new ideas about appropriate cemetery design and maintenance, largely evolved from urban practices. Although an occasional graveshelter was built, attitudes began to change regarding the appropriateness of such features in the cemetery. As one of the more visible artifacts of the folk cemetery, graveshelters were rarely built after World War II. Thus, the construction of fewer shelters, coupled with the decay and disappearance of historic examples, changed not only the distribution pattern of the feature but the look of the folk cemetery as well.

The question of graveshelter origin is very much an unresolved issue, and I am convinced that it is to Europe, specifically the British Isles, that we must



FIGURE 5.

Graveshelter baseboards, Houston County, Alabama. In many cemeteries no traces remain to indicate the former presence of graveshelters. (Photo by the author)

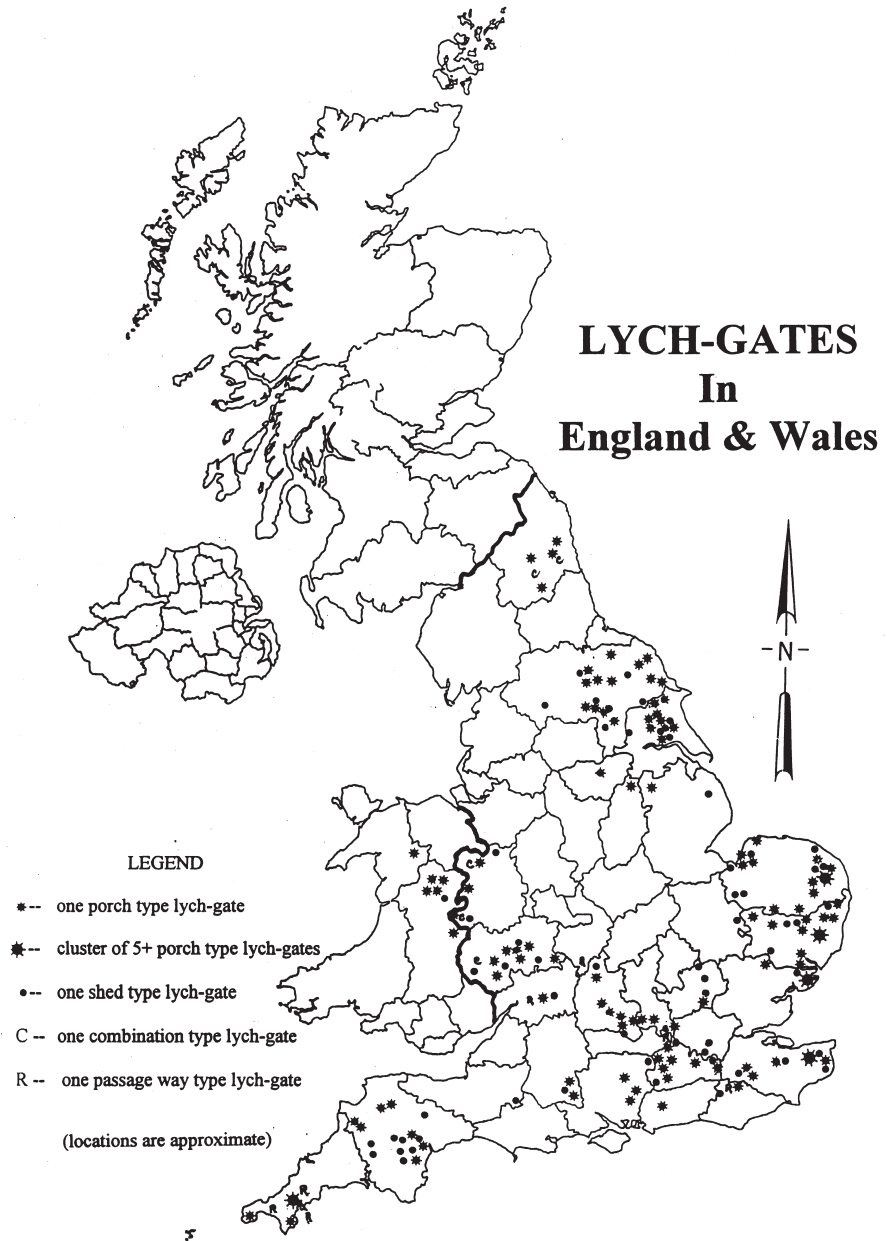
look for the origin of the graveshelter tradition practiced by white Southerners. The lych-gate is a house-form structure long associated with British burial grounds and whose history goes back to at least the seventh century (Encyclopedia Britannica 1911). As with American scholars and the term graveshelter, British scholars have no standard spelling for lych-gate, the term being spelled variously lychgate, lych gate, lych-gate, lichgate, or lich-gate. There does appear to be common agreement on the term's origin, coming into modern usage from the Anglo-Saxon *lich*, or German *leiche*, meaning "corpse." Based on a

field sample of more than 200 gates, the hyphenated spelling “lych-gate” seems preferred whenever the term is used on the gate.

The undeniable “authority” on English lych-gates is Aymer Vallance (1920). Nikolaus Pevsner (1951) is commonly accepted as *the* authority for England’s historic architecture, especially ecclesiastical architecture, but he treated lych-gates somewhat cavalierly, including them only when associated with architecturally significant churches. This bias notwithstanding, no published works come close to matching the scope of Vallance’s pioneering efforts to classify lych-gates, and his primary interest was not in lych-gates at all but in classifying church crosses—a far older and more prolific religious symbol on the English landscape. Nonetheless, he considered lych-gates worthy of note because of their antiquity and geographic distribution and felt some effort to classify them justified. Terminology used to describe lych-gates in most publications uses Vallance’s classification scheme, though seldom crediting him for his efforts. Vallance recognizes four types of lych-gates (1920: 164): a) porch—roof ridge has the same axis as the passage way; b) shed—roof ridge is transverse to the axis of the passage way; c) combination—two roof ridges intersect one another at right angles [a rare type]; and d) room—where the passage way is incorporated into a church house or other building. The porch-type lych-gate is most significant as an archetype for the Southern graveshelter.

The tradition of building lych-gates survives in the British Isles, particularly in England and Wales. Lych-gates are noted for Scotland, though how common there is not known. In addition to new lych-gates, and frequent repair of historic ones, the occasional circular, octagonal, pyramidal or square, or other shape is encountered reflecting modern architectural rendering of an ancient tradition.

Just how common are lych-gates? According to Friar (1996:vii), two-thirds of Great Britain’s Grade I historic buildings are ecclesiastical and account for better than 16,000 churches, many of which have churchyards. Although there is no substantiated count, scholars conservatively estimate that there are 10,000 churchyards in England [Brian (1987:19) estimates that 25,000 acres, or one in every 1,500, are used for burial purposes in England]. Christianity is believed to date from at least the fourth century in Great Britain, and the tradition of churchyards (i.e., burial grounds) associated with parish churches



MAP I.

Lych-gates in England and Wales. Distributions are based on two field seasons, 1990 and 1998, and encompass more than 200 lych-gates. (Map by the author)

began in 752 A.D. when the Pope granted Saint Cuthbert the authority to establish churchyards around churches (Brian 1987:20). The graveyard has been an integral part of sacred space ever since. A common assumption is that most of these churchyards have, or had, one or more lych-gates. British cemetery scholars agree there is little pattern to the distribution of lych-gate types, but this may be a random observation rather than any systematic effort to map the phenomenon. In much the same way that the graveshelter in the South appears to have been so common as to not attract attention, the lych-gate, too, was taken for granted.

Two hundred and nine lych-gates have been photographed and measured by the author between 1990 and 1998 (Map 1). Of the four basic types identified by Vallance, the porch and shed account for ninety-one percent of all measured gates. Fifty-seven percent of the sample is porch type; the shed type accounts for the other thirty-four percent. The combination type is rare indeed (only five gates scattered widely across England). The lych-gate incorporated into a room or other church building is equally rare (nine examples) and is geographically dominant in western England and the Welsh border area. Only one significant example of the room type, associated with St. Michael's in Bray in Surrey and authenticated to AD 1448, is known for eastern England.

Dating English lych-gates, like authenticating American graveshelters, is difficult. Most medieval gates depend on details of framing and aging of the wood as verification of antiquity. On this basis, a very few fourteenth and fifteenth century examples survive. A number of decent examples survive from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The eighteenth century is modestly represented, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are well represented. A great surge in lych-gate reconstruction took place during the Victorian era and persists to the present, though there has been a general decline in construction since the end of World War II.

The dominant lych-gate form is the porch type (Figure 6), a rectangular, gable-ended structure with a roof ridge parallel to the axis of passage. Although medieval shed-type lych-gates have survived in greater numbers than the porch type, it is significant that the oldest *verified* lych-gate in Britain, dated AD 1470, is the splendid gate at Boughton Monchelsea in Kent (Child 1982:20). An important stone lych-gate dating from AD 1632 is found at Pennant Melangell



FIGURE 6.

Lych-gate, All Saint's Church, Steep, Hampshire, England. Circa 1890. The evergreen trees lining the path to the church are yew trees, an ancient symbol of immortality in English churchyards. (Photo by the author)

well in the western regions of Britain.

The British make a very clear distinction between a lych-gate and a church gate, recognizing that each is a specific architectural feature having its own chronology and evolution of style. The common assumption that the single-dimension cemetery “gate” arching over the entrance to Southern cemeteries probably derives from the lych-gate is in error (Jordan, 1982, 38; Major, 1998, personal correspondence). The British separate the two because the lych-gate is emphatically associated with a funereal ritual while gates are simply ornamentation. The lych-gate’s specific function is to protect the corpse from the weather until a priest arrives to lead the funeral procession into sanctified ground. It is interesting that the most frequent rationale given by Southerners for constructing graveshelters is to protect the body or grave from the weather. While the graveshelter also may have been built for protection from marauding animals, this appears to be secondary, perhaps suggesting that most Southern graveyards may have been fenced from their inception or within a short time thereafter.

Every British parishioner, regardless of social status, generally entered the churchyard for religious services and other church functions by passing through the lych-gate. From 1549 it was required by the Book of Common Prayer that the priest, “metyng the corpse at the church stile,” would commence the *Order for the Burial of the Dead* (“church stile” was redefined in the 1662 Prayer Book as the entrance to the churchyard) (Friar, 1996, 262). Only in comparatively recent times has the tradition been abandoned, and the demise is in part due to changes in funeral protocol linked to services of morticians and the use of motorized vehicles. While not every church in every parish had a lych-gate, they were found throughout the width and breadth of the country and were understood by every citizen as to function.

The challenge is to explain how the practice of building lych-gates gets transposed to the Upland South. Is the origin to be explained by diffusion from abroad or from acculturation by indigenous peoples in America? Or, is it possible that each group developed a house-form structure for their burials independently of one another? Certainly, immigrants from England, Wales, and Scotland would at least be familiar with the form and function of the lych-gate. Although the Scotch-Irish are not known to have built lych-gates in Ulster,

it is not unheard of for church porches to have served the same purpose. The practice of building porches on churches in all of the British Isles dates to at least the 14th century, and the typical porch was a rectangular, gable-end, open-sided structure intended to provide protection from the weather. It is possible that yeoman farmers, desiring to protect the remains of their loved ones from elements or animals, may have reverted to a common form with that specific function, having long forgotten any association with church ritual.

That Native Americans used house-form burial structures is not in question, although these were not always free-standing structures but specifically built to be later covered over with dirt to create burial mounds. Their existence is known from ethnographic descriptions and from archaeological investigations. Some excavated Indian burials appear similar to Iron Age burials in Britain, incorporating a house-form structure to cover the corpse prior to covering the burial with dirt and constructing a burial mound.

Which Indian groups practiced building graveshelters consistently enough during the early years of contact to attract the attention of white settlers? Jordan and Kaups place the core of American backwoods (Upland South) culture in a contact zone on the upper Chesapeake Bay, among the Delaware Indians specifically, and developed by Finnish (Karelian) emigrants (Jordan and Kaups, 1989). There is no evidence the Delaware built graveshelters. Additionally, had they done so, the early Karelians should have found the practice interesting enough to remark upon since their European ancestors also built "spirit houses" similar to those constructed by some Indians (Stora, 1971). The noted ethnographer and authority on Native American mortuary customs, David Bushnell (1920), places most tribes practicing graveshelter construction outside the main avenues of immigrant movement and well outside the South.

Further, accurate information on mortuary customs from Southern tribes is not readily available, either from secondary sources or from primary tribal sources. Written requests for information have been denied on the grounds that to share information on sacred customs with non-tribal peoples is taboo. In instances where some claim that house-form construction is offered, the information is anecdotal and often contradictory with regard to an Indian origin or one resulting from Christianization from whites. The issue is not whether Native Americans influenced white culture; evidence is certainly abundant

that they did in significant ways. If, however, as tribes claim, the sharing of mortuary customs is taboo, then there is difficulty accepting that the culture transfer was as pervasive as Jordan and Kaups suggest. When, for example, would most English, Scotch-Irish, or other immigrants on the frontier have been exposed to Indian burial customs? Colonialists in the emerging urban core environments of the Atlantic coast apparently did not build graveshelters, but there is suggestion that some early Anglican churches in the Tidewater did construct lych-gates. By the time most immigrants settling the Upland South were making their way westward, after the mid-18th century, Indians' cultural influence was on the wane. Tribes had been significantly Anglicized, had turned hostile toward aggressive white expansion into their territories, or had been largely if not entirely removed from their lands.

James Axtell makes an interesting argument that early missionaries attacked, among other things, Indian mortuary customs as a means of "civilizing" the Indian. The goal, through disruption of their mortuary practices, among other ploys, "was to reduce Indians from cultural and political autonomy to dependence upon European institutions and authority" (1981: 112). Missionaries were largely unsuccessful in their efforts. Two major changes, however, did occur in mortuary customs as a consequence of European grave robbing violating the Indian sense of sanctity. In an effort to thwart robbery, Indians disguised graves by omitting telltale palisades, mounds, and other identifiers, and they practiced "democratization" of the exterior of graves by eliminating any signs of the wealth or social status of the deceased (Axtell 1981:119). Whether the changes occurred because of Indian desire to escape unscrupulous European acts or because of conversion to Christianity is unclear. However, the ultimate indignity to most Eastern Woodland tribes would have been reduction to an unmarked or uniformly crossed grave. Axtell believes this would have been the final step in the loss of an Indian's identity, precisely the goal sought by European missionaries (1981:120).

