

Tributaries

ON THE NAME OF THE JOURNAL:

“Alabama’s waterways intersect its folkways at every level. Early settlement and cultural diffusion conformed to drainage patterns. The Coastal Plain, the Black Belt, the Foothills, and the Tennessee Valley remain distinct traditional as well as economic regions today. The state’s cultural landscape, like its physical one, features a network of “tributaries” rather than a single dominant mainstream.”

—Jim Carnes, from the Premiere Issue

Tributaries

Journal of the Alabama Folklife Association

Joey Brackner
EDITOR

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The Alabama Folklife Association
c/o The Alabama Center for Traditional Culture
410 N. Hull Street
Montgomery, AL 36104

Kern Jackson
PRESIDENT

Al Thomas
TREASURER

Joyce Cauthen
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Editor's Note

This issue of *Tributaries* offers three widely dispersed glimpses along the timeline of Alabama traditions. ANNE FERRELL's article on "curb lights," a Birmingham area Christmas tradition, is as contemporary as can be. She explores a community tradition in Alabama's suburban neighborhoods where few folklorists have trod. Dr. LARRY ELLIS's examination of Creek Indian origin/migration myths takes us back before the historic period of our state. His analysis of ritual herbal lore and its connection to Creek narratives helps us understand how some of the first Alabamians constructed their world. JOYCE CAUTHEN offers an updated version of her research on the context of "The Ballad of John Catchings" and is a mid-twentieth-century tale of triumph and tragedy. Both of the first two articles are, broadly speaking, examinations of how communities define their own landscapes. The second two offerings are both interpretations of cultural texts. Nothing easily joins all three articles together except the geographic location of Alabama. But then, Alabama is a diverse place where the ancestors of Creeks came from the underworld and where moderns line their property with electric luminarias in accordance with a neighborhood aesthetic. And, as seen in the case of Joe Gelders, the singer of "The Ballad of John Catchings," our state is a place where people have spoken their mind despite dire consequences.

Our reviewers offer in-depth descriptions of two new documentary products dealing with well-known folk subject matter. JIM BROWN offers a review of Alan Brown's *Shadows and Cypress: Southern Ghost Stories*, and DUNCAN VINSON reviews *Sweet Is The Day*, the new documentary film about the Sacred Harp tradition of the Wootten family of Sand Mountain.

This issue of *Tributaries* also begins an important era for the Alabama Folklife Association. For the first time, the Association has a staff person. In October 2000, JOYCE CAUTHEN became Executive Director and since then has done a wonderful job of organizing the Association and planning for its future. Through the years the AFA has done remarkably well as an all-volunteer outfit working from project to project but it is time to step forward and become a more structured organization. I urge everyone who has not yet

joined the Folklife Association to do so and to support us in every way that you can. For your convenience, membership information about the Alabama Folklife Association and the documentary products that it sells can be found at the back of the issue.

I appreciate the many suggestions by AFA members and others as well as the efforts of Randall Williams, the 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.

JOEY BRACKNER

Alabama Folklife Program
Alabama State Council on the Arts
201 Monroe St.
Montgomery, AL 36130-1800
334-242-4076, x-225
joey@arts.state.al.us

“I Am Not Handy, I Had Mine Made”: Christmas Curb Lights as Expression of Individual and Community Aesthetics

Ann K. Ferrell

The last half-century of folklore studies has evidenced a major shift in folk art and material culture studies, away from the study of objects in isolation, and towards the study of the makers of objects. Most recently folklorists have begun to study the effects of consumerism on the folk artist and the objects that he or she produces. The verbalization of aesthetics has been central, as folklorists have struggled with the dilemma of understanding the continuity and change in folk art traditions of all kinds. The most recent arena for study appears to be the collective expression of community aesthetics; such investigation must include those who have chosen to make their homes in the suburbs, an area largely neglected by scholars in the past.

The focal point of this article is the Christmas lights used annually by Bill Boyett, lifetime resident of Birmingham, Alabama: his choice in using a particular type of light, his description of it, and its use in suburban Birmingham. In looking at Boyett's Christmas lights, I explore the ways in which he verbalizes the appeal, for him, of this type of light, as well as the expression of community aesthetics through the use of uniform outdoor Christmas decoration. These Christmas lights are often used by members of communities who wish to establish a “unifying look” (Boyett 1998) in their suburban neighborhoods.

This paper differs from a lot of folk art scholarship in that I have not interviewed the maker of these Christmas lights, although I assumed going into my interview with Bill Boyett that I would be doing just that. I assumed that because his lights are hand-made that he had made them. I found that this Christmas light tradition is a shared aspect of many suburban communities

on the northeast side of Birmingham. The lights are made either by the community members who use them or, more often, by others in the community who may or may not be paid to do so. I will discuss more about the way in which they are made, and by whom, later in this article. I will argue that the users of these lights are central to any discussion of these lights because they have input in making them even though they are usually not the makers. These lights are often, in fact, a product of the community as a whole.

I believe that it is this shared aspect of both creation and use that makes curb lights “folk art.” With this statement I am by no means implying that in order to be “folk art” an object must be communally created. The only defining characteristic I am assigning to folk art here is my belief that such an object must grow out of some kind of tradition—of process, of materials, or of collective aesthetics. This paper does not attempt to define folk art as much as it suggests that we must look not only to rural and urban areas, but also to the suburbs, in order to find and appreciate folk art. Curb lights have become an important tradition for residents of Birmingham suburbs and other parts of the South and are a worthy subject for study.

Use of Lights in Traditional Christmas Decoration and Celebration

We all have ideas and opinions about holiday decoration—what we find appealing, what we feel is just right or too much, and what evokes our nostalgic sense of the particular holiday at hand. Although throughout the United States holidays such as Christmas, Halloween, and Easter are observed with the use of outdoor decorations, Christmas decorations tend to be the most elaborate and perhaps, in my experience, evoke the most opinionated responses. Outdoor Christmas decorations range from a simple string of white or red and green lights to an *assemblage* of items around a celebrated Christmas scene, such as the birth of Jesus or Santa Claus’s descent into the chimney. Christmas celebrations very often include specific use of light, such as the traditional bonfires lit on the edges of swamps on Christmas Eve by Cajun communities (Santino 1994:1). Outdoor Christmas decorations seem, as well, to be more often coordinated by community members and neighborhood associations in efforts to orchestrate an atmosphere of unity in holiday decor. Family excursions to view the Christmas decorations of certain neighborhoods known to

be particularly organized and elaborate have become an important part of the holiday season for many people. Neighborhoods such as these take great pride in the annual displays that attract carloads of admirers each year.

The use of lights during winter holidays is a long-standing and widespread phenomenon with many possible origins and meanings. Some of these reasons are specific to a Judeo-Christian tradition, as shown in the following passage:

The sun, the moon, and the stars have always stood as symbols of the Divine, and in olden times torches, watch fires, beacon lights, and lamps were used to celebrate joyous occasions and festivals The Jewish and Catholic churches have always used an abundance of candles, principally on account of the candle being the symbol of enlightenment, and in the New Testament Jesus is called the Light of the World. (Hottes [1937] 1944:54)

It comes as no surprise, then, to find a common association of lights with Christmas. Perhaps the most obvious Biblical connection between Christmas and the use of lights is the Star of David, said to have beckoned the wise men to the manger in which Jesus was born. The association of lights with the birth of Christ makes them a logical motif during the season of the Christian celebration of his birth.

Jack Santino offers an explanation for the use of lights at Christmas that suggests traditions older than those of the Judeo-Christian world: the association of this time of year with “winter solstice (December 21), the day of the most darkness, after which the days begin to lengthen” (1994:11). According to Santino, “The eight days of Hanukkah and the Christmas-New Year week are festivals of candles and light. Is it any wonder that they come at the darkest time of the year, when daylight is at its ebb?” (47), and posits that the use of candles at Christmas is probably of Roman origin (183). For various reasons, and in various forms, Christmas lights are an important part of the celebration of Christmas for many people.

Bill Boyett's Expression of Aesthetics: The Curb Light

Christmas lights come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. In Birmingham, a common type of Christmas light, called *curb lights*, *yard lights*, or *border lights*, is made from a one-gallon plastic milk jug. I have chosen to use the terms curb light or milk jug light to refer to this type of light throughout this paper because these are the terms that Bill Boyett used most often throughout our interview and other discussions. Described by Boyett:

It's basically the bottom half of a milk jug which then becomes the cover of it. Now, to do it right, most people are then going to use a wooden base of some sort and attach the milk jug usually with a staple to a wooden base that they've just simply cut out with a handsaw of some sort . . . Each one is individual . . . and then outdoor electrical cord is used to link them together and you can make them, I suppose, as long as you want; we simply measured off the yard that we wanted to border or outline And then there is a light bulb inside each one of those

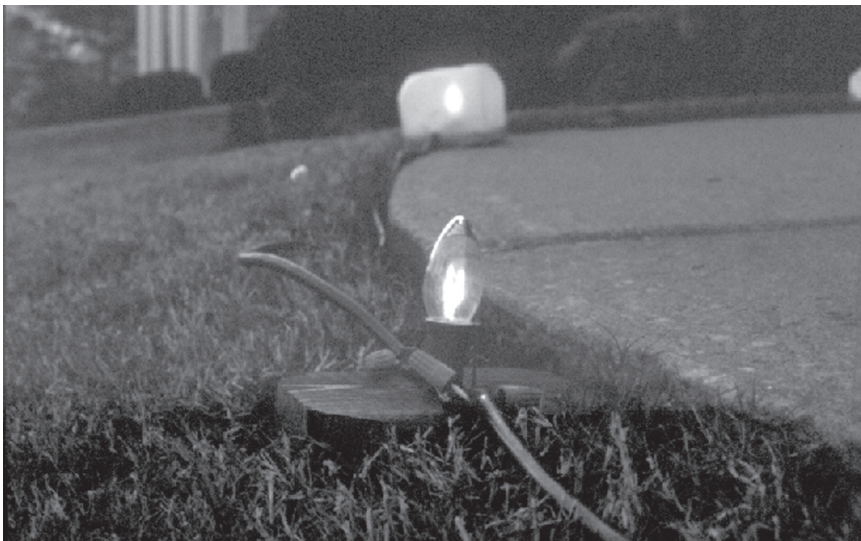


FIGURE 1.