By contrast, I offer that many of the people who settled the Upland South between 1750–1830 would have been familiar with the form and function of the lych-gate by practice (as they were with house-forms, barns, and field patterns) or through oral tradition. The frontier characteristic of fierce individualism, coupled with the need to "make do," may have found one expres-

sion in the transference of a culture trait formerly associated with the group, the lych-gate, to the domain of the individual, the graveshelter (Figure 7). It is possible that neither Jordan nor I are correct. The sanctity of the grave is emotionally driven, and it may well be that neither group had much influence upon the other; parallel origin rather than cultural adaptation may be more significant. ■

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FIGURE 7.

Graveshelter in advanced stage of deterioration. Macedonia Primitive Baptist Cemetery, Sulligent, Lamar County, Alabama. 1983 (Photo by Joey Brackner)

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The Skyline Farms Band Plays for President and Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt

David Campbell

On May 12, 1938, a group of musicians and dancers from Alabama performed for President and Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt at a garden party at the White House and later that evening took a cruise on the presidential yacht. Only a few years before, these hill-country farmers and their families had been struggling to make ends meet day-to-day and looking at an uncertain future. Life definitely had taken a change for the group from Alabama's Skyline Farms.

Folk music and dance had sent the group on their journey. They were participants in the Skyline Farms Project, a community development program on Cumberland Mountain in Jackson County begun for unemployed farm families during America's Great Depression. The project itself was as unique as the group's journey. The project was begun in 1934 by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), then operated by the Resettlement Administration (RA), and later by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) (Campbell and Coombs 1983: 244–255). The project, carved out of the Cumberland Mountain wilderness, was intended to provide a new life for destitute families, most of whom were chosen based on their good name and character and work history (Campbell 1991).

Families selected for the project were provided with 40–60 acre farms, a house, barn, farm equipment, livestock, and they were given loans to finance their farming. The overall plan was that the participants would make money from their farming and then repay the federal government for their farmhouse, land, and loans.

The project, however, was geared toward more than economic rehabilitation. Officials in the Franklin Roosevelt Administration saw this and similar

projects as a way to improve the quality of rural life in America, and not just economically. For example, Carl Taylor, a rural sociologist by training, headed the Rural Resettlement Division of the RA. Taylor's ideas on rural life structured the agenda for the RA in regard to social programs. Taylor believed that rural life should provide more social opportunities for people to offset isolation (Taylor 1933: 502). As a result, a number of programs were begun at Skyline Farms to improve life socially for the participants. Arts and crafts programs were conducted, pageants and plays were produced, and a community band and square dance team was formed. It was these musicians and dancers who would perform for the President.

Within the RA/FSA, the Special Skills Division was given the assignment of improving the quality of life at Skyline Farms through "cultural enrichment" programs. After a visit in 1936, Charles Seeger, a technical assistant in music with Special Skills, filed one of the first reports from Skyline Farms and gave a glowing account of the project (Seeger 1936). Seeger recommended that the

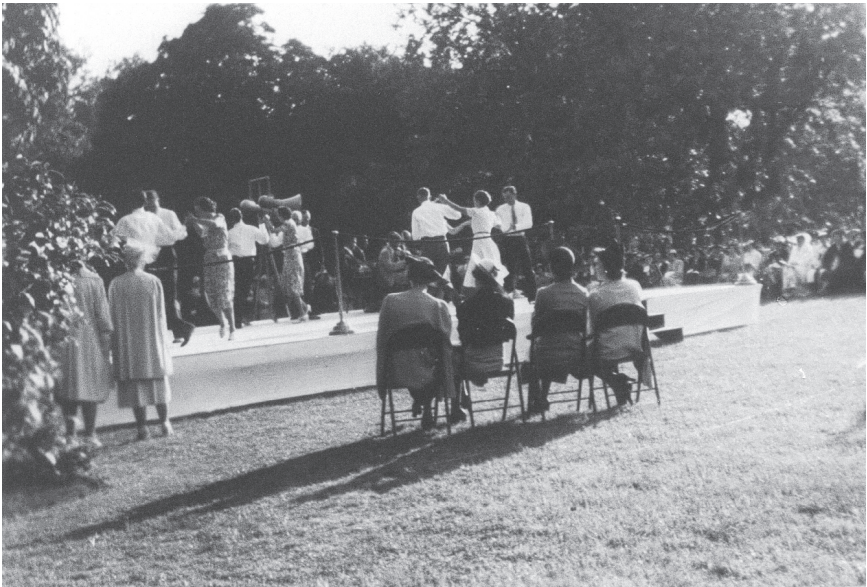


FIGURE 1.

Skyline Farms dancers and band perform at the garden party. Watching the performance is Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt (standing, second from left).



FIGURE 2

Nicolas Ray rehearses the Skyline Farms Band.

Special Skills Division develop a full array of programs at Skyline Farms—music, drama, painting and sculpture, woodworking, weaving, landscaping, and pottery.

Based on Seeger's recommendation, the Special Skills Division sent Bascom Lunsford to Skyline Farms.¹ Lunsford expressed his philosophy toward mountain folk music by saying: "My business was to draw attention to the fine cultural value of our traditional music and our dancing and the fine honor of our people. I was trying to perpetuate the real, true cultural worth of the mountain people. Our section, you know, has been slandered. People had the notion that it was somehow inferior. Now, they've turned around and found that there might be something to it" (Quoted in Jones 1984: 53). Within a few weeks after arriving at Skyline Farms, Lunsford organized a program of what he called "folk music and dancing." Members of this group performed traditional square dance numbers that had been handed down to them through the generations, such as "Home," "Right Hands Across and Left Back," "Ladies Docedo," and the "Grapevine Twist" (Lunsford 1936).



FIGURE 3

The Skyline group in Washington, D.C..

Lunsford had tapped into a golden seam of Appalachian folk music. He wrote: "Following are the names of some of the ballads, or songs which I have secured: 'The Little Yellow Hound' (Edward), 'How Come the Blood on Your Shirt Sleeve' (Edward), 'The Merrie Golden Tree,' 'There was a Bride Come Through the Land' (*The Wife of Usher's Well*). The above ballads are variants of the Child classifications . . ." (Lunsford 1937). Lunsford was thrilled to have found and identified songs still sung at Skyline Farms that were included in Francis James Child's landmark listing of ballads of British origin.

In early 1937 Lunsford lost his job with Special Skills due to cutbacks in the program. However, he did not forget the group he had organized at Skyline Farms. Indeed, in the summer of 1937 he invited the group to the Mountain Dance and Music Festival in Asheville, a festival that he had first organized. By bringing the group to Asheville, Lunsford had laid the groundwork for the performance in Washington that soon followed. For based on their Asheville performance, Nicholas Ray, a specialist in theatre and drama productions with Special Skills, recommended that the group perform at a garden party Mrs.

Eleanor Roosevelt was to host at the White House.² Soon, Mrs. Roosevelt invited the Skyline dancers and musicians to perform at the White House at her expense and the invitation was quickly accepted.

Ray arrived at Skyline Farms in April of 1938 to produce the Washington program, and also to interest the schools and community in the use of theatre for enrichment and enjoyment (Ray to Dornbush 1938). At the project Ray found the rich, musical heritage that Lunsford had discovered. The community band that Lunsford had organized was named the Skyline Farms Band. The band consisted of Chester Allen, guitar and vocals; Clifford Anderson, dobro; H. L. "Hub" Green, fiddle; Thomas Holt, tenor guitar; Joe Sharp, mandolin and vocals; and Rueben Rousseau, fiddle. The band had honed its skills playing at the community dances held at the project on Friday nights. Also, as was the tradition, the band often played at homes in the community, sometimes until the early hours of the morning. During these local performances, other musicians, such as Walter Holt, Lake Weldon, and Grady "Red" Campbell, would play with the band. On some occasions the Holt sisters, Irene and Lucille, would perform, with Irene playing the mandolin and guitar and singing, while Lucille sang and played the mandolin.³

A key member of the band was Chester Allen, a talented, humorous entertainer with a deep, booming voice, who along with his friend Grady "Red" Campbell, had recorded commercially before joining Skyline Farms. Allen and Campbell had recorded in the early 1930s in Atlanta for the Victor Bluebird label, a branch of RCA Records. Among the songs they recorded were "New Huntsville Jail," "Fool Drinking Daddy," "Drinking Fool," and "Railroad Blues." The songs were released regionally by RCA and sold relatively well, according to Campbell. Campbell later would recall that a "misunderstanding with a local policeman" caused him not to be at the project in 1938 when the band went to Washington (Campbell 1990).

Ray received official notice from Washington that the group was to perform on May 12, 1938. On May 10 the group of twenty-nine Skyline Farms residents began the 750-mile trip to Washington by car, crossing through east Tennessee and on into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. In addition to the band members, the group consisted of Mr. and Mrs. W. I. "Ike" Floyd, Willie Rodgers, Opal Holsonback, Mrs. A. Walker, Prince Whorton, Mrs. E.

E. Wilson, John Lindsey, J. W. Holmand, Edith Green, Mr. and Mrs. Elton Kennamer, Mr. and Mrs. N. E. Waldrop, Walter Freeman, Juanita Jarnagin, Jane Floyd, M. L. Lands, Mr. and Mrs. Otis Sharpe, and Mr. and Mrs. W. N. Ross. "Ike" Floyd was the project's timber resources manager and he served as manager for the band and dancers.

Mrs. Roosevelt's garden party was to honor women executives of various government departments. In all, some 2,323 people attended the garden party, including President Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt introduced the group by saying that they had come 750 miles by automobile to "play" just like they did every Friday night at their community house on a plateau in the lower Cumberland Mountains. After Mrs. Roosevelt's introduction, "Ike" Floyd took over as master of ceremonies (Washington Post 1938).

The band began by playing "Alabama Jubilee," followed by the square dancers, who according to news releases, "opened and shut the garden gate," "Ocean waved," and "broad sashshayed," "threaded the needle," and "Rang up four." The Skyline Farms Band itself played "Old Hen Cackled," "Old Rattler," and "Over the Mountain," the concluding song. Chester Allen led the vocals on "Old Rattler," and during the song imitated a hound dog chasing a rabbit, providing his own sound effects. According to those present, President Roosevelt roared with laughter when Allen performed his number. Roosevelt himself was a fan of "authentic mountain music."

Ms. Hope Ridings Miller of the Washington Post called the performance, "a highlight of the afternoon's entertainment" and said "judging by the thunder of applause following each performance, the gingham-clad girls and coatless boys were highly successful as entertainers" (Washington Post 1938). Later, Mrs. Roosevelt gave the group a personal tour of the White House where each met the President in his office. Chester Allen would recall: "When he spoke to you, there was a wake behind him . . . you could feel it. It wasn't just put-on or make-up. He meant what he said. And that smile on his face. He didn't act like he was worried about a thing in the world" (Allen 1981). While in Washington, the band would again perform for Roosevelt and his guests aboard the Presidential Yacht on the Potomac River.

Obviously, the project participants had come a long way and not just geographically. Only a few years before they had been unemployed or marginally

employed farm tenants, destitute, with little hope for the future. For a day, however, they had performed for President and Mrs. Roosevelt in a city far removed from the mountain that was their home. In that city they had been treated as special guests. It was a remarkable journey.

After their performances for President and Mrs. Roosevelt, the band had yet another engagement, for arrangements had been made for Alan Lomax to record the group for the U.S. Library of Congress (LOC).⁴ Lomax had begun work for the LOC in 1937 following in the footsteps of his father John as a traditional music collector. Both father and son would in time become renowned ethnomusicologists. In their collaboration, *Our Singing Country*, Alan Lomax and his father stated how folk music was to them an unappreciated American art form: "We have known country fiddlers who couldn't read or write, but could play two, three, or four hundred tunes. We have known white ballad singers who remembered one, two, three hundred ballads. We have known Negroes who could sing several hundred spirituals. We have shaken hands with a Mexican share-cropper who carried in his head the text, tunes, and stage directions for a Miracle play requiring four hours and twenty actors" (Lomax and Lomax, 1941). The Lomaxes were intent on redefining art to include the music and folk stories of rural America.

In Washington Lomax recorded the Skyline Farms Band performing seven songs: "John Henry," "Cumberland Mountain Farms," "Cotton Mill Colic," "Cacklin' Hen," "Here Rattler Here," "Let Me Be Your Salty Dog," and "Roll on, Buddy." (Archive of Folk Culture.) Three of the songs, "John Henry," "Roll on, Buddy," and "Cotton Mill Colic" were work/laborer songs.

Lomax recorded three other songs by the Skyline Farms Band. One was "Cacklin Hen," a lively square dance, instrumental number, with the band providing the hen "cackling" sound effects. "Salty Dog" was another fast-paced number about a man "looking for a woman (that) ain't got no man" (Skyline Jubilee 1989). The song, one of the most risqué tunes of the 1920s, originally was recorded by black blues singer Papa Charlie Johnson as "Salty Dog Blues." Later, the song was recorded by the Allen Brothers from Chattanooga, Tennessee, two of the more popular country recording artists of the late 1920s and early 1930s. "Here, Rattler, Here" was the dance tune in which the singer, Chester Allen, called his prize hound dog. As at the White House

concert, Allen provided the barking dog sound effects which had so captivated President Roosevelt.

After returning to Cumberland Mountain, the Skyline Farms Band musical legacy was further preserved when in 1939 Herbert Halpert came to the project with his mobile unit to record the band and other singers. Halpert was on his "Southern Recording Expedition," a field trip sponsored jointly by the LOC and the Works Progress Administration. Halpert and his assistant, Abbott Ferris, traveled the South in their "sound wagon," a converted U.S. Army ambulance, and they concentrated on recording Anglo-American fiddle music (Rankin 1985). In a brief visit to Skyline Farms, Halpert used a portable, battery-powered recorder to record various Skyline musicians, including the Skyline Farms Band, at the community school. Halpert re-recorded a number of the songs that Lomax recorded of the Skyline Farms Band in Washington, although in some cases the musicians had changed the song titles slightly. Halpert listed the members of the "Skyline Farms String Band" as: Chester Allen, guitar and violin; Joe Sharp, mandolin; Thomas Holt, guitar; and Herbert Green, violin. Allen, Sharp, and Holt sang the vocals with Allen again providing the sound effects on "Old Hen Cackle" and "Ol' Rattler." Halpert recorded the Band playing "John Henry," "Skyline Salty Dog," "Old Hen Cackle," "Cumberland Mountain Blues," and "Ol' Rattler"—the songs recorded by Lomax in Washington.

At Skyline, Halpert sought out the older, traditional folk ballads. He recorded four young girls singing the "play-party" song "Green Coffee Grows on a White Oak Stump" (Skyline Jubilee 1989). And he also recorded "The Miller," sung by a boy and three girls. Halpert's final recording at the Skyline school was of sisters Irene and Lucille Holt, who sang a religious song they had written, in which they warned that on the "resurrection morning" you will wish "that you was one of us." With that, Halpert and Ferris continued their journey across the South, next recording railroad "steel callers" and sacred harp singers.

Seeger, Lunsford, Lomax, and Halpert all brought into focus the role music played in the subcultural lifestyle of the Southern tenant farmer. Music was important in that lifestyle; the people looked to music not just to escape from daily drudgery, although certainly the music did permit them this. But the

music defined life for the tenants and clarified their emotions and feelings. For the tenants the musicians played and spoke a language and conveyed feelings for which they themselves sometimes did not have the words. To their credit, Seeger, Lunsford, Lomax, and Halpert worked within the parameters of this music and tried to preserve it without changing it to what many at the time would have considered a more acceptable form.

As for the Skyline Farms Band members, following their grand performance for the President, they continued to play as a band in the Cumberland Mountain area during the next several years. The Band, however, began to break up in the early and middle forties as members left the project for one reason or another. However, all continued in music in some capacity through the years, although none became professional musicians. They did play with various bands and groups in the area, performing country and gospel music. Chester Allen was offered a recording contract, but he never pursued a professional career. Instead, Allen performed at local shows or made appearances on AM radio. Whenever he performed, he sang "Ol' Rattler," the song that had made the President laugh during a troubled time in America and the world. After leaving the project, Allen worked at various jobs, including car salesman, an occupation for which no doubt his abundant charm was an asset.

The Skyline Farms Project itself turned few of the farm families into landowners. Agricultural problems plagued the project, and soon families were falling into debt, this time owing the government instead of banks or landowners. Efforts to stimulate the project, such as building a factory, were to no avail, and in 1944 the government decided to end the project. Many of the Skyline Farms families had left by then, taking other jobs as the economy improved, or moving north to work in industry. Only two families of the approximately two hundred at Skyline Farms obtained their farms.

Still, there were many positives to the project. It had gotten families in need through the hard times of the Depression. Many, too, had learned job skills that they would use later in life. Furthermore, Skyline Farms children were educated at the picturesque sandstone school that had become the heart of the project. There was also a genuine effort to create among the participants a sense of pride in their cultural heritage. Indeed, the work of Charles Seeger, Bascom Lunsford, Nicholas Ray, Alan Lomax, and Herbert Halpert pertain-

ing to Skyline Farms was a pioneering effort to acknowledge and preserve this rich folk heritage of Alabama, particularly the Appalachian region of the state. The band's and dancers' performance in Washington went a long way toward instilling a sense of pride in the people. Long after the project had ended, those connected to Skyline Farms talked wistfully about the day project members "played for the President" in a city far from their mountain home. ■

Notes

- 1 Lunsford had given up a career as a lawyer and politician in North Carolina to become a folk song collector (Jones 1984). He devoted his life to collecting folk songs in the Southern Appalachians, eventually obtaining some 300 songs for the United States Library of Congress and Columbia University archives.
- 2 Ray's work with the Skyline Farms group was the beginning to a long and successful career. He later would produce and co-host a national radio program for CBS with Woody Guthrie, then move to Hollywood to become a highly-regarded movie director, including in his career credits the James Dean epic *Rebel Without a Cause*.
- 3 Traditional music was a part of the subculture of the Appalachian farmers and had been passed from generation to generation. Walter Holt recalls that his father played a fiddle and bought him his own instrument as a young boy. His father played the fiddle in the old mountain style, Holt said, tuning it in the straight A chord, rather than in the G chord used in tuning by modern fiddlers. Holt admired the skill of the old style fiddlers, because they were constantly "moving their fingers" when they played to hit the right notes (Holt 1990).
- 4 For the original recordings see, "Tapes recorded by Alan Lomax (1938) and Herbert Halpert (1939)," AFS 1629–1630, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, U. S. Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. An audio-cassette of these recordings, edited for sound quality, is "Skyline Jubilee," produced by David Campbell, Northeast Alabama Community College, P. O. Box 139, Rainsville, AL 35986. A limited number of these tapes are available upon request. For online information about the American Folklife Center, see <http://lcweb.loc.gov/folklife/>. For a listing of the Alan Lomax and Herbert Halpert collections in the Library of Congress, keyword search by name at <http://lcweb.loc.gov/catalog/online.html>.

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The Piney Woods Regional Folklife Project

Carolyn Ware

The largely rural Piney Woods region, which stretches from northern Georgia to east Texas, is distinctive in both its geography and its cultural landscape. People here share a resilient folk culture that ignores state boundaries for the most part. Although Piney Woods culture is characteristically Southern, it has taken its own shape over the years. Many traditions have been handed down over generations and remain vital because they are still deeply meaningful to those who live here. New or adapted traditions constantly emerge and become part of the culture as well.

Piney Woods folklife is marked by differences as well as similarities. Although most residents are Protestant and either Anglo American (usually Scots-Irish) or African American, the region is also home to a number of other ethnic and religious groups—Native Americans, Croatians, Creoles, Lebanese, Hungarians, Mennonites and Catholics, for example. These groups maintain their own cultural traditions alongside those common to everyone in the Piney Woods.

Certain customs also vary somewhat from one part of the region to another. Cooking traditions are one example. French and Spanish influences on cuisine and other aspects of culture are strongest near the Gulf Coast, and less marked in other areas. And people in Louisiana's Florida Parishes make chicken pie, while cooks in southwest Alabama may favor chicken and dumplings.

Despite its size and rich cultural heritage, the Piney Woods remains one of the least documented areas of the southern United States. The two-year Piney Woods Regional Folklife Survey Project, now nearing completion, is filling some of these gaps. The first stage of the project has been documenting Piney Woods traditions in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. The second, equally

important (and ongoing) component is sharing regional traditions with the general public through an exhibit, a publication, and a series of free folk arts programs at festivals, museums, and libraries.

The Regional Folklife Survey is unusual because—like Piney Woods folk culture itself—it transcends state lines. It grew out of earlier documentation projects in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, and pools the resources, skills, and knowledge of folklorists from five organizations in the region. Collaboration allowed us to expand our scope beyond individual states and take a broader, more regional look at Piney Woods culture.

Like many public folklore initiatives, the project is intended to increase people's awareness and appreciation and ultimately to encourage the preservation of Piney Woods folk arts. Although this folklife survey can do little more than skim the surface of regional life, it can provide a jumping-off place for other projects. We also hope that it will offer a successful model for interstate cooperation in documenting and presenting folk arts.

The project is being directed by the Pine Hills Culture Program, a regional folklife program that I coordinate. Founded in 1996, the program is part of the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. Over the last three years, we have organized a community scholars folklife field school, conducted fieldwork on many aspects of traditional culture, and created traveling exhibits, a publication, and public programs such as live radio shows of Piney Woods music.¹ These earlier projects concentrated on southern Mississippi, but the program's mission includes documenting other Piney Woods states as well, and we were eager to expand our focus.

The Alabama State Council on the Arts and the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture shared our interest in a cooperative, multistate project, as did the Louisiana Division of the Arts and the Mississippi Arts Commission. All became part of a project consortium, and folklorists in each organization—Joey Brackner, Hank Willett, and Anne Kimzey in Alabama, Maida Owens in Louisiana, and Larry Morrissey in Mississippi—have helped to plan and carry out the project over the last two years. In addition, representatives of several festivals and museums in the three states have been involved in various stages. As project director, I worked closely with each organization as well as with

fieldworkers and traditional artists.

Generous funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Lila Wallace–Reader’s Digest Community Folklife Program formed a strong base for the project. Additional funds and in-kind support came from the state arts agencies and the University of Southern Mississippi.

Folklife Survey

The Piney Woods Regional Folklife Survey Project officially began in early 1998 with a planning meeting in Hattiesburg. This meeting brought together folklorists, folk artists, educators, and other community members from the three states to share ideas and set priorities for fieldwork. Each state was slated for fifty days of contracted field research funded by the NEA and Lila Wallace grants, and we wanted to identify the traditions that set the Piney Woods apart from other places.

It was crucial for state folks arts coordinators and teachers to be involved in fieldwork planning, as our goal was to provide a strong foundation for public programs, school programs, media projects, and publications in all three states for years to come. It was just as important for artists and other community members to have a voice in decisions about what traditions should be documented in their communities.

This planning meeting produced a wealth of suggestions on which customs most clearly define the region. These included food-related traditions such as the importance of hog meat, corn, peas, meat curing, barbecue, and wild game in Piney Woods cuisine; various kinds of sacred and secular music; and crafts such as quilting, making chair bottoms, boatbuilding (in some areas), making straw brooms, and weaving white oak baskets.

Events that bring people in a community together are also a significant aspect of regional life, and examples ranged from youth rodeos, 4-H events, and trail rides to heritage festivals, fiddling contests, family reunions, revivals and homecomings, high school football games, and camp meetings. Hunting traditions—turkey, deer, wild hogs, ducks, and so on, and in particular the importance of subsistence hunting—are also cultural markers.

Certain occupations are also closely associated with the region: lumbering is an obvious example, but so are truck farming, and (in some places) dairy

farming and commercial fishing. More general themes also emerged, such as how people use and interact with the land, and the importance of geography in local culture; cultural influences such as French, Native American, and Caribbean elements in Piney Woods music, foodways, and dialect; and “boom and bust” stories that reflect what happens when businesses leave the region. We agreed that project fieldwork should focus not only on the shared regional culture, but also on traditions among some of the region’s minority groups such as Croatians, Native Americans, and Creoles.

The list generated at the planning meeting was by no means exhaustive, of course, and not everyone had an identical view of the region. However, we all agreed that it was important that this project emphasize the here-and-now nature of regional folklife. Folk culture is made up of living traditions that are firmly rooted in a community but capable of adapting and changing. One example of a relatively modern folk celebration is high school football games. These games, and the local customs that develop around them, are a prominent feature of community life for many in the region.

Once a general research plan was in place, we hired a total of sixteen experienced folklife fieldworkers. Whenever possible, we tried to recruit local professionals with a good understanding of the region. Many of the fieldworkers had already done research on similar topics. Several conducted up to twenty days of fieldwork, but most were contracted for relatively short periods, sometimes only a few days.

Fieldworkers were responsible for finding, interviewing, and photographing people who carry on culturally important traditions. They were also asked to document community events such as dinners on the ground, gospel sings, Juneteenth parades, Fourth of July church picnics, mule pulls, and county or parish fairs.

Fieldwork began in the summer of 1998, and most research projects were wrapped up by late 1998; a few continued into the summer of 1999. More than 120 people in the three states were interviewed on topics ranging from music and hunting to foodways, crafts, storytelling traditions, and occupations such as logging and dairy farming. Because it is important for people in each state to have access to fieldwork done there, photographs and audiotapes of interviews will be archived with state folk arts agencies, as well as with the

Pine Hills Culture Program. Alabama materials will go to the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture.

Alabama Fieldwork

Seven fieldworkers working in southwest Alabama documented more than sixty men and women from Clarke, Choctaw, Washington, Mobile, Conecuh, Monroe, Marengo, and Dallas counties. Fieldwork here—as in Louisiana and Mississippi—included a variety of folk arts and traditional ways of doing things, from grinding sugar cane for syrup to Native American herbal remedies. Field researchers also compiled lists of leads to follow up on in future projects.

Veteran fieldworker and musician Joyce Cauthen has documented various Alabama music traditions such as Sacred Harp singing and fiddling over the years. For this folklife survey, she interviewed and recorded a number of musicians who play old-time or bluegrass music, sing gospel music and lead hymns. She also asked people about community gatherings centered around music, talking with organizers of a long-running fiddlers' convention, bluegrass festivals, fire station jam sessions, and gospel events.

Bluegrass banjo picker Gray Mosely of Butler told Joyce, "My father was a musician, an old-time musician. He was a fiddle player and played a Jew's Harp. . . . I think four of my great-uncles on my daddy's side were musicians." Mr. Mosely became began playing music, he said, because "[My daddy] had a fiddle and then therefore I became interested. And there was an older gentleman that lived down the Red Springs Road a way from us who was an old-time fiddler. His name was Mr. Ira Turner and he was a notorious fiddler. He could really play a fiddle and his wife banjoed the fiddle, beat the straw." Joyce Cauthen also interviewed Mr. Mosely's brother-in-law, Clarence Carpenter of Jackson, a fiddler who is well known in the region.

Robert Aaron Bozeman, another respected Alabama fiddler, explained the popularity of musical gatherings in the past by saying, "When you're in a predicament like we were, no jobs, nowhere to go, and no way to go, you just had to find some way of self-entertainment."