One Christmas light, disassembled, in order to show how they are made. (Photo by Ann Ferrell)

containers. And the frosting on the milk carton sort of diffuses the light, it also mutes it a little bit . . . interestingly enough the bulbs are hard to find You need a frosted or a clear bulb and most Christmas light bulbs . . . are red or green . . . It's more or less a Christmas tree light bulb in terms of shape. (Boyett 1998) (Figures 1 and 2)

These lights are used in different ways in the yards of Birmingham suburbanites. In the case of the Boyetts, who have used them for three years:

We do border one side of our walkway and one side of our driveway and then the entire front of the curb. I've seen people do just the curb and I've seen them do every outlined inch of the yard. Again, I think it's just personal taste. (Boyett 1998)

As seems to often be the case, the putting up of the outdoor Christmas lights in the Boyett family, as well as other area families, is a job for the men. When asked who is responsible for putting up the lights in his family, Boyett said, "That's a Daddy project. I'm in charge of outdoor illumination, like Clark Griswold [of the movie *A Christmas Vacation*]." It is Bill Boyett who initiated and participated in the making of these lights, and who takes them out of the attic and positions them in the yard each year. For this reason, I have chosen in this paper to focus on these lights from the perspective of Bill Boyett only. The indoor decoration seems to be the responsibility of the whole family, including Boyett's wife and his two college-age daughters.

Oh, we do a lot inside. You know, the tree, and wrap the staircase and we put out all manner of things we've accumulated over the years . . . We're into Christmas . . . When the girls come home for Thanksgiving break . . . they can help or preferably do the decorating of the tree. (Boyett 1998)

According to Boyett, curb lights have been used in the Birmingham area for quite some time: "You saw them sporadically, just a house here and a house there, over a very long period of time, I suspect that's maybe twenty years"

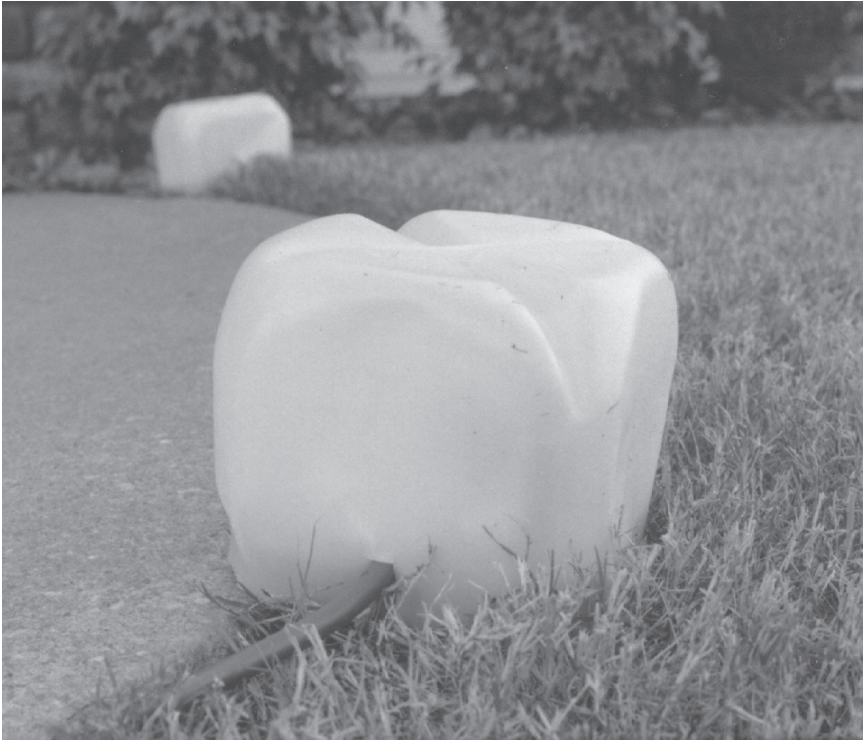


FIGURE 2.

An assembled curb light, close up. (Photo by Ann Ferrell)

(Boyett 1998). The idea of lights in bottles, or even this particular type of light, is not unique to the suburbs of Birmingham. Upon reading an early draft of this paper, a graduate school classmate noted that this type of Christmas light is also used to line the driveways of houses near her home in eastern North Carolina, in both rural and downtown areas (Thigpen 1998). When I first began the work on this article, my stepfather reminded me that in the early 1980s a family friend used this type of light to border his sidewalk at Christmas in Columbus, Mississippi (Ryals 1998).

Bottles make natural vessels for light, as other types of bottles are used as light fixtures on occasions other than Christmas. For instance, in a 1993 issue of *Smithsonian* magazine, an article about Bluegrass music includes a photo of a group of musicians at an informal jam session. Hanging from the canopy under which they are playing is a collection of bottles that have been made into

lights, including a Drano bottle and a baby bottle, along with what appear to be manufactured glass lanterns (Karnow 1993).

Bill Boyett links his type of light with the luminaries he believes originated in Germany and Switzerland—luminaries being a similar idea, but substituting the bottle for a paper bag and the light bulb for a candle. This type of light is well known in the Southwestern U.S. as the luminaria. The luminaria is said to have originated at the time of the Spanish conquistadors, evolving from customs such as Mexican lanterns hung on festive occasions, and are said to “light the way for the coming Christ child” (Santino 1994:185). As Boyett described, the makers of luminarias “would coat paper bags with wax, put sand in the bottom to hold them level and steady and down, and anchor them, and then they’d put a candle in that and light the candle in the evening” (Boyett 1998). Luminarias are no longer found only in the Southwest, but are now a common decoration, at Christmas as well as Halloween and other times of celebration, all over the country, including Birmingham. Boyett is unclear as to how “the leap got made from a candle and a paper bag,” but feels these lights simply grew out of a desire to light the curb, or as he said, “Necessity became the mother of invention” (Boyett 1998).

A quick Internet search led me to another connection between the milk jug curb light and the luminaria: a web site for a company called Southern Luminarias & Specialties, based in Birmingham. This company specializes in both traditional paper/candle luminarias as well as electric luminarias (Southern Luminarias & Specialties 1998). The accompanying photo shows a house with a yard lined with electric luminarias—paper bags made of plastic—in the same fashion as those lined with the curb lights made of milk bottles. A visual connection can be made easily to Boyett’s description of the appearance of curb lights, discussed below, and in Jack Santino’s description of luminarias: “The effect is a shimmering sea of amber, slowly burning through the Christmas Eve night” (1994:185). During my research for this project, in talking with people who had never heard of milk-jug lights, the response I most often received when I described the lights was, “Kind of like luminarias?” This is further evidence, however circumstantial, of a likely connection between these two types of lights.

Bill Boyett verbalizes the appeal of curb lights in several ways. The most

important aesthetic quality of these lights, to Boyett, is the effect of the opaque plastic bottle. When asked to describe the appearance of these lights, Boyett said,

The frosting on the milk carton sort of diffuses the light, it also mutes it a little bit . . . The idea is to just sort of get a muted sort of look, particularly because you have so many, as opposed to a bright light . . . (Boyett 1998)

Like the luminaria, then, these lights throw off a “muted” glow rather than the “bright” light of other types of Christmas lights. (Figure 4)

The idea of a muted and therefore subtle Christmas light is, indeed, common. In a 1937 “how-to” book about Christmas celebrations, I found a description of a hand-made Christmas decoration that suggests a similar aesthetic:

Giant candles made of wooden frames covered with some translucent material such as cel-o-glass produce a very attractive appearance when lighted from within by lamps in home-made tin reflectors located at the top and bottom. A covering of cellophane may be used to obtain a shiny, *frosty appearance*, and this, together with a flame-shaped lamp surrounded by a flame-shaped cardboard cutout, makes a decoration suitable for a number of places in the home. (Hottes [1937] 1944:85 emphasis added)

While the decoration described here is an indoor one, the same “frosty” or “muted” look is the goal.

In Boyett’s description we begin to get a picture of his aesthetic standards of Christmas decoration: they should be subtle, and not too bright. When asked outright why he wanted to use curb lights, he stated,

First of all I’d seen them and liked them, I thought they had good eye appeal . . . I didn’t want to overdo, I wanted to have something that looked good, but still had a degree of understatement to it . . . personal appeal. (Boyett 1998)

If Boyett had simply given as his reason that, “they had good eye appeal,” I would have been no closer to understanding why he decided to use them, what he finds appealing about them, and why he continues to use them, as this expression is a prime example of the difficulty of expressing aesthetic values. Instead, he elaborated by stating that it is the “degree of understatement” offered by these lights that is appealing to him.

One of the ways folklorists have identified as an opening to understanding the aesthetic values of others is the identification of formulaic expressions, such as those used by Boyett. In her 1920s study of the traditional potters of various Southwestern pueblos, Ruth Bunzel utilized several strategies in attempts to better understand the potters’ ideas of a good pot. Her methods included showing artists pots made by others to induce the potters to verbalize their aesthetic ideals. According to Bunzel the aesthetics of the pueblo potters’ tradition can be summed up by a frequently expressed observation of an unsuccessful pot, “Pretty, but not strong,” because although the visual design qualities are important, they are outweighed by the qualities of practical use of the piece ([1929] 1972:86). Geraldine Johnson explores similar ideas in her study of rugmakers in western Maryland. Utilizing the work of Michael Owen Jones who “suggests, however, that while there is a folk aesthetic, it may not be formally verbalized by the folk and may exist only in the form of conventional expressions . . .” (Johnson 1985:140), Johnson points out that the weavers verbalize their aesthetic preferences primarily in their reactions to their own rugs or rugs made by others.

Thankfully, Bill Boyett elaborated somewhat about why he feels that curb lights have “good eye appeal” to him. He favors understatement as opposed to glaring, “overdone” decorations, a fact that is also apparent in his description of the spacing of these lights. The fewer of these lights that are strung together, of course, the further apart they will be. In order to get this point across, Boyett said, “You’re interested in balancing the cost factor and the trouble factor and all that. In our case we didn’t want to be too overdone” (Boyett 1998). Although he couches his aesthetic of spacing in the idea that perhaps economics, of both time and money, were a factor in the decision he made about how far apart to string the lights, in this statement he also informs us

that if spaced too closely together, he would consider them “overdone.” Yet, we all have different ideas of “overdone,” making this statement only slightly less ambiguous than his statement that they have good “eye appeal.” Later, when asked directly if economics played any role in his decision to use these lights, or the choices of other users of these lights that he knows, he stated clearly that they had not. In these statements, then, can be found further proof that part of Boyett’s appreciation for these lights is in the subtle, yet celebratory qualities that he feels they engender.

When asked if he had ever seen curb lights that he didn’t like, he replied,

Not really . . . for some reason it probably has to do as much with the rest of the decorations that somebody might have or might not have . . . Generally I’ve always thought that these sort of added to whatever else was done.

Compared to many others in the area, the Boyett family does little else in the way of Christmas decoration on the outside of their home. There are no red and green lights draping the house or the trees. In 1998, the only other decorations included a large wreath on the front door illuminated by a spotlight and electric candles in the two front windows.