One way people entertained themselves was by fiddlers' conventions or contests. The Old Time Fiddler's Convention is still held each April in an old schoolhouse in Frankville. It began in 1926 as a fiddlers' convention and box



FIGURE 1

Aaron Bozeman of St. Stephens, Alabama, is a self-taught fiddler who has played professionally and now performs for benefits. (Photo by Joyce Cauthen)

supper, shut down in the 1960s, and restarted in 1975. Since then, it has been drawing about 500 people each year. There are different categories for fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar, and even buck dancing, and the contest can last well past midnight.

Joyce interviewed two of its chief organizers, Fred Everett and Ernest Goldman, and some of the fiddlers who participate, before recording their jam session. They describe the convention as “just down to earth” and “like a reunion” for participants.

John Henry Phillips of Gilbertown plays guitar and organizes bluegrass and gospel events, including second-Saturday “singings” at the Silas Fire Department. Other sings and “pickings” take place on a regular basis and sometimes include a barbecue supper. In an interview with Joyce Cauthen, Mr. Phillips described an annual supper and jam session held by friends and family. “Each November we have—we call it a chitterling supper, you know. My brother cooks a hundred pounds of chitterlings and people come and they also cook

chicken and stuff. And everybody just comes on Friday night and we just get around the campfire and pick and sing. Everybody sings.”

Myrtle Todd, now eighty-three years old, grew up in Clarke County, the daughter of a logger there. She told Joyce that she learned to play the guitar from her mother; in turn, her own children learned to play instruments and sing. Years ago, Mrs. Todd and her daughters performed music on local radio stations. (Her grandson, country singer Ty Herndon, carries on the family’s musical tradition.)

Mrs. Todd recalled winning a buck dancing contest when she was twelve. “We had a fiddlers’ convention at Carmichael, Mississippi. And you know they have all kinds of things at a fiddlers’ convention, all kinds. So they had buck dancing, too. They didn’t expect a little old girl to get up there and dance. I was twelve years old. . . . And guess what I got. A box of 12-gauge shotgun shells. They were expecting a boy or a man [to win.]”

Among the gospel performers Joyce Cauthen interviewed was Jimmy Roberts of the Ambassadors. The Ambassadors are a family southern gospel group from Chatom who perform old gospel standards and some of their own compositions at concerts, revivals, benefits, and other events. She also talked with Jesse Simms, who leads hymns at his church and said, “I chord a little bit on the piano. . . . I’ve been singing I reckon all of my life.”

Folklorist Erin Kellen, a native of Alabama’s Piney Woods, had already done a great deal of fieldwork in the region, particularly among loggers. For this project, she researched regional foodways, both everyday and special occasion cooking, speaking with several men and women about their perspectives. The conversations covered many aspects of foodways, from descriptions of typical dishes (various kinds of peas, butterbeans, corn, fried or boiled okra, chicken and dumplings, cornbread, and catfish, for example), to discussions about the differences between river and lake catfish, and ways to make a roux (with or without tomatoes.)

Erin also interviewed Myrtle Todd, who is known locally not only as a musician but as an excellent cook. Mrs. Todd stated that “I’m a taster cook, I taste of everything I cook, because I put it together with my own mind.” Without using recipes, she makes many regional favorites—preserves, “old timey” tea

cakes, and dozens of biscuits (using her mother's old bread tray) for the Senior Citizen's Center and for her church. Her speciality is chicken and dumplings, but she occasionally made rabbit and dumplings for her late husband.

Like many people in the region, Mrs. Todd has grown her own vegetables for most of her life. In the past, she said, "I raised tomatoes and cucumbers and peppers and Irish potatoes in my little garden." Gardening was a tradition she grew up around. "My mother, she had a beautiful garden. And she always raised a lot of stuff, and we'd just go around behind her. We'd go to the garden and get us onions and radishes, there and eat them. We'd just take them and wipe them off and eat them." Now Mrs. Todd grows both vegetables and flowers in the flower beds at her apartment building.

She also described how she cooks fresh collard and turnip greens. "I soak them in soda and saltwater for about thirty minutes before I ever wash them. Then I wash them and then I cut them up. And I have my boiler ready. And when I start my boiler, I fry my bacon in it. I just fry about several pieces of bacon in this boiler. Well, I pick that bacon out and then I add a little bit of vegetable oil to that and water and a little salt and a pinch of soda and about a teaspoon full of sugar in my water. And when it goes to boiling, I've got my greens cut up and I just dump them over in it and just cook them until I think they're done. I don't time them. I just stir them and I taste them, to see if they're done." She saves the pot liquor to drink because "it's good for your stomach."

Many men in the region like to cook, too, especially outdoors for events such as barbecues or fish fries. The popularity of wild game dishes—often prepared by men—reflects "the lingering importance of hunting and fishing traditions" in the region, Erin Kellen suggests (1998).

Venison, squirrel, and rabbit were traditionally part of many families' everyday home cooking. Wildlife dinners are special occasions that offer guests an array of (sometimes exotic) game dishes. Erin Kellen learned of the annual Armadillo and Coon Supper during her fieldwork, and interviewed Mickey Fountain, one of its organizers. This all-male cookout in Jackson, Alabama, is a charitable fundraiser sponsored by the Armadillo Gourmet Society. Invited diners might be served fried rattlesnake, rabbit salad, barbecued beaver, deer loaf, and duck gumbo. In past years, a local woman baked and decorated elaborate

cakes in the shapes of different kinds of local wildlife for the supper.

A more informal cooking event associated with men is camp cooking. In Erin's interview with Fred and Marilyn Scoggins of Leroy, Mr. Scoggins described how a group of local men "get together and we cook and play music . . . just about every two weeks" at a camp. He talked about changes in camp cooking, which he says "has gone from the old one-pot method. When we have a cookout now, we cook! Cook some outside and some in." Now the campers feast on corned beef and cabbage, rice, boiled corn, barbecued pork, fried fish, hush puppies, and cornbread.

As part of her fieldwork, Erin also documented a Wednesday night church supper, where a typical array of Southern special occasion foods—barbecued chicken, peas, okra, cornbread, and banana pudding—were served. As she points out, cooking from scratch on an everyday basis is becoming rarer among young families today, and an event like a church supper "gives talented community cooks a chance to display their skills and others a chance to enjoy them when home cooking is hard to find at home" (Kellen 1998).

Caroline Herring interviewed eleven members of the MOWA Band of Choctaw, who have a reservation near the junction of Mobile and Washington Counties. (The name of the band comes from the first syllables of these counties.) Chief Wilford "Longhair" Taylor and others spoke movingly about the tribe's history, what it was like growing up Native American in Alabama, and how important it is to them to maintain traditions such as their annual powwow.

Thirty or forty years ago, local Indians struggled to hold onto their cultural heritage. Chief Taylor told of having to choose between being listed as black or white when he applied for a driver's license, because there was no category for Native Americans. And Barbara Johnson told Caroline, "We fought to have our identity, you know. Because when we were growing up, people were afraid to say they were Indian, because there were only black and white. That's all the government recognized. But then it was during '79 when we got our state recognition that we all organized and just fought so hard and just came forward and said we were tired of denying our Indian heritage."

In his interview with Caroline Herring, Chief Taylor said, "And so Native Americans is coming out more outspoken now. They're not having to hide any

more, because of that Civil Rights law. We still kept our traditional culture but we had to keep it a secret. But now, we're having powwows. We're saying, 'We're proud to be Native American, we don't have to keep it hid any longer.'"

Quilter Annie Weaver, an older member of the tribe, described life years ago in a tight-knit community where everyone shared their resources. "But there used to be, if one of us had a cow, or hogs to kill, everybody in the community got a mess of it. There was no charge on it. Just bundled it up and sent it to them."

Laretta Weaver, interviewed with her husband Gallasneed, described the community as still close. "It's not just a community, it's an extended family," she told Caroline. Mrs. Weaver, who is Cherokee and grew up in Oklahoma, speaks both Cherokee and Choctaw. When she married Gallasneed, a member of the MOWA band, "I came from one Indian community to another one. I had no problem whatsoever making the transition because people here are basically the same as my people . . . in the ways they get along, teach each other, being helpful." Mrs. Weaver works in local classrooms to help preserve this Native heritage. "I try to teach the culture to the children through legends and stories, coloring pictures. I teach them their language . . . the Choctaw words." She has been active for many years in the annual powwow, starting a dance troupe and teaching children traditional crafts.

Historic preservationist Patrick McIntyre interviewed Gail Thrower, tribal historian for the Poarch Creek tribe in south Alabama. She described for him the history of Creeks in lower Alabama and some of the traditions being maintained today. Besides making pine straw baskets (a skill she learned from a Creek woman in Florida), Gail Thrower is very knowledgeable about native plants and herbal medicine. She said, "Now the plant knowledge is something that was passed down in my family from . . . generation to generation and from the tribal elders. But I learned most of the plant stuff from my mama and from my granny . . . My granny, she was paralyzed and she couldn't do things with her hands. But now she could talk and she would tell me about these plants and what they would use to do. And then as kids we'd go hunt and we'd go find a plant."

Mrs. Thrower's mother also learned a lot about medicinal plants from

an older man in the community. “They used these native plants and the wild plants for their medicines and stuff. Well, he would come up into our area because we lived close to a swamp. And he would come looking for yellow root and different plants like that, but he was old and crippled up. He knew . . . which plants he was looking for and about where they would be but he wasn’t physically able to gather it or dig it up. And so my mama would go with him and she would dig it up. . . . She learned a lot of them like that.”

Gail Thrower explained to Patrick that this plant lore “was the kind of thing that you knew all this stuff and you had that knowledge. But it wasn’t taught to you in a way like ‘Hey, we’re fixing to have a biology class and we’re going to learn five plants today.’ It was such a common part of you and so ordinary . . . You know, you just took it for granted everyone knows this. And then after a while you realize . . . they don’t know.”

Patrick McIntyre also documented Gaines Pezent of Jackson, Alabama, who grows sugar cane and makes cane syrup. Gaines Pezent and his brother Charles are sons of one of the Croatian men who came to Alabama early this century to harvest the white oak used to make barrel staves. Some men stayed and married local women, as their father did, and their children were raised within the dominant regional culture. Still, the Pezents see some Croatian influences in their home’s architecture and especially in holiday customs.

In an interview with Patrick, Charles Pezent recalled of his Croatian-born father, “He loved the holidays. He loved Christmas, he loved Easter. And he just liked a holiday, he would love to celebrate a holiday. Like the Fourth of July and things like that, he made big preparations. Him and Mama did for Christmas. Mama would cook half a dozen cakes and all kinds of things, and he’d fix the meats. He’d make a ham or bake a big side of pork, and fix it the Croatian way, and we’d just have a feast on Christmas.”

Patrick McIntyre also interviewed Dan Garris, who has fifteen dogs for hunting wild hogs (a long-time Piney Woods practice). Many people prepare wild hog meat by frying the loin and boiling the ham fresh.

Stephen Criswell, then teaching English at Alabama Southern Community College, interviewed his students about their family reunions. Family ties are important in the region and reunions are a common way of keeping these ties



FIGURE 2

Gaines Pezent of Jackson, Alabama, skims impurities from boiling cane syrup. He learned to make syrup from his mother during the Depression. Several years ago, Mr. Pezent began making a few gallons of syrup for family and friends, using an old, converted fuel tank as a cooker. (Photo by Patrick McIntyre)

close and family history alive.

Stephen documented African-American and Anglo-American students from rural central and southwestern Alabama. He asked each about how their reunions are organized, who participates, when and where they take place, food traditions, and why reunions are important. Several common themes emerged. For instance, preparing and eating food are central activities at virtually all reunions; many also feature group singing, games, a worship service, and sometimes matching t-shirts (sometimes with family trees.) He suggests that family reunions “celebrate, sustain, and strengthen family ties” (Criswell 1998).



FIGURE 3

James "Winky" Hicks of Grove Hill, Alabama, who plays the banjo with a bluegrass band, also makes wild hen turkey calls. (Photo by Martha Teall)

Kathy McCoy, Director of the Monroe County Heritage Museums, agreed to interview traditional artists in Monroe, Dallas, and Conecuh counties, some of whom have demonstrated their skills at the museum. Her conversations with Ed and Pearl Salter, Jerry Daniel, Kathryn Windham, Nannie Williams, George Singleton, Claude Swift, and Jane Ellen Cason covered many different kinds of skills. These included foodways (canning preserves, and making hog's head cheese, cracklins, chitterlings, and sausage), hog killing time, making kudzu baskets, land management and the timber industry, storytelling, turpentine making, watermelon stealing, fox hunting, and the blues.

Most recently, fieldworker Martha Teall interviewed nine people in Clarke and Monroe Counties on various Piney Woods traditions. Some of the people she met have been documented previously or featured in public presentations, but many have not. Charles Knowles of Grove Hill grinds corn and flour for his neighbors since he retired and bought a corn mill. James "Winky" Hicks is a carpenter who plays the banjo in a three-man bluegrass band and makes turkey calls. Jerry Gates, a leather worker who makes and fixes saddles, began repairing leather on his family's cattle operation when he could find no one else to do it. Storyteller Dana Dunn of Thomasville reminisced about growing up in the region, memorable characters, and everyday customs that are still common. Walter Brooks of Jackson makes white oak baskets, brooms, and walking sticks, and his daughter Donna Wesley, a self-taught potter, sells their crafts. Donald Knowles is another white oak basketmaker; he learned from his father, who learned from his cousin. For his part, Mr. Knowles has taught his son how to make baskets. He also canes chairs and is learning to make ax and hammer handles from hickory. Roy "Laverne" Mott of Thomasville plays the guitar, fiddle, and bass fiddle, and has performed in country swing and gospel groups. Jack Irvin and Ronald Hare talked with Martha about logging and sawmill operations.

Mississippi Fieldwork

Mississippi documentation was divided among four field researchers. Folklorist Worth Long, who began documenting folk culture in Mississippi

in the early 1970s, returned to south Mississippi to interview Piney Woods blues and gospel musicians for this project. Although the blues are most often associated with the Delta, they are also an important part of Piney Woods life. Worth Long's interviews with musicians R. L. House, Deborah and David Wilson, Melvin Stacks, Lil' Willie Jordan, Dorothy Moore, Ervin Thomas, and Elmore Williams touched not only on their musical influences but also on growing up in the Piney Woods, seasonal events such as hog killing time, and race relations in the region.

Scott McCraw also interviewed several blues musicians and conducted a folklife survey of four counties (Walthall, Marion, Lawrence, and Wilkinson) in southwest Mississippi. Through this survey work, he documented barbecue and other foodways, quilting, shingle riving, syrup making, shape note singing, tating, and making hunting stands.

One of the people he interviewed was Julia Lewis of Foxworth, who explained the tradition of shape note singing and how it was taught in singing schools at various churches. "Now Professor Taylor brought that singing to this country. . . . I used to hear them singing, oh I'd just want to go so bad, but I was too small, you know. And he'd come and spend nights—like I said, he'd teach that Norman sometimes for a week and two weeks. Well he'd sleep at someone's house, you know. They may sit around the fire at night and sing. My daddy sung bass, and my sister sung tenor, I had two sisters sung alto, and my mama did soprano. So they'd sit around the fire, we had enough for four parts, and they'd sit around the fire and sing at night."

Today only one or two African-American singing conventions remain active in south Mississippi. One is Marion County's Pearl River South Singing Convention, which Mrs. Lewis belongs to. She told Scott, "Well, now we have the singing convention three times a year. . . . You have three sessions per year that all the choirs come together to one church. . . . And they go from church to church. And then when we sing and dismiss, they have a lot of food, and everybody goes out and eats together, you know."

Caroline Herring conducted a similar folklife survey of southeastern Mississippi counties, including Greene, Wayne, Clarke, and Jones counties. She interviewed

twelve people on chair making, meat cutting, quilting, woodworking, crochet, old-time fiddling and bluegrass music, doll making, woodcarving, making jam, and storytelling, among other topics.

Wiley Prewitt researched Piney Woods hunting traditions, a topic he has studied for years in North Mississippi. He accompanied a group of Forrest County men and boys on a youth deer hunt in the fall of 1998, and interviewed a game warden and hunters on hunting and recreational fishing.

Louisiana Fieldwork

Although a significant portion of north Louisiana can be considered part of the Piney Woods or Pine Hills, we limited project fieldwork to the Florida Parishes, eight parishes in south Louisiana near the Mississippi border. Some of these parishes have a particularly strong Catholic and French heritage, and there are also communities of Italian Americans and Hungarians in the area.

Four Louisiana-based fieldworkers conducted interviews in seven of the eight Florida Parishes. Folklorist Aimee Schmidt, then the Folklife Coordinator for the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, conducted a folklife survey of Washington, Livingston, St. Helena, Tangipahoa, and East Feliciana parishes to identify living traditions there. Among the practices she documented were sausage making and wine making in the Hungarian-American community near Albany, dairy farming, crocheting, making lye soap, saddlemaking and rodeo riding, making blowing horns, building wagons, crafting wooden dough bowls, blacksmithing, making chicken pie, making white oak baskets, and trail riding. She also photographed a number of community events: contests for the biggest watermelon and melon eating at the Washington Parish Watermelon Festival; a Fourth of July barbecue at a Baptist church; a “cow dress-up contest” at the Washington Parish Fair; and gospel and bluegrass performances at local restaurants.

Christie Calaycay, then an intern at the Louisiana Division of the Arts, interviewed gospel singers Peter and Hazel Clark at their home and at the nearby church they are renovating in East Feliciana Parish. “Music and playing,” Peter Clark said, “always was in my family.” He also described a child’s perspective on revival or “protracted meeting,” which meant at least two weeks of going to church every day. He said, “And I used to hate that word, when they said



FIGURE 4

Judges taste samples in the chicken pie contest at the 1998 Washington Parish Fair in Franklinton, Louisiana, which had only two contestants. Many county and parish fairs feature contests for making traditional regional dishes such as chicken pie (or chicken and dumplings in some parts of the Piney Woods). (Photo by Aimee Schmidt)

‘revival.’ Because it cut out all my pleasures that I did, me and other boys in my neighborhood . . . And when the preacher would get up and say, ‘Well, church, it’s getting on time to run a revival,’ I’d know my marble days and my pleasure days were going to be over.” Christie also documented Susie Boyd, an African American quilter in Tangipahoa Parish, and woodworker Charles Eldridge Jr. in Amite Parish.

Anthropologist Dolores Hemphill concentrated on folk religious traditions among Creoles in Lacombe, Slidell, and Ponchartroula. These communities on the northern shore of Lake Ponchartrain have been influenced by their nearness to New Orleans and other parts of French southeast Louisiana. She investigated cemetery practices and observances surrounding All Saints’ Day

and other holidays, and St. Joseph's altars among Creoles.

Jocelyn Donlon, who teaches English at Louisiana State University, researched narrative traditions in the region. She concentrated especially on local legends about feuds, outlaws, and the violence that earned Tangipahoa Parish the nickname "Bloody Tangipahoa."

Piney Woods Celebrations Exhibit

By the end of 1998, enough fieldwork had been completed to begin planning a traveling exhibit on regional culture. Although many different kinds of traditions were documented, we decided the exhibit's focus would be community events and celebrations. Celebrations, which we defined to include many different kinds of sacred and secular events, bring people together in symbolic expressions of community. The exhibit features gospel sings, bluegrass festivals, high school football games, powwows, revivals, and All Saints Day cemetery visits.

Piney Woods Celebrations is a professionally designed and built exhibit created around fieldwork photos and interviews. It consists of five double-sided panels with text and both color and black-and-white photographs. Because food and religion seemed to be unifying elements in many of these events, a small church pew and a barbecue pit support the panels. A compact disc player hidden in the barbecue pit plays excerpts of fieldwork interviews and music.

Images from Alabama's Piney Woods include a demonstration of logging techniques at the Sawmill Days festival in Fulton, and a logging wagon at the same event. There are also photographs from the MOWA Band of Choctaw's annual powwow in Calvert; making cane syrup at Rikards Mill in Monroe County; fiddler Robert Aaron Bozeman of St. Stephens, Alabama; and the Sullivan Family gospel group performing at a festival.

The exhibit will travel to at least one site each in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. It opened at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival on April 23, 1999, and has already visited the Mississippi Heritage Festival, the Louisiana Folklife Festival in Monroe, and Southeastern Louisiana University. In January 2000, Alabama's Monroe County Heritage Museums hosted the exhibit, and we sponsored a related public program at the museum.

The final stage of the project is putting together a publication on Piney

Woods folklife, and we are busy organizing this now. The book, aimed at the general public, will be made up of about eight articles or chapters on different aspects of Piney Woods folk culture. Many of the project fieldworkers will contribute articles based on their research, and other scholars will also write articles on various aspects of Piney Woods folklife. Some articles will offer a fairly broad view, such as the history of the region and musical traditions. Others will spotlight particular communities or groups such as Livingston Parish's Hungarians. The book may be published by a university press or made available through the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage's web site. ■

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¹ From our 1996 community scholars program, we contributed a special Piney Woods issue of *Mississippi Folklife* (a magazine produced by the Center for the Study of Southern Culture), and an exhibit called *A Taste of Pine Hills Traditions* that visited ten libraries in south Mississippi.

“That Dirt Was Good!”: Memories of Geophagy Among Alabama Black Belt Tenant Farmers

Patrick McIntyre

This article examines the custom of dirt eating—known scientifically as geophagy—as practiced by African-American tenant farmers in Montgomery County, Alabama. Ten informants were interviewed for the study, which took place in 1993—five males and five females, ranging in age from 42 to 87. The research goal was to determine the local customs pertaining to eating dirt, as well as to relate it to the practice as it occurred in other parts of the South and beyond. The only prerequisite for choosing the informants for this survey was that they were known former residents of the McIntyre Brothers Farm, a 7,600-acre cotton plantation approximately 15 miles south of the city of Montgomery that was in operation from the 1880s until the 1960s. Informants were not chosen based on any prior knowledge of their having engaged or not engaged in geophagia. Out of respect for the privacy of the individuals, all names have been changed prior to the publication of this article.

Introduction

The practice of geophagy is a cultural trait with both worldwide distribution and a lengthy history. The Ancient Greeks are known to have consumed certain soils for medicinal purposes over two thousand years ago, and geophagy has been observed in such diverse contemporary societies as North American Indian groups, the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific, and Australian Aborigines (Frate 1984:34). Dirt eating has also been noted in historical accounts concerning various African tribal groups, and the practice continues to this day. In a study of the Ewe people of Ghana and the Tiv of Nigeria, research showed that the practitioners consume clay as a mineral supplement,



FIGURE I

Frank Dabney at home, November 1993. (photo by Patrick McIntyre)

and as an antidiarrheic (Vermeer 1966:197–204). Such clays are typically sold in West African marketplaces, and analysis showed a distinct variation in the mineral contents of different specimens. Some of the marketed clays were higher in iron content, while others had concentrations of calcium or potassium (Hunter 1973:177).

In the American South geophagy was noted as early as 1709, when it was

reported among white settlers in the Carolinas (Lawson 1967:131). Almost all subsequent accounts of dirt eating reported among Southern whites described the practitioners as being members of the lower socioeconomic classes, and observers tended to view them in a derogatory manner. The antebellum Georgia schoolteacher Emily Burke noted that “when a person has once seen a clay-eater, he can . . . instantly recognize any one of their number by their sickly, sallow, and most unnatural complexions” (Burke 1850:205–206). When recalling her childhood in Biloxi, Mississippi during the 1880s, Mary Craig Sinclair recalled some of her poorer white neighbors. “Mrs. Jefferson Davis called (them) ‘the clayeaters,’” she wrote, “and all of them had the complexions of the color of the clay which they ate to satisfy their starved bodies” (Sinclair 1957:7).

The ingestion of dirt among African-American slaves was first reported in the notes of antebellum physicians, who saw the practice as a malady which they termed *Cachexia africanus*. The slaves who suffered from this illness were described as being addicted to clay to the point that they “became sluggish and debilitated, their skin changed to a whitish hue, and many of them eventually died” (Twyman 1971:”I). The antebellum Louisiana physician Dr. William Carpenter reported that the practice was so widespread in some areas of his state that several plantations had to be abandoned as a result (Carpenter 1844:148).

Recent research indicates that antebellum doctors and slaveholders were probably mistaken in their belief that the digestion of soils was the cause of the slaves’ sickness (Frate:34). Some accounts of the illness report that other materials such as charcoal, wood, and hair were also consumed by the sufferers (Laufer 1930:154), which would indicate that it was possibly related to a mental disorder. Pica (the ingestion of non-food items) has been found to occur in chronic schizophrenics, as well as among other sufferers of mental illnesses (McLoughlin 1987:288).

The consumption of clay continued to be practiced by Southerners during the postbellum period and throughout much of the twentieth century. In 1934, residents of the De Soto Park area of Memphis, Tennessee, discovered that clay eaters had descended on a particularly inviting portion of the riverbank, and “digging it out with picks, knives, and spoons . . . removed more than a ton of dirt and clay’ to satisfy their cravings (Finger 1993:11). A study of black



FIGURE 2

Sophia Dabney (left) and Pearl Chapman collecting “sour dirt” from a traditional south Montgomery gathering spot. (photo by Patrick McIntyre)

percent of the respondents consumed dirt on a regular basis (Dickins and Ford 1941:63). As late as 1971, researchers in Holmes County, Mississippi discovered that fifty-seven percent of the women and sixteen percent of the children surveyed still engaged in geophagia (Vermeer and Frate 1971:2132).

It has been postulated that the practice of eating dirt among Americans of African descent represents a cultural transfer from the African continent to North America (Hunter:192). Among eighteenth century slaves brought to the Carribean it was noted that "in Guinea the Negroes eat a yellowish earth which they call **caouac**. When carried as slaves to the West Indies they try to procure there a similar earth" (Laufer:156). It would appear to be a logical assumption that the black American tradition of consuming clay has an Old World origin, although the widespread prevalence of the trait among nineteenth century poor whites logically invites intriguing questions as to how that group became introduced to the custom.

Survey Results

The former inhabitants of the McIntyre plantation revealed a higher percentage of practitioners of geophagia than was reflected in the available forms of comparative data.

Nine of the ten respondents answered that they had eaten dirt during one or more periods of their lives. This figure included four of the five men and all five of the women. (It should be noted that the sole individual who denied having eaten dirt also stated, "I don't remember no one gettin' no sour dirt" despite the fact that his wife and stepdaughter were admitted practitioners.) Only one of the men had eaten dirt as an adult; all the other males engaged in the practice only as children. Of the female respondents eighty percent ate dirt as children while sixty percent consumed it after reaching adulthood. One of the women ate dirt only while she was pregnant. However, of the total respondents, only one male and one female would consider engaging in, or did engage in geophagia at the time of the survey.

Obviously there is an inherent danger in comparing the statistical results of that very limited study to larger sample groups. However, if it could be assumed that those trends would in fact hold up for all potential respondents from the plantation, it would indicate that consumption of dirt was higher

in the area than in other locales. For example, Dickins and Ford's 1941 study showed that only twenty-five percent of children aged seven to thirteen were actively consuming dirt in Oktibbeha County, Mississippi (Dickins and Ford 1941:63). Vermeer and Frate's 1971 survey found that only 16 percent of children and no adolescents were consuming dirt in Holmes County, Mississippi (Vermeer and Frate:2132). Both of these percentages are strikingly lower than the figure of 80 percent that was indicated as the percentage of former McIntyre plantation residents who ate dirt during their childhood.

Procurement of Dirt for Consumption

As was typical of other areas where dirt was eaten, the tenants on the McIntyre farm had very specific localities where they gathered edible clays. The term used to describe the soil by the residents of the area was "sour dirt." In some communities, such as those studied in Mississippi, clays were given names according to the nearest town from which they originated; for example "Franklin Dirt" was known to practitioners as having come from the vicinity of Franklin (Vermeer and Frate:2130).