Verni Greenfield suggests that scholars bring distinct class values to the study of “recycled” art and states, “Rather than acknowledging the ingenuity of recyclers or the artistic aspects of their creations, scholars tend to offer economic explanations based on their conceptions . . .” (1984:133). As noted above, economics of time and money played no role in Bill Boyett’s choice to use this type of Christmas light. Although these lights are often of recycled materials (but not always, as I discuss below), a more important quality to Boyett is the fact that they remain relatively hidden during the day and yet prominent at night:

But around here, at least, they sort of blend into the landscape in the daytime, nobody really looks at them, certainly not with a critical eye. And then at night all you see is the sort of warm glow and the

decorative look and that sort of thing . . . You just sort of see the total picture of that along with other yard or house decorations for the season. (Boyett 1998)

An economic approach to these lights would tell us little; it is the creativity of design which we must look towards to reach an appreciation for these lights.

Boyett also expressed the appeal, for him, of curb lights during a discussion of a manufactured Christmas light that is now available and attempts to produce a similar effect. A neighbor of Boyett used this type of light.

She's got, as the old saying goes, a "store-bought version" . . . not to knock hers in favor of ours, but I really like ours better, because the store-bought version, or commercially produced version, has a different kind of . . . The top that would be the equivalent of our milk-jug bottom is just sort of a plastic kind of a thing, and I don't think it gives quite the same good look. Although the finished product looks obviously nicer, it's molded plastic of some sort. . . . I think it's just more personal taste and eye appeal and I think probably also it's a little bit of what I am used to. This commercially produced product is relatively new and so I'm just not used to seeing it. I've seen it in a couple of places.

For the most part, Boyett expressed merely that "I really like ours better" and that the difference is, again, in "eye appeal" (Boyett 1998). Perhaps being afraid that word might get back to the neighbor that uses the manufactured type, or perhaps simply never having thought of the reasons why, he could or would make no further statements about what exactly it is about the manufactured type that was less appealing to him. Importantly, he identified tradition as a factor motivating his aesthetic ideal of an attractive Christmas light, and he later stated that it would be difficult to design a mass-produced string of lights so that the length would appropriately fit the yard in which it would be used.

Fitting accurately in the yard is a major consideration for Boyett in the set-up of these lights, displayed by his comment about the yearly storage of

them: “I have learned as I’ve gone along that one makes a detailed map of each strand and where it goes . . .” (Boyett 1998). The first year he used these lights he had trouble differentiating the several different strands, each measured and made to conform exactly to the length of his walkway, driveway, and curb.

Expression of Community Aesthetics

In the early part of the twentieth century material culture specialists focused their studies not on the makers or users of folk art but on the objects themselves. Makers were viewed as vessels who merely passed on traditions, with no role in creating, changing, or improving the objects or the means of making them. Not until Ruth Bunzel’s *The Pueblo Potter* did the focus take a turn toward the individual makers of these objects ([1929] 1972). Others, however, did not take up her innovative approach, and it was not until the 1960s that folklorists moved to the study of the makers of folk art. Folklorists such as Michael Owen Jones took a behaviorist approach to the individual artist and the expression of life circumstances and emotional states through folk art (1989), while others, such as Henry Glassie, attempted to understand the “mind of the maker” by studying objects, such as houses, in isolation (1975). Although it is very recently that folklorists began to look at the idea of a community aesthetic as expressed by individuals, once again Ruth Bunzel was ahead of her time, discussing, if only briefly, the commonly-held ideas of a well-made pot. Scholars such as Bunzel, Jones, and Geraldine Johnson (1985) discuss the ways in which the consumers’ aesthetics affect the makers of the objects and the changes they might or might not make to their designs to accommodate the demands of the market. But these scholars tell us little about communities of consumers and the ways in which the display of local folk art may express community aesthetics.

More recently, folklorists have begun to look at the users of folk art and their expression of community aesthetics in how and what they choose to display in public spaces. For instance, Elaine Eff looks at the painted screen tradition of southeast Baltimore not only to discuss the artists involved in this art form, but the varying reasons for the continued use of these screens and their meanings to their users (1984). These screens are painted by local artists and replace ordinary screens in the windows and doors of homes that face the

streets of southeast Baltimore. While there are various reasons for using these screens, they both create and maintain a feeling of community in the neighborhoods in which they are used. She states that “The same phenomena of taste that has turned row upon row of brick into row upon row of Formstone has caused these same owners to choose conformity rather than to scorn it” (1984:23). In the documentary film directed by Elaine Eff, *The Screen Painters* (1988), Baltimoreans express pride in a unique tradition, feelings about what makes a “nice neighborhood,” the expression of similar people living together, and the creation of community through common aesthetics.

This same idea can be applied to the use of curb lights in suburban Birmingham. In recent years folklorists have begun to acknowledge neglect of the folklife of suburban areas. Early folklorists looked to the inhabitants of rural areas to find folklore, the surviving vestiges of times long past. With the exception of “popularizers” such as Benjamin Botkin, it was only in the last few decades that it was realized that folklore is present in urban areas as well, and that folklore exists, in fact, everywhere that there are people.

The folklore of suburban areas has been scarcely touched; folklorists such as John Dorst (1989) can be cited as among the few exceptions. For many of us, the suburbs bring to mind alienation, isolation, and a general lack of folk culture and expression of group identity. Jack Santino sums up the folklorist’s limited view of the suburbs’ role in modernity:

Communities filled with people who are tied together through kinship and friendship are being replaced in a mobile society by apartment complexes where people often do not know their neighbors well, if at all, and by neighbors with rapid rates of turnover. Perhaps these public statements of private ritual reflect the fact that many of the old ties of mutual dependence and reciprocity are changing The holiday decorations, the assemblages, the birthday balloons, all are statements to an audience that shares the same language and participates in the same events. Maybe this shows that despite the anonymity of today’s world, we are still a closely-knit society—a large one, related through the media, but in touch (1994:40).

As I wrote the first draft of this paper I sat in a suburban apartment surrounded by neighbors I barely knew. Yet I thought back to the most recent holiday, Halloween, and reflected on the process of decoration that I witnessed—each of my neighbors (and I) decorating our stoops, one by one, encouraged by each other. Though in this process one might see, like Santino, merely “statements” about our shared contexts, this process also acted as a means through which this small community of neighbors connected and communicated as we commented on and enjoyed each others’ jack-o-lanterns and cardboard ghosts. While suburban areas can be looked at in terms of isolation, there are alternative means through which to view them.

Works such as Dorst’s study of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, certainly do little to challenge these stereotypical ideas of suburban areas. Dorst’s study, in fact, only serves to further our stereotypes of suburban areas—in part because of the perspective of his research: “It should be apparent that I have not been particularly concerned with the lives of the people who inhabit Chadds Ford . . .” (1989:208). Dorst looks at the ways that post-modern communities, specifically the suburban Chadds Ford area, represent themselves through what he calls “auto-ethnography.” He is not interested in Chadds Ford as a community or region, but as an “image” or “idea” (1989:3). Communal expression such as the Christmas lights of the Birmingham area require, and deserve, that we question these assumptions about suburban isolation and look at what suburban communities have to tell us about folklife at the end of the twentieth century. By continuing to concentrate only on the lore and life of rural and urban areas, of marginalized groups as opposed to those of the middle class, are we not continuing the very same practices that we criticize in the folklorists who came before us?

The Christmas curb lights discussed in this paper express not only the aesthetics of Bill Boyett, but those of many people in the Birmingham area and not only as individuals but as a collective community. Most often, these lights are used not by isolated individuals, but by those in neighboring homes in an effort to produce a collective Christmas landscape. This tradition exists in several neighborhoods around Birmingham, including a suburb in Argo, Alabama, several miles from Bill Boyett’s neighborhood. According to resident Leta Brackner, about seventy houses in the subdivision of Misty Pines are

decorated with milk-jug lights each year (Brackner 1998). Although the street on which Boyett lives can boast only a handful of curb-light adorned homes, he repeatedly held up a nearby subdivision, Stonehedge, as an example of, perhaps, what he hopes his neighborhood could aspire to. This entire neighborhood, according to Boyett, has decorated as a group, using curb lights, for about ten years.

But there's a subdivision near here called Stonehedge and at Christmas they virtually light the entire subdivision . . . with the electric version, as well as other yard and house decor. A lot of electrical—sort of like Clark Griswold in the “Christmas Vacation” movie or [laughing] whatever it was. They, as I say, do the whole subdivision for the most part. I think there may be one Scrooge or two in there . . . it looks great, particularly the way the subdivision is positioned (Boyett 1998).

Stonehedge is located just off of the same heavily trafficked road as Bill's neighborhood, but in plain sight from this road. Most of the houses in view are arranged around a small lake in which a boat is placed, strung with small white lights. This appears to be a man's project, much like Boyett's lights. In 1998, as the boat was being lowered and draped with lights, about fifteen men could be seen working together on this community project (P. Ryals 1998). Residents of Stonehedge also decorate with (primarily) white lights in their trees. It is the overall appearance created by the community effort, not just the milk-jug lights, which appeals to Boyett. He further expressed his approval of this subdivision by stating, “In other words if you're not in the spirit before you drive by, you ought to be in the spirit by the time you do get by” (Boyett 1998). He stressed his feelings about the importance of community expression of the Christmas “spirit” with his use of the term “Scrooge” in referring to those who do not decorate. Colleen Boyett, Bill's wife, expressed similar feelings about Stonehedge, referring to it as a “winter wonderland” (C. Boyett 1998).

Although the houses of Boyett's neighborhood vary in structure and appearance significantly more than the row houses of southeast Baltimore, they are very similar in the way that many middle and upper middle class suburban homes are. Not only are the houses similar in style and facade (most are either

ranch style or two-story brick), but this part of Birmingham seems striking in the efforts made to maintain a particular look on the outside of the home. Most obviously, lawns are highly manicured and of a precise, close-cropped height and uniform shade of green. According to E. N. Anderson, “By planting a lawn or equivalent, a person expresses his commitment to the community and his feeling of being a part of it . . .” (as quoted in Chittendon 1984:50).

The use of the same Christmas lights by members of neighborhoods such as Boyett’s, Stonehedge, and Misty Pines illustrates this same degree of “conformity” or harmonious aesthetic expression as well as the establishment and expression of a sense of community. One house in particular on Boyett’s street uses Christmas lights that are very different from the lights used by the Boyetts and others. This house favors bright colorful lights strung not only on the house and the trees, but in the grass as well, with plastic toy soldiers about two feet tall lining the curb. It was obvious from my conversation with Boyett that he considered this yard “overdone,” although he was careful to refrain from judgment (Boyett 1998b).

Bill Boyett expressed satisfaction that both he and his next-door neighbor use milk-jug curb lights, by stating that together they create a “unifying look.” The neighbor to which he refers was one of the first to have the lights in the neighborhood, about five years or so ago, and has since passed away. Boyett continues the tradition by putting out the lights each year for the man’s widow, who remains his neighbor. He also relayed to me that another neighbor had, several years ago, been the first to encourage everyone in their subdivision to adopt this type of Christmas light. His now deceased next-door neighbor did so in part because his house was on the corner and was the first house to be seen when entering this subdivision. In Boyett’s words:

In our case my next door neighbor and I, whose yards join, both do it. And I think it—where the yards lay that, as people approach the subdivision and turn in, that it sort of gives a real nice appearance, unifying those two yards. (Boyett 1998)

The lights of the Boyetts’ and their neighbor’s yards literally meet along the curb where their property comes together. (Figure 3)



FIGURE 3.

Bill Boyett and his neighbor's house during the day; the milk jug curb lights can be seen lining the curb. (Photo by Brent Bjorkman)

Although first Boyett's neighbor and then Boyett were successfully recruited, others were not. Leta Brackner mentioned, during our conversation, that there was a new family in her neighborhood and she is hopeful that they, too, will use curb lights this year (Brackner 1998). Similarly, one resident of Baltimore expressed that "I want to see the whole block with every single screen painted . . . I'm going to work on the neighbors!" (Eff 1988). Through these examples it becomes obvious that community expression can be actively cultivated, but it can also be much more informal. Boyett commented:

Most people around here that have lived here for years have, in the process of driving by homes, sort of really eyeballed what they were seeing and said "those are just milk cartons, milk jugs" (Boyett 1998).

According to Boyett the spread of their popularity was often just this easy: people see them, like them, realize that they involve a simple concept, and decide to make or have them made.

The making of curb lights is an important aspect of their importance in the community. As mentioned above, the users do not always make the lights, yet

they are not bought ready-made, nor do they come from one source. According to Brackner, neighbors—whoever has the needed skills and knowledge—often make them for each other or together (Brackner 1998). Boyett told me that “They are made in various and sundry ways . . . people who are handy figuring out how to do it. I am not handy, I had mine made . . . “ (Boyett 1998).

Although Boyett’s lights were made by an electrician that he knew—a man who had never before made these lights—Boyett was involved in their production in important ways. When asked if he had a pattern that he brought to this electrician, he replied that although the electrician had seen the lights in front of other homes, he brought him the lights that belonged to his neighbor as an example of what he wanted. Boyett played important roles in the making of his lights, particularly in the improvements he made upon the standard form, as well as the decisions regarding personalizing the lights to make them fit his yard. For example, he instructed the maker to use green electrical cord instead of the orange of his neighbors. Boyett explained to me that perhaps green cord was not available at the time that his neighbors’ lights were made, but that he viewed the green cord as an “improvement” because “they blend into the landscape during the day time” (Boyett 1998). He also had the blocks of wood upon which the lights sit painted green to blend into the yard, even though the blocks are almost entirely covered by the plastic of the milk jug. To make the lights conform to the landscaping of his yard, Boyett decided on the length of cord between the lights (about five feet) as well as the height of the milk jug cover.

We did ours probably about three and a half, four inches [tall] and that was only eyeballing again of what looked good to us. I’ve seen people that really cut them down low, what might be only two to three inches. I think probably each person in that case was envisioning their own particular lay of their land whether they have a slope or a hill or a flat piece of property (Boyett 1998).

I have seen at least one set of curb lights, in a neighborhood near Trussville, between the Boyetts’ and Leta Brackner’s neighborhoods, that are only about two inches tall.

Boyett also participated in the making of his curb lights through the gathering of materials, namely the milk jugs. He told me that his family was not drinking enough milk or tea at the time to save enough jugs, so he came up with an unusual way to solve this problem:

One thing that's unique here, is that, at least it was for me, we have a local brand of commercially sold tea, called Milo's tea . . . They sell this tea in what would otherwise be called a milk jug. And when I was trying to accumulate my milk jugs and so forth, we were drinking tea more than we were drinking milk so I got those. And then it became an interesting adventure to try to get the labels off, and I tried every hint from Heloise that there was to get labels off and wasn't being very successful. So, I contacted that company and they were kind enough to sell me unlabeled jugs that I was then able to cut—all you do is just cut the milk jug or tea jug in half and use what is the bottom and turn it upside-down and it becomes the top for your light project. (Boyett 1998)

The use of one-gallon Milo's tea bottles further displays the regional importance of these Christmas lights. While Milo's is available outside of Birmingham, and is in fact also a fast food chain known for their sweet tea, it is a Birmingham-based company—a fact that may play an important role in this Christmas-light tradition. Milo's tea is available at local grocery stores in a gallon jug and is commonly consumed in the Birmingham area. Buying iced tea in a one-gallon bottle, no matter the brand, is in my experience largely unique to the southern regions of the U.S. Perhaps the greater availability of plastic gallon bottles in the region was a factor in the initial creation of these lights.

In Conclusion

Collective holiday decoration is not rare, nor is it limited to the suburbs. By looking at the curb lights of Bill Boyett, we can see not only his personal expression of aesthetics but also the community expression of aesthetics of many residents of suburban Birmingham. In these curb lights can be found a tradition of Christmas decoration that continues to grow. As folklorists move



FIGURE 4.

Boyett's house at night, lit by curb lights. (Photo by Brent Bjorkman)

from looking at the folk art object, to the maker of the folk art, and finally to the users of folk art, we must go beyond the inhabitants of rural and urban areas and begin to look also at the traditions of those of the suburbs.

In the last decade folklorists have begun to acknowledge the creation of tradition by groups of people; traditions of the suburbs provide important examples of such new traditions. Far from the stereotypes of homogenous, alienated suburban dwellers, suburbs such as those of Birmingham, Alabama, prove that tradition is alive and well in these areas full of people from different regional and familial backgrounds who are succeeding in creating a sense of community in their neighborhoods. ■

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**“As Long as Time Lasts”:
Ritual, Alliance, and Cultural Survival
in Creek Indian Origin/Migration Narratives**

Larry Ellis

As origin myths articulate a people's emergence into a natural order evolving toward the realities of the here-and-now, so do migration legends chronicle their travel through these new landscapes toward settlement in traditional homelands. In the oral literatures of many of North America's native tribes, emergence and journey in such “first narratives” are accompanied by the inception and growth of the customs that will define and individuate the clans, tribes, and alliances that inhabit the world first created in the time of myth. Such cultural genesis in oral narrative is accompanied by the development of cultural identities, which will aid tribal peoples in assuring their prosperity and survival in the world of the present.

However, the establishment of Native American cultural identity is a continuing event that does not end in myth and legend; rather, it must be carried on in day-to-day living. As Stuart Hall reminds us, such identities are not “an accomplished fact which new cultural practices represent,” but a “‘production,’ which is never complete; always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation,” often in a performative “re-telling of the past.”¹ In Native American oral traditions, this dynamic comes into play as precedents established in myth and legend are regularly invoked to serve the needs of the present moment. Through the re-presentation of a traditional past in storytelling and ceremony, a tribe is strengthened by a persistent, ongoing production of its sense of collective self. As a place of creation, the world of myth furnishes many of the tools whereby this process is sustained. Holy people may provide physical goods, economic practices, and rules of conduct,



FIGURE 1

Lower Creek *mico* Tomochichi and his nephew Tooanaby. Tomochichi was a contemporary of Tchikilli, the Kasihta *mico* whose delegation delivered the buffalo skin to James Oglethorpe in 1735. (From an engraving by John Faber after a portrait by William Verelst, 1734. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution (negative no. 1129a). Image from *The Creek Frontier* by David H. Corkran, University of Oklahoma Press.)

and hero tales the narrative and performative origins of ceremonies designed to maintain the spiritual and physical well-being of the community and its individual members.

In the oral narratives of the Creek Indians of the southeastern United States, fire and herbal medicines are revealed in the world of myth, either by Creek holy people or by the earth itself.² While fire is entrusted to all the people, medicines are often placed in the care of specific tribes, which, as they come together in the eastward journey spoken of in Creek migration legends, mark alliances by combining their medicines into mixtures that were, and are to this day, ritually ingested in Creek ceremonials centered upon the yearly renewal of the first fire. Thus, the narrative past re-emerges time and again in the world of the present, reminding the people of their connection to the earth and the world of myth while symbolically reaffirming the unity, power, and survival of the many clans and tribes that came together to form what would be called the Creek Confederacy.

The Creek Confederacy was a loose yet effective alliance of more than fifty tribes that exercised significant political, economic, and military influence in southeastern North America from the early colonial period until the second decade of the nineteenth century.³ Most Creek tribes were matrilineal; in any one family, the wife's clan determined property ownership and clan affiliation of offspring. The residential compounds of individual clans formed towns situated along the many rivers and tributaries that flowed from the mountains and highlands in the north into the Gulf of Mexico. These were surrounded by communal agricultural lands and hunting grounds, which were coveted by the white settlers who had arrived in the Americas when the Confederacy was first coming into being. Successive wars with European colonial powers and, finally, the United States, contributed to a progressive cession of territory in what would become the states of Alabama and Georgia. Creek power was finally broken in the disastrous Red Stick War of 1813–14. Following the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the last Creek lands in the Southeast were absorbed into the United States and the majority of their occupants relocated in Indian Territory in the future state of Oklahoma, where customs practiced in the Southeast continue to this day in towns that bear the names of those left behind in Alabama and Georgia.

In the early to mid-eighteenth century, the Creeks were a force to be reckoned with. Their unique geographical position as a buffer between British, French, and Spanish holdings in the Americas moved the European powers and their colonies to seek out the tribes of the Confederacy as military allies, and as partners in the lucrative deerskin trade. In 1735, English settlers in the newly established colony of Georgia, whose prosperity depended upon the goodwill of their Indian neighbors, proposed talks to negotiate boundaries. In response, Tchikilli, a *mico* (town headman) of the powerful Kasihta tribe, led a delegation of Creek warriors and notables to meet with Governor General James Oglethorpe in the Georgian capital of Savannah. He bore an unusual gift: a pictographic text of the Kasihta origin myth and migration legend, “curiously written,” in the words of a newspaper of the day, “in red and black characters on the skin of a young buffalo, and translated into English as soon as it was delivered in the Indian language.” The buffalo skin was taken to England where it “was set in a frame and hung up in the Georgia Office in Westminster.” It was lost, along with the English translation, presumably in a fire. In the nineteenth century, linguist Albert Gatschet discovered a German translation of the first English text in a collection of eighteenth century pamphlets. This he retranslated into English, and then into Muskogee and Hitchiti—two of the Creek languages that were spoken in his day.⁴

The Gatschet text originated in what may be the earliest extant European language transcription of Creek Indian oral literature; however, it is the record of only one of what must have been many tellings of an older tale, and the Kasihta were only one of the many tribes that must be taken into account when using the term “Creek” in an eighteenth-century context (see Note 3). The tale depicted on the buffalo skin, then, cannot be approached as a master text of Creek Indian origin and migration literature, for we cannot know whether it is a definitive variant of a more expansive oral tale or the characteristic utterance of a single tribe whose literary production is somehow representative of the Confederacy as a whole.