The respondents from the plantation indicated that the best locations for gathering "sour dirt" were ditches where the proper soil had been exposed by water erosion. Ella Barnes, born in 1906, explained that in the 1920s "we used to go to them places and dig in that dirt until we'd get to where it's sour; it weren't no trouble for you to find that sour dirt 'cause it was plenty of drained ditches and things." Ethel Jackson, (1928–1999) gave a more detailed explanation of the gathering process:

Ladies got together in the communities or on the slave plantations. Or, my husband and I was walking maybe, and we'd pass by this red land; it's derived from red land . . . and you might see just a little ditch there with a little knoll on each side, you know? And you might look on the side of the road somewhere and you might see this red hill that looks good. And my friend and I would come back later and take a hoe that you go into the fields with; shovels were very limited at that time. Take a hoe, and dig into that ditch . . . maybe a foot deep. And

when they got through digging, I would say maybe twelve, thirteen, fourteen inches around, they would come to dirt that was red with a white looking mixture in it, an off-white looking mixture in it. That was the color; they knew it was sour dirt then. Often times they would taste it to see if it was the sour dirt. Then you'd pass the word on to the other women that liked it.

Sam Richards, who was born in 1923, described his favorite gathering spot, now covered by a pond:

There was a lump about that high. Used to be a bank there, can't find none now. I was workin' down there cuttin' that pasture over there, and I'd knock that tractor out of gear and I had me a knife in my pocket. And I knocked that trash back and I got me a pocket full. And that dirt was good!

At least five "sour dirt" gathering sites on the plantation have been discerned based on the ten interviews. It has been reported that often the best new procurement spots were only announced to certain trusted individuals, lest the supply be overrun and depleted (Twyman:446-447). Animals were also sometimes considered a threat to spoil a good pit. Ethel Jackson remembered that "I have seen people . . . take brushes and hide that ditch to where it would stay clean. Dogs or anything like that wouldn't be able to go anywhere near that hole. They'd dig that hole out and they would hide it."

The respondents also stressed that it was important to dig at least ten or more inches into the source pit in order to obtain the best dirt. This is no doubt due to a reduced degree of 'sourness' that was a consequence of natural weathering processes on surface soils. George Harvey, born in 1910, recalled that it was important to dig to a depth where subsurface moisture was detected:

It had suction in it. This dirt right here to the floor, it done dried up; it ain't got no suction in it. Knock that old rough dirt off, and dig you some dirt back in there. Sometimes you just didn't have to go that

far. Just dig in there a little bit. Where that dirt got a little moisture in it . . . it'd lump up like coal you know. Just small lumps.

Just as Ethel Jackson described the appearance of the desired clay, Paula Patterson Barnes, born in 1927, also stated that the preferred soil for consumption is “red . . . (with) little white, dingly grains in it.” It would appear that the local sour dirt is a ferruginous loam similar to that described as being used in Holmes County, Mississippi (Vermeer and Frate:2130). This loam is especially prized since it has a minimal amount of sand in it. One study in Georgia indicated that some practitioners of geophagy there favored a white kaolin clay (Hunter:194).

Comparative historical studies indicated that there was a considerable amount of variation among individuals with regard to the preparation or modification of edible soils after removal from the gathering site. Dirt could either be consumed directly from the source at the time it was obtained, or it was left out to dry before it was eaten. It was often baked, and salt or vinegar was sometimes added to it to enhance the flavor. Additionally, some informants reported that they particularly enjoyed the flavor imparted by the smoke from a wood-burning stove or fireplace (Frate:37).

The results from the survey of former McIntyre farm tenants indicates that four individuals ate “sour dirt” at the procurement site without any preparation. Two respondents stated that they ate it only after baking it, while one individual said she consumed it either way. It was not clear from the interviews what mode of consumption was preferred by the other two informants. Ella Barnes explained how the dirt was consumed in her family:

My mother, she used to just get a little of it. But how she'd do hers, when she'd get it she would put it in the stove and let it bake and that'd get hard. She used to eat hers like that. It was good, though. But I just got mine, since I dug it out of a ditch where that clay was. We'd just eat it as children. Just go on and eat it.

George Harvey recalled that when he was growing up the women would gather together to socialize while consuming their “sour dirt:”

Sometimes they put it down to the fireplace and let it dry, and eat it while it was warm. . . . Some of them would put it in the stove, warm it and eat it. After it warmed they'd set it up and get them a little piece, eat off it, and eat off it, laugh and talk—just like me and you doing. Eatin' off dirt, that was enjoyment to 'em!

Millie Chapman, born in 1951, revealed that she put salt on her “sour dirt” before baking it. Interestingly, no other informants from the plantation recalled adding anything to the soil before eating it. And sometimes the dirt was not swallowed at all, but simply chewed and then spit out (Dickins and Ford:59). Mrs. Chapman remembered her neighbor Bob Harmon, saying “He'd just get some clay. And he loved to eat the clay. You could tell when he was on it 'cause he wouldn't swallow it, he would just wet it and spit it out like he was chewin tobacco . . . he would just wet it enough to spit it out.”

Attempting to learn just how often the dirt was eaten among the practitioners during the fieldwork in Montgomery County proved a difficult task. Characterizations of “pretty regular” and “sometimes” were obviously far too vague for statistical purposes. Vermeer and Frate's study found that a typical clay eater ate some fifty grams of dirt a day (Vermeer and Frate:2133).

Another interesting factor determined during scientific research indicated that both males and females were often discouraged from eating dirt by their parents before reaching puberty, and that it was usually considered socially acceptable only for females to engage in the habit after adulthood. Most women took to eating dirt again after they had reached the age of childbearing (Frate:38). The survey of plantation residents also reflected this trend, as only one male reported having eaten dirt as an adult. According to Ethel Jackson, “They might have, but I never knew of a man that ate sour dirt.” However, Ella Barnes remembered “Some men fool (ed) with it, too. They'd see the ladies eating it and they'd try to taste it and see how it taste, too.”

Evidence from the plantation study also shed light as to how the desire for soil consumption— and personal attitudes toward it— could change over the years. According to George Harvey, his mother Mamie occasionally ate dirt around 1916 or 1917, but his younger sister Ethel Jackson's account related

that her mother had changed by the late 1930s. She recalled that “she didn’t like it, and if she’d seen me eating it I would have been punished. I would have been beaten.” Sophia Dabney, born in 1947, described her desire for dirt by saying “off and on a little craving will come for it and go away and come back.” However, she estimated that it had been ten years since she had eaten any clay before gathering some in the Fall of 1993.

Another interesting observation discovered during the interviews was how the smell of the earth after a passing rain shower could stimulate a desire to gather the clay. Sam Richards observed “Now when it’d rain, you’d smell that dirt a mile!” Thomas Huff remembered that “When there used to come a little rain, you know, just a sprinkle, you’d smell that dirt . . . You’d want some sour dirt. You’d go find it and get it. That’s the way it went.”

The propensity of pregnant woman to engage in geophagia is well documented. A 1964 study of African-American Obstetrics patients at Duke Medical Center found that almost 25 percent of them ate clay (Edwards et al. 1964:109–115). In a 1959 study of pregnant black women in Alabama, it was found that 50 percent were consuming dirt, and that all of their diets were inadequate in iron, calories, thiamine, and niacin. (Hunter:194). Significantly, other sources indicted that the ingestion of dirt by pregnant women interferes with iron absorption, causing an increased frequency of anemia among the practitioners (McLoughlin:287). Among the former plantation members, Paula Patterson Barnes said that she only ate “sour dirt” only when pregnant:

When women get pregnant they crave for somethin’ sour. Some people eat Argo Starch, but I never could eat that. I always went to the sour dirt bank . . . us would go down there, about three ladies, and we’d dig a big hole out in the bank and get that sour dirt and just have a little bag full about that tall, and bring it to the house and we’d eat out of that bag about three days. And the next three days we’d go back and get some more . . . when a child was born we’d practically wean off that dirt ’til one of us would get pregnant again. We’d go back to that sour dirt then.

Mrs. Barnes noted that while she was pregnant with her last two children,

the doctor gave her a pill that removed her craving for the dirt. Ethel Jackson stated that she ate starch when she was pregnant only because she could not obtain the “sour dirt” that she wanted. Sophia Dabney also reported that she had an increased desire for soil during pregnancy.

Comparative studies reveal that folk beliefs have played a major role in determining the propensity of pregnant women to engage in dirt eating. In Africa it has been observed that Nigerian women eat earth during the first trimester of pregnancy “to assure successful delivery” (Laufer:162). Pregnant women in Louisiana reported that eating clay keeps a baby’s body “from being marked at birth” (O’Rourke et al. 1967:584). Another statement made by an informant was “You have to eat clay when you are carrying your baby, or it won’t be born right” (Twyman:”6).

None of the participants interviewed in 1993 were able to ascribe any specific medicinal benefits to clay as it pertained to pregnancy. Twyman’s research found that it was once believed by many that consumption of the dirt was looked upon within African-American communities as promoting good health in general (Twyman:443). The former plantation residents, however, indicated otherwise. George Harvey was typical in his observation that the dirt had “no health benefits that I know of.” Millie Chapman recalled that “it wasn’t healthy.” It should be mentioned also that none of the informants recalled previously described beliefs that clay consumption increased sexual prowess, or that it relieved stress (Twyman:446;) (Hunter:194).

One of the most interesting discoveries from the interviews with the former plantation residents was the use of “sour dirt” as applied to sprains. Thomas Huff recalled the custom passed down from his grandfather Aaron Washington, who had been born into slavery:

Back in those times, them old people didn’t worry about no doctor— they’d do their doctorin’ theirselves. And I tell you what they used to do. My granddaddy sprung his leg. He went to that sour dirt ditch, dug that sour dirt out of there. He got sour dirt and vinegar, and wrapped that leg in it tight (and then) poured that vinegar on that sour dirt around that leg. A day or two and it was gone. His leg was swoll up but that stuff carried it down. That sour dirt was good for more than one thing.

It's good for sprains . . . it would take that pain out of there.

George Harvey also remembered, "You could sprain your ankle and get you some clay dirt, and put it around your ankle. It'd help you, too."

A biological side effect that was reported consistently by the plantation informants was the observation that eating too much dirt led to constipation. Ella Barnes warned "it was a thing; it would constipate you if you got too much of it in you. And I didn't want it to. 'Cause I didn't want that kind of trouble on my children; that's the reason I quit foolin' with it." Ethel Jackson noted, "You had to be very careful because if you slipped and ate enough of it your mother would know it because you'd become very, very constipated. That's the only side effect." Published accounts confirmed that too much dirt could block a person's intestines (Dickins and Ford:59). One medical journal article told of a 31-year-old woman in the Atlanta area who had a bowel obstruction caused by geophagia. The author warned that "Physicians who practice in areas where pica is common, such as . . . the southeastern United States, should be aware of this unusual complication of dirt-eating' (Wren 1989:932).

It was apparent in talking to the study informants that imitation of adult behavior was a primary factor in passing the custom of geophagy from one generation to the next. In the following paragraph Ethel Jackson explained how she started eating dirt:

I think the first time I remember eating sour dirt I had to have been about seven years old. I did this because of what other people did, because I was curious as to what they were eating and why they wanted to eat it. I wanted to see how it tasted . . . the first time that I saw my aunt eat sour dirt I stood there and just turned my nose up and my thoughts were "This is really something terrible that you would eat dirt" and I didn't know. The first time I tasted sour dirt she had gotten a bag . . . she saved paper bags and she would go to this ditch. We weren't allowed to go with her but we would sneak as everything else and watch her go there and dig this dirt . . . I'm inclined to think for me then it was just a fantasy that I got to eat sour dirt. I thought I was doing something big because the elderly person was doing it. That's

how we got to taste it.

Millie Chapman also indicated that she learned to eat dirt from watching older family members, saying “I would just eat it ’cause the rest of them was doing it.” Thomas Huff would accompany his sister to the dirt-gathering spot. “I’d just go over there and gather it with them,” he recalled.

One of the questions asked of the informants is where they thought the practice of dirt eating had begun. Millie Chapman said that she thought the custom originated among people working in the fields “a long time ago (when) they probably didn’t have nothin’ to eat and that would kill their appetite . . . until they could get home to eat.” George Harvey speculated that “people just had a habit of eating dirt. Something that started back yonder; I don’t know where it started at.” His sister Ethel reflected that dirt “seemed to have satisfied a taste that they hadn’t had or didn’t get in the foods, the basic foods that they ate back then . . . (it was) like a luxury, just like getting a Snickers bar now.” When asked if the practice of eating dirt was a long-standing custom in her family, Paula Barnes was emphatic: “It wasn’t nothin’ that came from the family or nothin’; it was just a craving of pregnant women. Nobody in my family ate dirt just to be eating dirt!”

Thomas Huff offered perhaps the most original explanation for the custom and its disappearance:

Old people then, they aint like the young people is now. What they wanted; they’d eat it! But see, young people nowadays they ain’t strong as the old people was. And they get tired with some of that stuff; it might not work too good with them. Because they’re not made like the older people’s made. Old people (are) made out of that good material. What come on back down, it gets wilder and weaker!

Several notable scientific studies have attempted to answer definitively the question of why people engage in geophagical behavior. Early in the twentieth century, the predominant belief was that there was a relationship between soil consumption and hookworm disease (Twyman:”3–4”). In 1942, Dickins and Ford proposed a connection between dirt eating and iron deficiency based

on the fact that “dirt eating was found more often among the (study) group consuming fewer iron-rich foods” (Dickins and Ford:65). Dickins and Ford also maintained that there was no apparent association between geophagy and parasitic infection, and there had not been any subsequent evidence to support such a theory (Twyman:447).

Citing a research project in which school children of a certain age enjoyed eating cod liver oil and then several years later exhibited a dislike for it, J.M. Hunter argued that an appetite for soil consumption corresponded to a similar physiological need based on the nutritional requirements of the practitioner (Hunter:187–188). A study of geophagical informants in Mississippi by Ferguson and Keaton indicated that 94 percent of the participants had “an inadequate diet” (Hunter:188). According to Hunter, geophagy is an obvious result of malnutrition (Hunter: 188).