With these caveats in mind, we can approach the Gatschet text as a working focus, or point of departure, for a discussion of the relevance of themes central in origin/migration narrative to Creek Indian cultural production—specifically, themes of dispersal, encounter, alliance, and survival; how these

themes relate to the origins, development, and ritual application of fire and Creek medicines; and finally, how fire and medicine serve a significant cultural function by ritually bridging life in the present moment to seminal events in a narrative past.

For the purpose of our analysis, the Gatschet text conveniently offers what very loosely may be termed a “continuous narrative,” covering the period beginning with the emergence of the Creek clans and tribes from below the Earth and ending with their arrival in the traditional homelands in the East. It also originates in the oral traditions of one of the more powerful and influential of the Muskogee tribes that dominated the Creek Confederacy and were its major component. Moreover, the progression through time and geography of the tellings, transcripts, and translations generated by the buffalo skin is itself a tale of origin and migration—spanning utterance, pictograph, and phonetic alphabet, the North American and European continents, and Indian and European languages. This potent metaphor of the manner in which the Creek people and their culture traveled and survived in the face of disruption and diaspora becomes all the richer if we view it as but one facet of a vast dynamic of appearance, evolution, and survival involving a potentially infinite number of variants of the same tale. Although variants may change with each telling and sometimes disappear altogether, the larger tale may never disappear; rather, it will travel, reappearing in new tellings, much as cultures survive and perpetuate through adaptation.⁵

The diffusional nature of oral transmission encourages the survival, in one form or another, of any one tale; similarly, myth and legend generate the means whereby a people can assure the survival of its culture. Origin and migration tales have provided, and still provide, the Creek people the narrative anchor of established custom to construct and maintain cultural identity, and to weather and manage change, whether adopted willingly or imposed by circumstance. Here, Creek cultural identity undergoes a continual process of production that draws the mythic and legendary into the everyday. At the core of this dynamic lie the fire and medicines given to the Creeks in the world of myth to assure their success and survival in the world of the present. They are the literal and figurative link between these worlds, offering a focus of ritual behavior that demands the cooperation of many tribes, just as the strength of

the Creek Confederacy hinged upon the political and military cooperation of its member tribes and towns.⁶ Through oral narrative, such links first make their appearance in the world of the Creeks.

The Gatschet translation of the buffalo skin texts begins with an origin myth that speaks of the emergence of the first Kasihta people from a fissure in the earth:

At a certain time, the Earth opened in the West, where its mouth is. The earth opened up and the Cussitaws [Kasihta] came out of its mouth and settled near by.⁷

It may be significant that the text does not begin with the origins of the cosmos and landscape that gave birth to these first Creeks, although we may never know where the buffalo skin, or the translator who accompanied Tchikilli to Savannah in 1735, began the narrative.⁸ It is certainly relevant to the political context within which the tale was first delivered, for we can probably assume that the buffalo skin was not only a gift but also part of a diplomatic strategy through which the Kasihta planned to impress their European neighbors with the strength of their tribe and its claim upon the land. Beginning the telling at the point at which the Kasihta emerged upon a landscape largely similar to that of the world of their present not only focuses the tale on the tribe, it also establishes their central place in—and finally, claim to—that landscape. For our analysis, it is the identification of the tribe to the land that is important in this first passage, for it is clear that the Earth itself has plans for the people; not only is it instrumental in their emergence (“The Earth opened up . . .”), it actually takes offense when the Kasihta refuse to move from the emergence place:

. . . the Earth became angry and ate up their children; therefore, they moved further West. A part of them, however, turned back, and came again to the same place where they had been and settled there. The greater number remained behind because they thought it best to do so.

Their children, nevertheless, were eaten by the Earth, so that, full

of dissatisfaction, they journeyed toward the sunrise.⁹

The survival of culture itself seems tied to movement and adaptation in this tale, for twice the impatient Earth slaughters a future generation of the Kasihta when they attempt to settle down or return to the emergence place. Clearly, emigration is their only option if they wish to endure as a people, and eastward—"toward the sunrise"—appears to be the path intended for them by the Earth, for they are allowed to travel in this direction without incident.

Several days into their journey, the Kasihta settle on the banks of a "red, bloody river." Here, they live for two years, but again the earth pushes them on—more subtly this time, for as the people notice, "there were low springs there; and it did not please them to remain." With water in short supply, travel once again becomes necessary. While moving toward the "end" of the river, they hear a thundering noise:

They approached to see whence the noise came. At first, they perceived a red smoke and then a mountain which thundered; and on the mountain was a sound as of singing. They went to see what this was; and it was a great fire which blazed upward, and made this singing noise. This mountain they named the King of Mountains, and men today are very much afraid of it.¹⁰

In this passage the Earth, working through the King of Mountains, changes tactics, acting more as a guide than the agent of dispersal seen earlier in the narrative. The King of Mountains is certainly mythic in scope and fearful in its potential, but the people are drawn to its thundering and singing—not scattered by its manifest power. In a manner characteristic of origin/migration narratives, the movement of the Kasihta from the emergence place toward Creek homelands in the East is accompanied by a parallel journey from the world of myth into a reality consistent with a historical/legendary present; singing mountains and blood-red rivers give way to a landscape resembling, more and more, the post-Encounter Southeast.

There is also a movement toward a sharing of agency with the Earth, based upon free action rather than coercion. The King of Mountains acts as locus

and source, offering the people choices regarding what will be three crucial components of their cultural identity—alliance, fire, and ritual medicine:

They here [near the King of Mountains] met a people of three different nations. They had taken and saved some of the fire from the mountain; and, at this place, they also obtained a knowledge of herbs and many other things.

From the East, a white fire came to them; which, however, they would not use.

From Wahallee [the South], came a fire which was blue; neither did they use it.

From the West, came a fire which was black; nor would they use it.

At last, came a fire from the North, which was red and yellow. This they mingled with the fire they had taken from the fire mountain; and this is the fire they use today; and this, too, sometimes sings.¹¹

Now a provider, the Earth gives the people the primal fire with which they consecrate another flame—one they select from four fires of different colors that originate in the four cardinal directions. Its “realistic” color reveals it to be “the fire they use today,” while its propensity to sing reminds the people of their mythic origins. Coming as it does with the revelation of herb-lore and the “many other things” that will serve the people in the years to come, the sacred fire reinforces their tie to a powerful, yet bountiful earth, with which they must act in ritual partnership if they are to thrive in their newly settled homelands.

A potent bond between the concepts of alliance and ritual obligation is evident in the coincidence of these events with the first coming together of the tribes with which the Kasihta will forge lasting alliances. Revealed later in the narrative as the Chickasaw, Atilama (Alabama), and Obikaw (Abihka), they will combine with the Kasihta to form a significant core of a larger Creek Confederacy in the historical period, bound together by common cultural experience and ritual precedent first generated in the time of myth and legend.

Although the Gatschet text is unclear as to whether this proto-confederacy

of four tribes is working in concert to gather or receive these first gifts of the earth, another Kasihta origin/migration tale suggests that they are. Transcribed and translated by United States Indian Agent Benjamin Hawkins in 1798-99, it offers a variant of the tale in the Gatschet text, but with several notable differences. The Hawkins text bypasses an explicit account of a mythic emergence, beginning instead with three tribes coming together near the forks of a river, where there are two mounds:

At this place, the Cussetuh, Cowetuh, and Chickasaws found themselves. They were at a loss for fire. Here they were visited by the Hi-you-yul-gee, four men who came from the corners of the world. One of these people asked the Indians, where they would have their fire (*tote-kit-cau*). They pointed to a place; it was made, and they sat down around it. The Hi-you-yul-gee directed, that they should pay particular attention to the fire, that it would preserve them and let E-sau-ge-tuh E-mis-see, (master of breath), know their wants.¹²

Significantly, the tribes in the Hawkins text begin the narrative as allies—or at least, as traveling companions.¹³ In Gatschet, the ambiguous placement of the pronoun “they” confuses the involvement of the three tribes that join the Kasihta in the discovery of fire and medicine. In the Hawkins variant we see the companion tribes as a single entity, not yet acting in concert but receiving as a group those mythic gifts that will serve them in the future. In both variants, the first tribes of the new Confederacy are either actively or passively present in this crucial stage of cultural production. Indeed, the discovery of fire in these texts is the first experience held in common by the component tribes of the Confederacy. When the Confederacy comes into being, so does fire, and as one survives or falls, so will the other, for fire will become a powerful symbol of cohesion and alliance among towns, tribes, and clans—the basic components of Creek society.

Creek *tahwa*—self-governing towns associated with individual tribes—were organized around sacred fires that were rekindled at the beginning of every year. Tribes living in different towns were said to be “of the same fire” when their bonds were especially strong—the Kasihta and the Chickasaw, for example,

whose long association began in the world of myth, coincidental to the first appearance of fire in their cultural memories.¹⁴

Likewise, Confederacy towns were categorized as white and red, associated respectively with functions of peace and war. Red towns in all parts of the Confederacy were said to be of the same fire, separate from the fire uniting white towns.¹⁵ Fire was also a symbol of unity between allied clans; if links between clans or within a single clan were broken, it was said that “their fire (or light) was put out.”¹⁶ The fact that any one clan could be represented in a number of different tribes added to an already complex web of unifying fires interlinking tribes, towns, and clans—all derived from the first fire given to or constructed by the first Creeks in the world of myth.

Although there appears to have been no single fire for the Confederacy, it took much of its strength from these smaller bonds, in effect bringing their many fires back together in a single, figurative fire of alliance that symbolized the first fire in the world of myth. We can see this in an origin tale told by Sanger Beaver of the Okfuski tribe to ethnographer John R. Swanton in the early twentieth century. Here, “the fire of the confederacy” is kindled by an old man using four sticks of wood. The people, who “were continually fighting, scalping, and killing, who were without law, and went about nearly naked,” come together and obtain their tribal fires from this one Confederacy fire, after which they unite. Swanton observes that the Muskogee tribes, of which the Ofuski was one, saw this tale as proof that they were “the originators of all the national fires of the various Indian nations” of the Confederacy. This not only exemplifies the tendency of a tale to take on the cultural bias of its teller, it also speaks of the significant political and cultural influence the Muskogee peoples held in the historical Confederacy.¹⁷

The earthly symbol of a sacred fire of cultural unity emanated from the power of the Master of Breath, the principal deity of the Creeks and the creator of all life in their cosmos. The first fire proffered by the Hi-you-yul-gee in Hawkins establishes a bond between the people and the Master of Breath through an oracular link analogous to that created by the fire in Gatschet. Instead of simply reminding the people of their connection to and responsibilities toward the Creator by singing, however, it “would preserve them” and let the Creator “know their wants,” but only if they pay it “particular attention.”

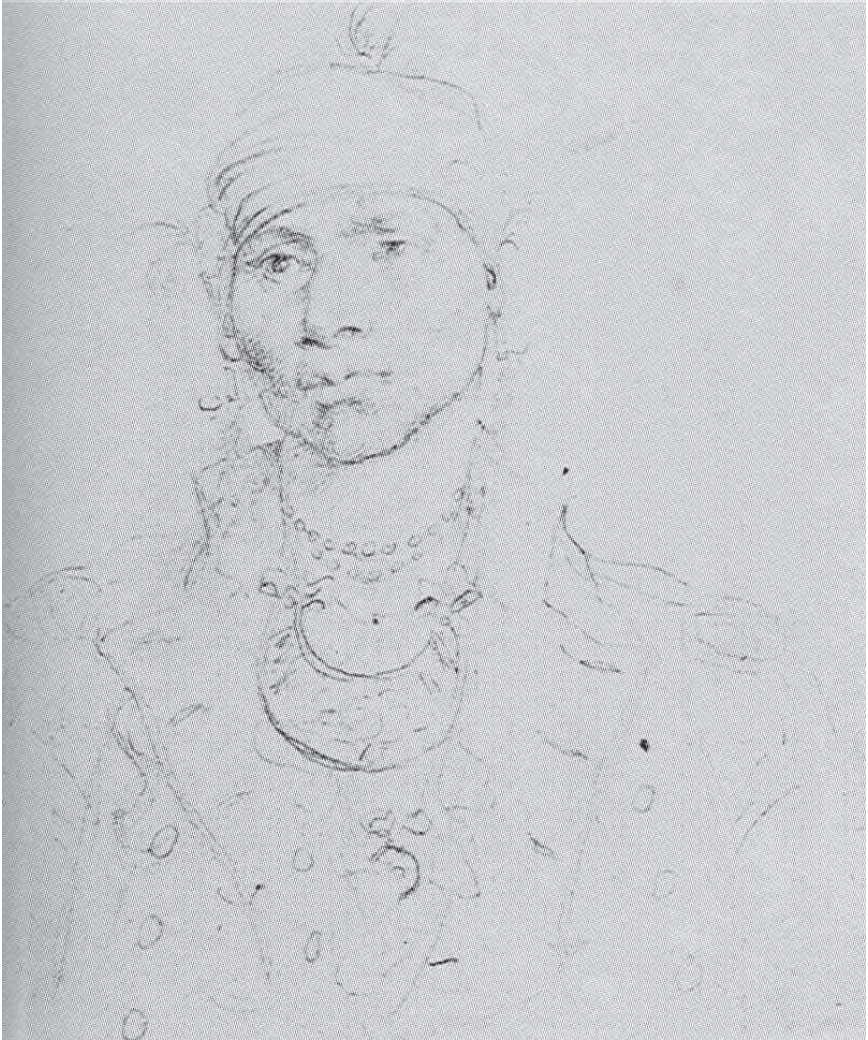


FIGURE 2

A 1790 sketch of a Creek *mico*, thought to be Opeitly Mico of the Upper Creek town of Tallassee. (Courtesy of Fordham University)

What follows in Hawkins, and is echoed in Gatschet, is the discovery of the principal means whereby the Creeks may purify themselves to exercise the special attention required to communicate and bond, through the sacred fire, with the Master of Breath:

One of these visitors took them and showed them the passau; another showed them Mic-co-ho yon-ejau, then the Au-che-nau (cedar), and Too-loh (sweet bay). After this the four visitors disappeared in a cloud, going from whence they came.¹⁸

The ritual medicines the Hi-you-yul-gee entrust to the people are each given to a specific tribe or clan,¹⁹ indicating that medicine is another means whereby the alliances that will define the historical Confederacy are first formed. In Gatschet, medicines are not associated with specific tribes, but have a peculiar feature that connects them both to fire and to the Master of Breath. Shortly after the building of the first fire, the people discover medicines growing on the King of Mountains:

Here, they also found four herbs or roots, which sang and disclosed their virtues: *First, Pasaw*, the rattle-snake root; *Second, Micoweanochaw*, red-root; *Third, Sowatchko*, which grows like wild fennel; and *Fourth, Eschalapootchke*, little tobacco.²⁰

As elsewhere in the Gatschet text, the people receive the gift of medicine indirectly from the earth. In Hawkins, the sanction of the first fire and medicine by the Master of Breath is evident in the words and guidance of the Hi-you-yul-gee.

In Gatschet, it is in the ability of these gifts to sing—perhaps with the voice of the Master of Breath himself. The frequent use in both texts of the Creek sacred number four (four tribes, four visitors, four fires, four medicines, four sticks in Sanger Beaver) establishes the sacred nature of fire and medicine, and by association, of alliance. A divine sanction for the Confederacy is further indicated in Sanger Beaver by the assignation of the first fire to the Confederacy, and in Hawkins by the distribution of medicine among first tribes.

Tales of the divine origins and interconnectedness of fire, medicine, and alliance in Creek oral literature furnished precedents for the ritual practices through which the Creek tribes would live, adapt, and survive during the historical period. The Sanger Beaver text reveals the ritual use of medicine in the building of the first fire of the Confederacy. Prior to kindling the fire, the old man fasts and meditates, after which he is given four medicines and the “songs for each medicine” by the Creator (here called Ibofanga [The-One-Above]) to aid in “the building up of our future generations, to make grow up the women and the children.”²¹ Cultural survival, therefore, is tied to cultural production, and both are linked to the use of medicine and the construction of the sacred fire. How these come together in the world of the here-and-now is explained in the passage following the discovery of medicine in the Gatschet text:

These herbs, especially the first and third, they use as medicine to purify themselves at their Busk.

At this Busk, which is held yearly, they fast, and make offerings of the first-fruits.²²

The word Busk (*Puskita* in Creek) usually referred to the Green Corn Ceremony. This annual rite celebrating the first corn harvest designated the beginning of the Creek New Year with the rekindling of the sacred fire in the square ground of each town. This was accompanied by four to eight days of dancing, fasting, the taking of medicine, ritual bathing, and feasting on the “first fruits” of the harvest. Benjamin Hawkins witnessed a Busk in Cussetuh (Kasihta) Town in 1798-99. He describes an eight-day festival of purification and renewal that “restores man to himself, to his family, and to his nation.”²³

Hawkins follows his account of the Cussetah Town Busk with a brief interview conducted with Efau Haujo, *mico* of the Upper Creek town of Tukabahtchee. In answer to Hawkins’s query on “the origin of the new fire, and of the Boosketau [Busk],” he replies,

I have been taught from my infancy, that there is an E-sau-ge-tuh E-mis-see (master of breath), who gave these customs to the Indians as necessary to them and suited them; and that to follow them, entitles the

red people to his care and protection, in war and difficulties. It is our opinion that the origin of the Boosketau and our physics [medicines, medicine objects], proceeds from the goodness of Esaugetuh E-missee; that he communicated them in old times to the red people, and impressed it on them to follow and adhere to them, and they would be of service to them.²⁴

John R. Swanton's interviews with early twentieth century Creek informants shed a similar, and more contemporary light on Busk origins. While recognizing that the Gatschet and Hawkins texts contain telling fragments of a longer Busk origin tale, he observes that

the Creeks of the present day for the most part know only that it [the Busk] was established in the beginning of things for the benefit of the Indians and that its observance is thought to keep them and their families in good health throughout the ensuing year.²⁵

Swanton's informants tie Busk customs involving the sacred fire and "the medicines that go with it" to the Creator (Master of Breath, Ibofanga, God), and to the prosperity of the Creek people.²⁶ Ignoring the Busk had dire consequences, as Swanton notes in his commentary on the Sanger Beaver text:

[From] such an origin grew the customs and practices of the Busk, and it is said that the tribe was instructed that so long as it adhered to the use of these medicines, customs, etc., it would grow strong, but if at any time they became lax in attending to them, they would grow weak and perish.²⁷

Thus, the very survival of the people is bound to an unceasing adherence to the customs and rituals initiated in their mythic literature. The unique links between clan, tribe, and confederacy in Creek society predicate this survival not only on the attention of one tribe to the representation of the mythic past, but on that of all tribes. True to Stuart Hall's observations, the production of Creek culture and cultural identity that is generated by the representation of

events in mythic narrative must occur again and again for the culture not only to thrive, but also to survive. Origin myths make this linked responsibility clear in the unifying symbol of the sacred fire which must be re-presented (that is, rekindled) yearly by every tribe in every town. Finally, the many medicines that were entrusted to individual clans and tribes must come together, through the ceremonial medium of the Busk, to link the people to the Master of Breath and the larger Creek cosmos.

In his description of the Cussetuh Town Busk, Hawkins lists fourteen medicines (“physics plants”) that are brought together in two large pots on the eighth and last day of the ceremony:

These are all put into the pots and heated up with water. The chemists (E-lic-chul-gee, called by the traders physic makers), they blow in it through a small reed, and then it is drank by the men, and rubbed over their joints....²⁸

All four medicines discovered by the first Creeks in the Gatschet text are in Hawkins’s list. In his own text of the origin myth, Hawkins observes that all of the medicines given to the tribes by the Hi-you-yul-gee are Busk medicines. Three out of the four medicines given to the old man in the Sanger Beaver text are in Hawkins’s Busk list. Clearly, all three texts are, to some extent, classifiable as Busk origin tales.

The narrative precedent for the mixing of medicines into a single infusion that will serve the rituals of the Busk can be seen as Creek myths of origin move into the increasingly familiar realm of legend. Equipped with fire, medicine, and ritual precedent, the first Creek tribes encounter other tribes on their migration eastward. Enemy tribes are defeated in battle and alliances are formed through contests that decide precedence in the growing confederacy.