However, some studies indicated that dirt consumption actually interfered with iron absorption rather than supplementing it (McLoughlin:287). Vermeer and Frate maintained that geophagy was not based on nutritional need, but rather was so culturally ingrained that it was necessary for some practitioners’ psychological well being. The authors reflected “likely geophagia becomes so ingrained in the cultural fabric that its removal leads creates emotional disruption that in turn leads to reduced caloric intake . . . suggesting that geophagical substances in some manner stimulate the appetite” (Vermeer and Frate:21 33).

Frate thought that children of both sexes observed the geophagical behavior of their mothers and were given soil “as a convenient pacifier” (Frate:37). At approximately age four, children of both sexes were discouraged from continuing to eat the clay since it “is considered a woman’s habit; . . . girls are permitted to take up the habit years later” (Frate:37). Although Frate acknowledged that the historical origin of geophagy may be associated with biological drives, he saw its continued persistence as resulting from the long-standing cultural acceptance among African American women that it was a form of food (Frate:37–38).

Conclusion

Recent trends indicate that dirt consumption has been declining steadily in the latter part of the 20th century. A 1984 followup study on ten individu-

als who had been known to practice geophagy in 1971 found that only one continued to eat the clay (Frate:38). Reasons given for the decline include: a large-scale shift by former practitioners from rural surroundings to urban settlements, which result in an inability to find favorable soils; and the advent of mass communication, which has stimulated awareness of the negative connotations that are sometimes associated with dirt eating (Frate:38). Continuance of the trait well into the 21st century is therefore considered highly unlikely.

The responses and trends exhibited by informants from the former McIntyre plantation were generally in keeping with the comparative studies of geophagical behavior. There did appear to be a slightly higher incidence of historical occurrence among the plantation informants, but this may be due to the wide temporal range of this survey as opposed to the time-specific characteristics of comparative studies. Unfortunately, none of the plantation informants touched upon the folk beliefs regarding dirt consumption appearing in comparative literature. It is the opinion of the author that was likely due to the passage of time and that such cultural mechanisms were simply forgotten, rather than a reluctance to share information.

It appears that geophagy represents a culturally determined trait with specific sex and age requirements for acceptable consumption among community participants. Children of both sexes and adult women were considered the acceptable practitioners, although some adult males also engaged in the habit. Although multiple sources suggested that the original cause of dirt consumption resulted from a mineral deficiency, its practice was not necessarily related to malnutrition and should be regarded as simply an acquired habit. ■

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BOOK REVIEW

My Quilts and Me: The Diary of an American Quilter. By Nora McKeown Ezell. Montgomery: Black Belt Press, 1999. Cloth, 192 pp., \$45.00

ELI LEON

“One thing I know,” reads an entry in the hypnotic daily log of National heritage Fellow Nora Ezell, “is that I’m at peace with the world. I don’t bother nobody, I don’t ask no one for help but the Lord, and I’m so glad he has never failed me yet. With a feeling that maybe I would be able to finish this quilt, as I have put in so many hours already, I’m first on a high, and now on a depression so deep it don’t look as if I can get out. But with the help of God, I keep pressing on.” (p.162)

Ezell has made a great variety of quilts, but for her one-of-a-kind appliqué¹ “story” quilts, such as *A Tribute to the Civil Righters of Alabama* or *The American Indian’s Saga (as I See Them)*, she has established a custom of maintaining an ongoing commentary addressed to the quilt’s purchaser, which serves as the main text for her beautifully illustrated *My Quilts and Me: The Diary of an American Quilter*. Although Ezell’s commentary is by its nature repetitive, often plaintive, and largely about matters other than quilting—failing health, loneliness, family concerns, faith in God—the story quilts, exuberant and imaginatively conceived, seem to grow in grace and stature, and, above all, to garner ever more the reader’s affection as the days wear on, signaling a special importance to this idiosyncratic document.

“After 267¾ hours,” she writes on January 25, 1994, “I finished this block. Hope you will like it too. Well, stop lollygagging and get on with the



FIGURE 1
Nora Ezell's *Migration* quilt.

with this oppressed feeling—my family, my children, but I guess it is best that I don't interfere. Maybe they will work their problems out. Damon, I think, is sick and is under a lot of stress. I would love to do something, but I don't know what, and I just simply don't want my feelings hurt. I'm trying very hard to come back and I have come very close to going off the lower edge. Thank God for his mercy. I prayed the best I knew how and He turned me around and once more put my feet back on solid ground. My mind is back together and back on my work, which I love very much. So I better get on with this quilt." (p. 152)

My Quilts and Me also includes brief statements by Ezell's impassioned patrons, a section on rules, tools, techniques, and the like ("The How-to of My Craft"), photos and news clips of the award-winning quiltmaker in the public eye, and a good number of pieced quilts (without accompanying diary entries) that draw upon, and often faithfully follow, traditional patterns. Indeed, one of my favorites of the many quilts illustrated (right up there with the *University of Alabama Quilt* (page 12) and two of Ezell's spectacular "necktie" quilts—*Flower Garden #4* (page 135) and *Gambler's Dream* (page 138)) is a pieced quilt called "Migration" (page 6) (see Figure 1). The quilt block, perhaps of Ezell's own design, is unusual in conception, composed of alternate strips of two different popular quilt motifs—"chevron" (Figure 2) and "wild geese" (Figure 3). The blocks are arranged in four rows of three and vary in color, directionality (the chevrons may point North, South, East or West), and internal organization (the center strip is sometimes wild geese, sometimes chevrons), but Ezell's improvisation doesn't stop there. The top row, for example, is set apart from the others by a *lack* of variation in both color and directionality (all three blocks are orange and vertically oriented), while the second row, although similarly

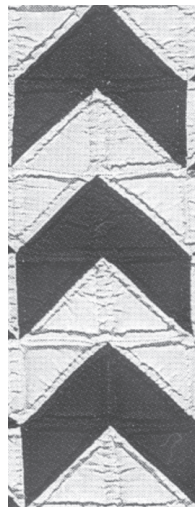


FIGURE 2 (left)

FIGURE 3 (below)



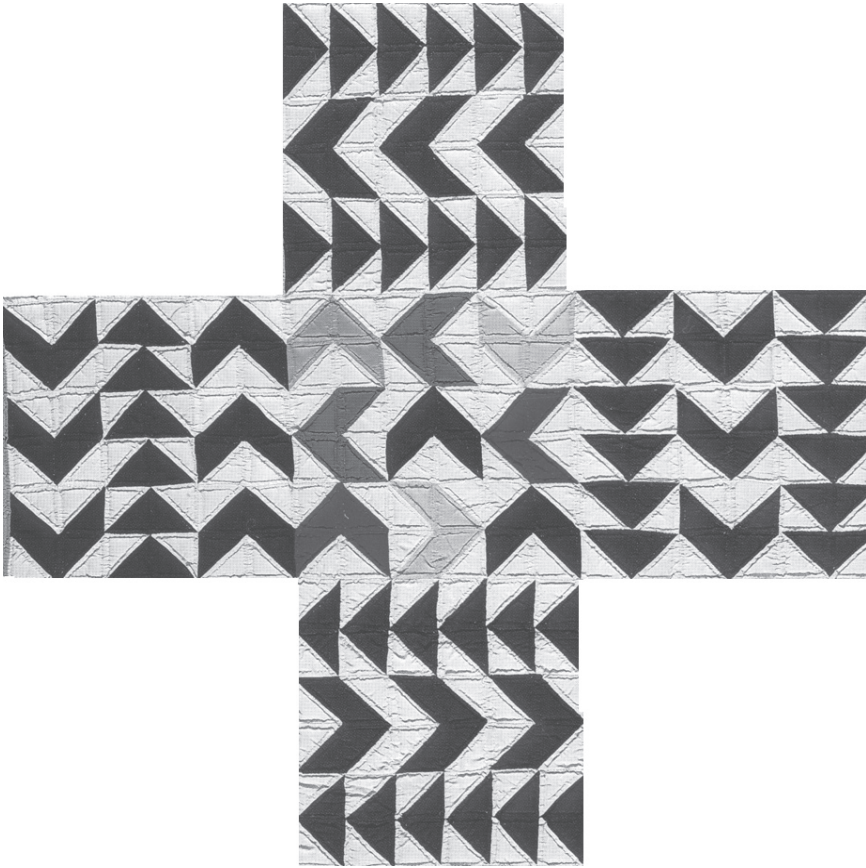


FIGURE 4

“Nine-patch” arrangement from the *Migration* quilt.

limited in directional variation (it features an exclusively *horizontal* orientation found nowhere else in the quilt), clearly color coordinates with the remaining two rows to form a larger entity—a “nine-patch” arrangement (Figure 4) that circumscribes a black cross with a multicolored center. This center, in turn, breaks most of the rules elsewhere established in the work by being the only varicolored, nondirectional (the chevrons point in all four directions), or single-patterned (chevrons only) block in the quilt. Add to this a lone border of chevrons with a brilliant touch of wild geese at its center and a three-sided border of hourglass patchwork with red squares in two corners, and you have

a splendid example of African-American multiple-patterned, non-uniformly-bordered, improvisational quiltmaking.²

Indeed, Ezell fits very well the emerging profile of the African-American improvisational quiltmaker. Despite her meticulous accounting for time and materials (on which she bases her prices), she has been described as laboring on her quilts “like one possessed.” And, despite an apparent penchant for traditional patterns diligently repeated, she explicitly affirms her improvisational inclinations. “I don’t like doing the same pattern over and over again,” she reports. “I put a little bit of me into it.” Clearly appreciating the value of scraps and castoffs (“That’s what quilts are all about. Taking nothing and making something out of it.”), she is not afraid to make use of creative offerings that originate beyond the conscious domain. “I do whatever comes off the top of my head,” she explains. “Sometimes they don’t turn out like what I had in mind, but they are always good.” ■

Notes

1. Two major classes of American quilts are: “appliquéd,” in which swatches of cloth are sewn onto a whole-cloth base; and “pieced,” in which numerous small swatches are sewn together to make a larger expanse of cloth. Ezell’s pictorial quilts are chiefly of the appliqué variety.
2. For discussions of multiple patterns, non-four-sided bordering arrangements, and improvisation in African-American quiltmaking, see Wahlman, Maude Southwell, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*; Leon, Eli, *Something Else to See: Improvisational Bordering Styles in African-American Quilts*; Leon, Eli, *Who’d a Thought It: Improvisation in African-American Quiltmaking*; Vlach, John Michael, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*.

Book Review

In Celebration of a Legacy: The Traditional Arts of the Lower Chattahoochee Valley. Historic Chattahoochee Commission, 1999. 2 CD Recordings with book. \$24.95.

DEBORAH BOYKIN

In April, 1980, folklorists George Mitchell and Fred Fussell undertook a project to document folk traditions of the lower Chattahoochee Valley. Eighteen months later, Mitchell had interviewed, recorded, and photographed more than 300 people. This work was the basis for an exhibit, a record album, and a book, *In Celebration of a Legacy, The Traditional Arts of the Chattahoochee Valley*, first published in 1981. This collection of interviews, photographs, and music offers a window on a people and a place and, on careful reading, our attitudes about traditions and their role in our lives.

The book includes interviews conducted by George Mitchell with traditional artists ranging from quilters and basketmakers, to blues, country, and gospel musicians, to self-taught artists and poets. They talk about their lives, acknowledging the monotony of farm labor and uncertainty of rural life as well as the pride of craftsmanship and the satisfaction of making gardens, quilts, syrup, paintings, or music. Child rearing, love and marriage, rural self-sufficiency, and the need to create are all addressed. All of these people have, in one way or another, persevered through hard times and their traditions are interwoven throughout.

Recalling her husband, Bessie Thornton says, "You marry a man and don't love him, he be good to you and you be good to him, you come to love that person . . ." Later, she describes his pride in her talents, "One time I hadn't

pieced but one block on a quilt, and my husband said, 'Nobody ever get that but me.' He was really proud and loved to sleep under it." Craftsperson Johnnie Ree Jackson talks about the pieces she makes from pinecones and corn shucks and shares beliefs about ways in which an unborn child can be "marked." B. T. Foote recounts his experiences playing for dances, talks about his grandmother's skills as an herb doctor and midwife, and tells stories of "tooth headed doctors, root workers and fortune tellers." From Luscious Robinson, the reader learns about syrup making and about the past Christmases when folks from all over his Stewart County community would go from house to house "serenading and having fun. . . . Folks would disfigure themselves, put dough faces on, put on wigs . . . That's the way people used to have fun at Christmas."

Others tell about leaving home in their early teens and the loneliness and exhilaration of making their way in new places among people not their own. "I would pray to God," said Eddie Martin of his time in New York, "I'm going forth tonight. What will it bring me tonight? . . . I seek and what comes to my arms, I'll grab." Herman Wadsworth's talent for painting came in handy when he was stationed in the Marshall Islands. "I used to paint a lot of pictures on the coconuts they had over there . . . I was the type that didn't sit round and grieve myself. I liked to keep my mind occupied, keep busy with something . . ." Both men eventually found home in the Chattahoochee Valley, Martin settling in to create Passaquan, an elaborately constructed, flamboyantly painted environment in Marion County, Georgia, and Wadsworth marrying and raising a family on a Talbot County farm.

Mitchell's photographs illustrate their words beautifully. There are pictures of each artist and of places and activities that are part of their lives: sweeping yards, playing checkers, picking cotton, plowing with a mule, pushing a cornshuck mop, quilting at the frame, and shelling peas in the shade of a many-limbed tree. Other photographs show the concentration of a fiddler, the joy of worship in a small rural church, and the quiet confidence of a craftsman standing atop an inverted cotton basket he'd made, certain that it would hold his weight.