Busk medicines are not mentioned in the Gatschet and Hawkins texts after they are discovered or given out, and the Sanger Beaver text ends abruptly after the different tribes take their fires from the one Confederacy fire. Nevertheless, several Tukabahtchee legends transcribed by John R. Swanton specifically tie the sharing of medicines to the building of alliances. In a tale told to Swanton by Creek informant Zachariah Cook, the people have already started build-

ing towns in the lands where they will settle when a party of Coweta enter a Tukabahtchee square ground. One of the Coweta asks the Tukabahtchee *mico*, “What have you?” The *mico* replies, “I have only the *miko hoyanidja* [red root] and my whoop.” The Coweta convinces the Tukabahtchee *mico* to perform his whoop. After much hesitation, he whoops four times, holding the *miko hoyanidja* in his right hand and stomping on the ground,

and the earth quivered as if there were an earthquake When he was through, the Coweta chief said “we will be friends. Here is my medicine; let us combine the two.” So they united the *pasa* (button-snake-root) of the Coweta with the *miko hoyanidja* of the Tukabahtchee, and the combined medicine is the *sawatcka*. Thereafter, each used both.²⁹

Swanton presents a variant of this tale as told by his Creek informant, Al-indja. In it, the Coweta seek out the Tukabahtchee to “measure their strength,” for they have heard that the Tukabahtchee surpass their own formidable skill in battle. Messengers are dispatched. When they are led to the Tukabahtchee *micos*, the messengers ask,

“We hear that you have a very powerful medicine which enables you to conquer everybody, therefore we have come to learn about it. Have you any warriors?”

The Tuckabatchee *micos* answer, “We must whoop four times to call them up.” The Coweta agree.

Then they [the *micos*] sent a messenger who returned presently with something wrapped up in white deerskin. They unrolled this and produced a short stick of *miko hoyanidja*. Holding this they whooped once and the earth trembled and it thundered and lightened.

As promised, the Tukabahtchee *micos* perform this ritual four times, after which the Coweta propose an alliance:



FIGURE 3

Pictograph made by a Creek war party, c. 1775. (National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution (pictograph 8). Image from *The Creek Frontier* by David H. Corkran, University of Oklahoma Press.)

“Let us become friends and exchange medicines.” They did this and have been firm friends ever since. The Tukabahtchee medicine was, as we have seen, the *miko hoyanidja*; the Coweta medicine was the *kapapaska* (spicewood).³⁰

The Tukabahtchee and Coweta tribes were bound not only as Muskogee tribes, but also as controlling the leading red towns among, respectively, the Upper and Lower Creeks.³¹ As in the Hawkins and Gatschet texts, we see first tribes coming together to form the nucleus of the larger Confederacy that will flourish in the historical period. These tribes are given a first fire, and afterwards first medicines, often with stewardship over particular medicines given to specific tribes. As Creek society evolves into the forms it will take in the historical period, medicines come together for use in the Busk and other rituals.³²

As Swanton’s Tukabahtchee variants reveal, the first bringing together of medicines ritualistically cements tribal alliances, strengthening their new bonds with the divine power contained in these medicines. In the first variant, the Tukabahtchee *mico*’s whooping and stomping are powerful enough to cause an earthquake, and in the second variant, the thundering and lightning that accompany this ritual are reminiscent of the King of Mountains where, in the Gatschet text, the medicines are first found. The employment of four, the Creek sacred number, imparts further significance to the ritual, and in both variants, the *miko hoyanidja* (red root) —most important of the Busk medicines³³— lends its sacred authority to this demonstration of power.

In Hawkins and Gatschet, similar displays of strength occur as new tribes are encountered during the eastward migration. As in the Tukabahtchee variants, these are tied to skill in warfare and defense, whether directly (scalping contests, battles) or indirectly (wrestling matches, ball play, hunting). Finally, the newly allied tribes cease their traveling and settle on rivers in Creek homelands and build their towns.³⁴

The link between medicine and military prowess in Creek legend is particularly significant to the realities of the historical period, for the Creek Confederacy was primarily a military alliance, “connecting,” according to Gatschet, “the various and disparate elements, which composed it, for common action against external aggression.”³⁵ The contribution of medicines by first

Confederacy tribes toward a single medicine for use in Creek culture's most important ceremonial activity drew cultural identity production from myth and legend into the practical realities of everyday life in the lands controlled by the Confederacy; a persistent attention to the celebration of the rituals of the Busk would invoke the mythic power of fire and medicine to affirm and renew the strength of the political and military alliances that had made the Creek Confederacy one of the most powerful Native American tribal leagues in the history of North America.

If the forced Removal to Oklahoma in the 1830s marked the destruction of the old Confederacy, it did not signal the disappearance of the social and cultural mechanisms upon which the Confederacy had been grounded. Sacred fires were rekindled in Oklahoma Indian Territory in towns that bore the names of those left behind in Alabama and Georgia: Tukabahtchee, Coweta, Kasihta, Abihka. Busk medicines were also taken on the journey. Swanton relays an account given by three Creek informants of the transportation of a "can" of medicine from Alabama to Oklahoma. Reputed to contain "the dried residue of the first medicine ever used in the old country," the can was dug up from under the spot that held the town's sacred fire and carried to Oklahoma, where it was "buried in the same way underneath the fire in the first busk ground on the Arkansas River."³⁶

Although the many tribes of the old Confederacy have largely coalesced into a single Muskogee/Creek tribe, the Oklahoma Creeks still hold clan affiliations and identify with the town, or "grounds" to which they belong. Red and white distinctions survive in stickball game rivalries between towns of different fires.³⁷ The Busk, now called Green Corn, is still celebrated, and in northern Florida, descendants of Creeks who evaded the Removal by hiding in the dense pine barrens which then covered the region tell stories of holding Green Corn late at night in deserted forests, using their automobile lights to illuminate the proceedings.³⁸

In his study of the mythologies of North America's western Indians, Jarold Ramsey concludes that tales of origin are characterized by "powerful mitigations of evil and misfortune according to a principle of human solidarity . . ." Solidarity, that is, among the tribe or tribes that are the focus of a tale:

... this solidarity is specifically ethnocentric, relating to the way in which myth narratives like these confirmed in their audiences the conviction that they were consolidated as the People, for better and for worse the proud and rightful inheritors of a distinctive world and cultural way, and above all the possessors of ritualized sacred stories about how that world and way began, and are to be continued.³⁹

Ramsey's concept of cultural solidarity tied to common possession of a unique legacy of ritual literature speaks eloquently of the cultural attitudes that fuel and sustain identity production in Native peoples such as the Creeks. Ramsey views Native American creation and origin myths as "antechambers" to the tales that follow—those that take place in the socialized cultural landscape that emerges from mythic origins and (in this paper's analysis) legendary journeys.⁴⁰ Likewise, the first rituals of fire and medicine, and the first tribal alliances, are antechambers to their reemergence and reenactment in the here-and-now of the Creek people, whether in the early eighteenth century Southeast of Tchikilli or in present-day Oklahoma, Alabama, and Florida.

The tale of the first Confederacy fire in the Sanger Beaver text was said to have been "contained in a kind of song that had been handed down from the old Indian" who kindled the fire in the narrative.⁴¹ Thus, the story joins itself to the legacy of ritual instruction contained in its narrative. Its audience, like the Kasihta constructing fire near the King of Mountains and the first tribes joining medicines in their eastward migrations, actively participate in a perpetual production of Creek identity by re-performing and re-telling their mythic and legendary past.

Consolidation and solidarity are both product and process of this dynamic, which is as bound to motion and migration as the first people of myth and legend, or the tale that tells of their travels. The narrative of the Kasihta buffalo skin has wandered from West to East to West—from the lands of the old Confederacy to Europe, and then to the nineteenth century United States. Likewise, the Creek of myth and legend migrated from West to East, and then, as a consolidated people, back West in the diaspora of the Removal. The sense of solidarity and collective identity gained through a journey of cultural identity production running parallel to the narrative journeys of myth and legend

has, perhaps, allowed the Creek to survive and thrive following the disruption of the Removal. And attention, as well, to the admonition at the end of the distribution of laws and medicine in a Creek Busk tale:

“This shall be respected and appreciated as long as time lasts.”⁴² ■

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Notes

- ¹ Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” Rpt. in *Contemporary Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Padmini Mongia (London: Arnold, 1996), pp. 110-11. Although Hall’s observations are directed toward cultural production in modern Caribbean cinema, they are especially applicable to the Native American experience in general and the Creek experience in particular.

²I use the standard distinctions between mythic, legendary, and historical times in this paper. Myth deals with narratives set in a world in production, its realities differing from but working toward those of the present day. Legends move through a more “finished” world, one in which events and geography are, to a large extent, verifiable through the academic archeological or historical criteria that define historical time. Usually, myth and legend are fully believed only within the culture to which they apply. Similarly, the concept of historical time is credible only to those who subscribe to its peculiar academic mythos. Certainly, these “realities” overlap, with historical events occurring in the time of myth and acts of mythic creation taking place well into the legendary period.

³The great majority of Confederacy tribes belonged to the Muskogean linguistic family. The Muskogee tribes that dominated and formed the core of the Confederacy belonged to a division of this family. Non-Muskogee tribes were often remnants of tribes weakened by disease and warfare during the first several centuries of the post-Encounter period. Some of these were able to hold on to their languages and social/cultural usages, while others borrowed extensively from Muskogee tribes such as the Kasihta, Coweta, Tukabahtchee, and Abihka. See J. Lietch Wright (*Creeks and Seminoles: the Destruction and Regeneration of the Muscogulge People* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986]) and David H. Corkran (*The Creek Frontier: 1540-1783* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967]) for thorough historical studies of the Confederacy prior to the American Indian Removal Act of 1830.

⁴Gatschet, Albert S., *A Migration Legend of the Creek Indians vol. 1*, Reprinted from the edition of 1884 (Philadelphia: AMS Press, 1969), 235-236. Gatschet attributes the newspaper account to the *American Gazeteer*.

⁵The Gatschet text and other transcriptions used in this paper are by no means the “last word” in Creek origin/migration tales. If these early ethnographic efforts suffer from the cultural and scientific biases that often skewed transcription and contextual analysis, they nevertheless provide some of the earliest extant records of Creek Indian verbal art. Origin myths and migration legends in contemporary Creek oral traditions carry the older tellings presented in this paper into the present day and should be looked at in future work to provide a fuller understanding of the themes discussed here, and a closer attention to the performative contexts that inform Creek oral literature.

⁶Although the Creek Confederacy could bring the combined power of its member tribes to bear in military emergencies, its consensual nature could, and often did, work against unified action and purpose. See Albert Gatschet for a brief treatment of the political organization of the Confederacy (*Legend*, 168-171).

⁷Gatschet, *Legend*, 244.

⁸Gatschet notes that “[t]he chances of rediscovering the English original of the legend are . . . almost as slim as those of recovering the lost books of Livy” (*Legend* 236).