The two CDs are a fine balance of musical styles from the area including blues from Albert Macon, Precious Bryant, and others, fiddle tunes by Carter Rushing and Gene Jackson, and sacred music from the Morris Family and

Bessie and W. F. Hannah. Selections like “Jimmy Brown the Newsboy,” “Hello Stranger,” and “When the Saints Go Marching In” and “Blue Yodel” show that the radio has long been a part of life in the Chattahoochee Valley, while “A Little Town of Birmingham,” “Columbus Stockade Blues,” and “Alabama Girl” echo places a bit closer to home.

The text, photographs and music of *In Celebration of a Legacy* are best described by these words from Fred Fussell’s update to this edition: “Folklore is not history, and cultural traditions and the people who maintain them are not relics of the past. The traditional attributes of a region are constantly changing, continually adjusting to the conditions of the time and in response to the demands of necessity . . .” This fine collection of words, images and music documents the traditions of a people, time and place, and offers us the opportunity to understand the ways in which their traditions are inextricable from their lives. ■

SOUND RECORDING REVIEW

Spirit of Steel: Music of the Mines, Railroads and Mills of the Birmingham District. An Educational Resource. Produced by the Sloss Furnace Association, Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark, and Crane Hill Publishers, 2000. CD recording with 82-page booklet.

JOHN BEALLE

No history of labor and industry in Alabama would be complete without attention to the steel industry of Birmingham and its vicinity. Steel, simply put, was the economic lifeblood of Alabama's most influential 20th century city. In the complex of industries it comprised—from mining to steel production and the railroads—steel was a way of life for countless thousands of Alabama workers.

This was, moreover, the period of the great urban migration, which brought rural cultural tradition into contact with industrial and urban experience. In these settings, distinctive musical forms developed, some of which, brought to light by the parallel development of mass media, emerged as the definitive forms of 20th century American popular music. Birmingham was thus a cultural seedbed, and the musical traditions forged from steel are among Alabama's most distinctive. It is these musical traditions that *Spirit of Steel* seeks to celebrate, exposing their profound ties to labor experience at this site of rural-urban synthesis.

The CD recording includes 21 selections, most drawn from either of two sources. Many are from 78 RPM commercial recordings made as early as 1925, when northern recording companies began traveling south to record southern

artists and then issuing the recordings to regional audiences. As the liner notes warn, these recordings by no means live up to contemporary acoustic standards, but the *Spirit of Steel* selections are surprisingly clear. The other main source is recent field recordings made by folklorists of artists recreating music that was popular long ago in the heyday of steel. From both these sources, *Spirit of Steel* outlines a vivid picture of a once-glorious musical culture defined around one of Alabama's most important industries.

The accompanying 82-page booklet includes lyrics to all songs on the recordings and features articles by scholars outlining the main styles of music on the recording. "Gandy Dancing," by Maggie Holtzberg, discusses music that accompanied track labor on the railroad. This type of music helped synchronize the precise timing, coordination, and collective strength for what was necessarily group labor. "Notes on the Early Recorded Blues of Birmingham," by Gayle Dean Wardlow, surveys Birmingham's 78 RPM commercial blues recordings, providing essential recording data and artist profiles. "Birmingham Quartets Celebrate the Union Movement," by Ray Funk, explores African-American gospel quartet music, for which Birmingham was a formative site. Most gospel music naturally addressed religious themes, but some songs articulated the struggle to organize the Steelworkers Union. "Fiddling Tunes for Mining Towns," by Joyce Cauthen, discusses the old-time fiddling selections by recording artists Charlie and Ira Stripling of Pickens County. The Striplings began playing for dances in the coal towns in Jefferson and Walker Counties as a result of their radio and recording notoriety, and they composed the distinctive pieces, "Coal Mine Blues" (1928) and "Coal Valley" (1936) for this audience. "The Ballad of John Catchings," also by Joyce Cauthen, addresses the song of this title, sung by union organizers Joe and Esther Gelders and recorded by folklorist Alan Lomax in 1937. The song concerns the conviction and imprisonment, on trumped-up charges, of union man John Catchings. On the whole, these songs reflect the day-to-day experience of those who built the great 20th century industrial cities and fought bravely for workplace conditions that Americans now take for granted.

This package is intended for educators and indeed contributes immeasurably to the vividness of the scholarly record of Alabama labor history. It was produced by Birmingham's Sloss Furnaces National Historical Landmark,

which operates as a living industrial museum and education center. It contains the real voices raised above the din of industry by or about those who had everything to gain or lose in steel. One could do much worse in grasping the labor experience than to hear Trixie Smith's desperate plea for her coal-miner husband from 1925, "Will he come back to me? Will they leave him in the ground?" Or hear the Marvel Quartet boasting euphorically, "Union boys are we, jolly as can be" (1940), against the backdrop of tragic testimony paid, in other songs, to union organizers such as John Catchings or Joe Gelders. Or experience the extraordinary circumstance of track lining songs recorded for commercial sale or zestfully reenacted after a half-century's dormancy.

Spirit of Steel is framed by a prophetic commentary from the renowned labor folklorist Archie Green. Twenty-first century labor, apparently hastening toward a volatile global economy driven by information-based wealth and manufacturers who follow cheap labor from nation to nation, seems destined to veer farther and farther from the economic modalities that built Alabama's largest city. Gandy dancing and Joe Gelders are half-forgotten, and along with them the profoundly discernible interdependency of boss and worker, labor and capital, industry and urban place, union and management. Cast in this light, *Spirit of Steel* is not merely a reminiscence, but a beacon to future generations, proclaiming the strength of American labor at its finest hour. ■

BOOK REVIEW

Benjamin Lloyd's Hymn Book: A Primitive Baptist Song Tradition Containing Essays and a Compact Disc Illustrating the History of *The Primitive Hymns* and the Variety of Ways in which Primitive Baptists Sing from this Word-Only Hymn Book. Ed. By Joyce H. Cauthen. Montgomery: Alabama Folklife Association, 1999. Cloth, \$25, paper, \$18.

HARRY ESKEW

Perhaps the earliest English-language hymnal still in current use, *Primitive Hymns* was first published in 1841 by Benjamin Lloyd, a Primitive Baptist pastor then living at Wetumpka, about a dozen miles northeast of Montgomery. Its earliest extant edition is the third, published in 1845. Although its more than 150 years of use pales against the record achieved by the *Ausbund* of 1564, a German-language Anabaptist collection that is used by the Old Order Amish, it is remarkable when compared with the average life span of 20 to 40 years for most hymnals.

Four folklorists, a music professor, and a professor of philosophy joined forces to explore and document the history and use of *Primitive Hymns*. John Bealle gives an interpretive introduction to this volume, building a framework for understanding this early hymnal and stating the purpose of each of the chapters. Three chapters are devoted to "Congregational Singing from Benjamin Lloyd's *Primitive Hymns*," and three chapters to "Benjamin Lloyd and the History of his Hymn Book." The "Descriptions of Extant Editions" compiled by Joey Brackner is valuable, but incomplete. For example, although the Library of Congress copy of the 1906 edition does not include "The Romish Lady," this

reviewer's personal copy of a 1906 edition does include this ballad. It appears that variant editions of *Primitive Hymns* were published in this same year.

Tucked in a pocket in the back of this study is a compact disc containing twenty selections sung from this hymnal. Extensive notes on the recording, an index, and a short list of "Suggested Readings and Recordings" increase the value of this book.

Primitive Baptists, strongly Calvinistic in theology, split off from missionary-sending Baptists around the 1830s. Mainstream Primitive Baptists churches reject certain practices not specified in the New Testament, such as holding Sunday schools and revival meetings, and using musical instruments. In addition to baptism by immersion and communion, they observe foot-washing as a church ordinance. In terms of music, the focus of Primitive Baptist churches is upon unaccompanied congregational singing.

This book is not only a study of the hymn texts of Lloyd's hymnal and its history, but also of the fascinating variety of styles of singing associated with its texts. Bealle's introduction is followed by contributions from Joyce Cauthen, Beverly Patterson, William T. Dargen, Oliver C. Weaver, and Joey Brackner. Weaver, a descendant of Benjamin Lloyd, provides extensive biographical information.

Since *Primitive Hymns* does not use any musical notation, the accompanying compact disc containing twenty examples of singing and the musical transcriptions by William T. Dargen is valuable in introducing this oral musical tradition. Each of the musical examples is accompanied by elucidations from Joyce Cauthen and other contributors. Contributor Joey Brackner observes that most tunes used today in singing from Lloyd's word-only hymnal are found in Alabama's two main shape-note singing school tunebooks, *The Sacred Harp* (1844, current edition, 1991) and *The Christian Harmony* (1867, current edition, 1995). Two of the selections on the CD (numbers 10 and 11) are sung by members of the Deason family, leading participants in Christian Harmony singing in Alabama.

The CD provides a rich patchwork of styles of singing texts from Lloyd's hymnal. Both Anglo-American and African-American congregational singing are well illustrated. These performances for the most part include lining-out and singing the slow ornamented style known as "the old way" of singing.

The single example of solo singing is that of West Virginian Ginny Hawker, a polished performer and presenter of traditional music, who sings a moving rendition of “From Every Stormy Wind that Blows” to the tune “MERCY SEAT.” At times the singers use Lloyd’s hymnal as a basic guide, adding to the text. In “Come We that Love the Lord” the congregation of Oak Grove Primitive Baptist Church of Davidson County, North Carolina, creates a refrain from the last two lines of each stanza of Watts’s text. The same congregation adds the familiar “I am bound for the promised land” chorus to Samuel Stennett’s “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand.” These additions show the influence of other Primitive Baptist hymnals, such as the words and music hymnal of C. H. Cayce of Arkansas, *The Good Old Songs* (1913).

Benjamin Lloyd’s Hymn Book is an important contribution to our knowledge of oral traditions of congregational singing. It is written by competent scholars who have done their job well. It is to be hoped that this volume will stimulate other studies of oral traditions of congregational singing. The Alabama Folklife Association is to be commended for this fascinating book and compact disc. ■

Contributors' Notes

DAVID CAMPBELL received his Ph.D. in American Civilization from the University of Texas at Austin. He is an Instructor at Northeast Alabama Community College (NACC) and serves as the Chair of the Arts and Humanities Division. He has received major grants from the Alabama Humanities Foundation to produce the *Skyline Farms Revisited* and *Reflections* exhibits of photographs made in Alabama by Farm Security Administration and Office of War Information photographers. He recently produced the video *Bob Jones: A Congressional Legacy*. His research on Skyline Farms resulted in his production of the audiotape *Skyline Jubilee*.

GREGORY JEANE earned his Ph.D. in Geography at Louisiana State University. He was introduced to the importance of the cemetery as a cultural landscape indicator by the venerable professor Fred Kniffen, the "Dean" of American settlement geography. He has published a number of articles defining the characteristics of and establishing the Upland South folk cemetery as a true American cemetery type. Currently at work on a book on Southern cemeteries, he is Professor and Chair of the Department of Geography at Samford University.

PATRICK MCINTYRE received an M.A. in Southern Studies from the University of Mississippi in 1995 and holds a B.A. in Anthropology from the University of Alabama. Much of his graduate research concentrated on the domestic lifeways of African-American tenant farmers, with particular emphasis on their housing and associated material culture. A native of Montgomery, he currently works as a cultural resource coordinator for the Alabama Historical Commission and serves as a vice president of the Alabama Preservation Alliance, the statewide non-profit historic preservation organization.

CAROLYN WARE earned her Ph.D. in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania in 1994. She has worked as a public programs folklorist in Louisiana and Mississippi for ten years, and has written about rural Cajun Mardi Gras traditions and public programming of folklife. Since 1996, she has directed the Pine Hills Culture Program, a regional folklife program at the University of Southern Mississippi, where she teaches folklore and fieldwork. She has coordinated a field school for community scholars, produced two major exhibitions on Piney Woods culture, and edited a collection of articles on regional folklife.

Reviewers

JOHN BEALLE earned his Ph.D. in folklore at Indiana University and has written on folksong revival, bluegrass performance, and printed folktale collections. He recently published *Public Worship, Private Faith* (University of Georgia Press, 1997), a study of the current revival of Sacred Harp singing. He has taught at Indiana University, Miami University, and the University of Alabama. He currently resides in Cincinnati.

DEBORAH BOYKIN is archivist and cultural planner for the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. She served as folk arts director for the Mississippi Arts Commission and has worked with a variety of traditional artists and communities in the Southeast.

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ELI LEON, based in Oakland, California, is an independent scholar of African-American quiltmaking. His five major exhibitions have traveled to museums all over the United States, *Who'd a Thought It* alone having appeared at more than twenty-five venues. His exhibition catalogs include: *Who'd a Thought It:*

Improvisation in African-American Quilting; Models in the Mind: African Prototypes in American Patchwork; Arbie Williams Transforms the Britches Quilt; Something Else to See: Improvisational Bordering Styles in African-American Quilts; and No Two Alike: African-American Improvisations on a Traditional Patchwork Pattern. In 1989 he was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship.



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- John Alexander's Sterling Jubilee Singers of Bessemer, Alabama***, (\$10). This cassette recording features Jefferson County's oldest African American a capella gospel group.
- Jesus Hits like an Atom Bomb***, (\$15). CD version of the Sterling Jubilee cassette described above.
- Cornbread Crumbled in Gravy: Historical Alabama Field Recordings from the Byron Arnold Collection of Traditional Tunes*** (\$12.50). This box set includes a 64-page booklet and a cassette featuring field recordings of folk, gospel, and parlor tunes recorded in 1947.
- Traditional Music from Alabama's Wiregrass*** (\$10). A CD capturing bluegrass, gospel, blues, and Sacred Harp singing as done in Southeast Alabama.
- The Alabama Sampler*** (\$12). A CD featuring live performances at City Stages of Alabama blues, bluegrass, Sacred Harp, Gospel, railroad calls, etc.
- Benjamin Lloyd's Hymn Book: A Primitive Baptist Song Tradition*** (\$18 softcover, \$25 hardcover). A book of essays with enclosed CD exploring Alabama's oldest hymnal, published in 1841, and enclosed CD with twenty examples of ways in which congregations sing from it.

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songs.

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