⁹Ibid., 245.

¹⁰ Gatschet, *Legend*, 245.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 245-246. Hawkins entitles this text, "The Opinion of Tus-se-kiah Mic-co, on the Origin of the Creeks, and the New Fire." Although elsewhere I refer to texts by the names of their Creek informants, I use the name of the transcriber/translator on the two variants that begin the paper. The Kasihta buffalo skin narrative discovered by Gatschet was too far removed from its "first" telling in Savannah to be classified according to informant, even if the name of the Kasihta narrator in Tchikilli's party were known. The comparison of the Gatschet and Hawkins variants throughout the paper suggest the use of a standard classification—here, by the transcriber/translator since the Gatschet text seems best classified using his name. Nevertheless, we should not forget that the Hawkins text is a record of a tale told by a named Creek informant.

¹² Hawkins, Benjamin, *A Sketch of the Creek Country in the Years 1789 and 1799*, reprinted in *Collections of the Georgia Historical Society Vol III Part 1*. (Savannah: Krauss Reprint Co., 1971), 81-82.

¹³ The tribes differ somewhat in the Gatschet and Hawkins variants. In both texts, the Kasihta join with the Chickasaw (Chicasa), and in Hawkins the Coweta appear at the end of the text as a division of the Kasihta. That the Alabama and Abihka are not mentioned in the Hawkins text could be due to the association of these tribes with the Upper Creek towns along the Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers and their tributaries—the tribes in Hawkins formed the Lower Creek towns in the future state of Georgia. As a Lower Creek tribe, the Kasihta could be expected to focus at least one of the variants of their origin/migration story on the tribes in their immediate neighborhood, and perhaps another on a broader geographical sample of Confederacy tribes of whom they saw themselves leaders, as we see in Gatschet.

¹⁴ The Hawkins text ends affirming that these tribes "consider themselves people of one fire . . . from the earliest account of their origin" (*Sketch*, 83), although the Chickasaw proper would settle far to the west of Kasihta lands in Georgia.

¹⁵ Womack, Craig, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31-33, 43.

¹⁶ Swanton, John R., "Social Organization and Social Usages of the Indians of the Creek Confederacy" in the *Forty-Second Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1928), 107.

¹⁷ Swanton, John R., "Religious Beliefs and Medical Practices of the Creek Indians" in the *Forty-Second Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1928), 547. Swanton uses the term Creek to apply specifically to the Muskogee tribes, which he often called "pure Creek" to distinguish them from other tribal components of the Confederacy.

¹⁸ Hawkins, *Sketch*, 82. Hawkins notes here that "there are one or two other plants, not recollected. Each of these seven plants was to belong to a particular tribe (E-mau-li-ge-tuh.)."

- ¹⁹ Gatschet translates Hawkins's word for tribe as "gens"—that is, "clan" (*Legend*, 223).
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.
- ²¹ Swanton, *Religious Beliefs*, 547.
- ²² Gatschet, *Legend*, 246.
- ²³ Hawkins, *Sketch*, 75-78.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ²⁵ Swanton, *Religious Beliefs*, 546.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 546.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 547.
- ²⁸ Hawkins, *Sketch*, 77. John R. Swanton gives an account of an early twentieth century Oklahoma Busk, which, although over one hundred years removed from Hawkins's description, tells of similar preparations of multiple Busk medicines (Swanton, *Religious Beliefs*, 552-553).
- ²⁹ Swanton, "Social Organization," 65.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 67. The *miko hoyanidja* (red root) is spelled "mic-co-ho yon-ejau" in Gatschet and the "micoweanochaw" in Hawkins. Alternative phonetic spellings of Creek words were common in pre-twentieth century Euro-American studies of the Southeastern tribes.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 67. The Coweta were of the same fire as the Kashita. The Gatschet text describes this relationship at the end of the legend as the two tribes settle in their traditional villages (Gatschet, *Legend*, 251).
- ³² Medicines were mixed or administered singly in rituals connected to war, hunting and adolescent rites-of-passage, among other occasions (Hawkins, *Sketch*, 78-80; Swanton, *Religious Beliefs*, 431-432, 445). The Black Drink (*asi*), perhaps the most common of Creek medicines, was taken on a variety of occasions, from the celebration of the Busk to diplomatic encounters with Europeans and other tribes to everyday drinking in the town square ground. It was called the White Drink by the Creek for its connection to peace and diplomacy (the term Black Drink was coined by Euro-American traders) and deserves a long study of its own for its significance in Creek ritual, culture, and politics. See Swanton for background on the Black Drink (*Ibid.*, 538-544).
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 552.
- ³⁴ Gatschet, *Legend*, 246-251; Hawkins, *Sketch*, 82-83.
- ³⁵ Gatschet, *Legend*, 168.
- ³⁶ Swanton, *Religious Beliefs*, 547.
- ³⁷ Womack, *Red on Red*, 43.
- ³⁸ Malcolm Reed, a member of the Santa Rosa (Florida) Tribe of Creek Indians and teacher of the Creek language, told me this story in a recent interview. Mr. Reed

attended these secret Busk celebrations when he was a child.

³⁹ Ramsey, Gerald. *Reading the Fire: Essays in the Traditional Indian Literatures of the Far West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 22.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁴¹ Swanton, *Religious Beliefs*, 547.

⁴² Ibid., 547.

Hearts of Steel: The Story of John Catchings, Joe Gelders, and a Ballad

Joyce Cauthen

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The following is a revision of an article I wrote in 1995 for Spirit of Steel: Music of the Mines, Railroads and Mills of the Birmingham District. This publication, sponsored by the Sloss Furnace Association in Birmingham, contains a CD of historic recordings of blues, gospel, and other music pertaining to labor in Birmingham. On it Joe and Esther Gelders sing "The Ballad of John Catchings." When I was researching the ballad for this project, I located one of John Catchings's sons, but he was ill and would tell me little of his father's story. I had to complete the article with very little information about the ballad's main character other than what I could learn from the City Directory and his obituary. After Spirit of Steel was published in 1999, I sent a copy of it to every Catchings in the Birmingham telephone directory and asked them to call me if they were kin to John Catchings. One of Catchings's grandsons responded and put me in touch with Velma Decker, eighty-year-old daughter of John Catchings. Mrs. Decker gave me a heart-felt account of the turbulent times her family went through during the strike of 1934. I also read Glenn Feldman's recent work on the Klan in Alabama (1999), which contains a section on Joe Gelders. In light of these two sources of new information, I decided to revise my article and am grateful for the opportunity to publish it in Tributaries, with the permission of the Sloss Furnace Association.*

Those wishing to obtain Spirit of Steel and hear the Gelders sing this ballad may do so by becoming a member of the Sloss Furnace Association, 20 32nd Street North, Birmingham, Alabama 35222, (205) 324-1911.

THE BALLAD OF JOHN CATCHINGS

BY JOE AND ESTHER GELDERS

Come gather round and I will sing
A song you'll know is true,
About a brother working man,
A man that's union through and through.

John Catchings is a union man.
He joined on charter day.
He did not like a company town,
Where they used clacker 'stead of pay.

The furnace where he made his time,
Is Thomas Mill in Birmingham.
Republic Steel, they owned that plant,
And they're the toughest in the land.

In '33 the Eagle came
And brought the N.R.A.
John Catchings said, "Our time has come,
We'll organize this very day."

And then they had election day
To vote the union straight,
And when the vote was counted up
Republic got a measly eight.

Those rich men's hearts are harder still
Than steel made in their mill.
Republic would not be content
To obey the laws of the government.

Tom Girdler called his Board around,

A frame-up for to plan.
“We’re going to drive that Union out
And we will use what means we can.”

They sent for Thomas Carpenter,
The Superintendent scratched his head,
They gave him a drink from a silver flask,
Then this is what the Super said:

“That man’s that’s Union through and through,
John Catchings is his name,
He leads the men on the picket line,
And he’s the one we’ve got to frame.”

“When we reduce the wages down
Or double up a job or two,
Or when the price of the rent goes up,
He criticizes me and you.”

“He’s taught his family union ways,
His wife and children all,
He tells them they must organize,
Because divided they will fall.”

“So he’s the one we’ve got to frame,
No matter what it will entail,
We’ll put him safely underneath,
The sheriff’s ‘Big Rock’ county jail.”

“We’ll call in that detective guy,
The one named Milt McDuff,
We’ll tell him what we’re paying for,
And make him do his dirty stuff.”

They put John Catchings in the jail,
 The lies that they did tell
 Will close the road to heaven up,
 And send their lousy souls to Hell.

Come gather round me, brothers all,
 Together let us shout.
 If we must take that jailhouse down,
 We're going to get John Catchings out.

When Brother John is free again,
 He'll have a big surprise.
 We'll all be in the C.I.O.
 Republic Steel we'll organize.

In 1936 Joe Gelders was working in Birmingham as Southern representative of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners.¹ One of his cases involved a union organizer that the Committee believed to have been framed by officials of Republic Steel. To draw attention to the case, Gelders and his wife Esther turned to balladry, a musical form by which news of wars, disasters, murders, and romance has been spread throughout history. According to the Gelders' daughter, Marge Frantz, "The Ballad of John Catchings" was created in the following manner:

Dad, mother, and the local Communist party organizer, Rob. F. Hall, sat around one night over a bottle of bourbon and wrote it. The tune Dad had heard in a Broadway play by Albert Bein, *Let Freedom Ring*, which I think we saw in 1935 in New York. As I recall, that was about textile workers' struggle in the South and I don't know where Bein got the tune. Anyway, after the [Catchings] song was written, [my parents] mimeographed words and lyrics and sent them out to all the local unions in Birmingham and generally circulated them.²

The events behind "The Ballad of John Catchings" began in 1933, when

the Depression-era National Recovery Administration, which had as its symbol the blue eagle, issued the National Industry Recovery Act. Among its provisions was the right of workers to organize and join unions, without interference by management. The International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, an AFL industrial union better known as “Mine Mill,” had been granted jurisdiction over Southern iron ore mines, blast furnaces, and steel mills in the 1920s and took this opportunity to launch a vigorous organizational drive. In Birmingham, Mine Mill immediately chartered Republic’s Raimund Red Ore Local 121 and Thomas Furnace Local 137. According to the ballad, John Catchings joined Local 137 on Charter Day.

An election conducted by the National Labor Board at Republic Steel’s Thomas Furnace that year resulted in 281 votes for Local 137 and eight (Republic’s “measly eight”) for no union. Republic refused to accept the vote, however. Afterward, wrote Joe Gelders in *Labor Defender*, “Republic started firing union men, first 25, then 50. A strike vote was taken.”³

On May 4, 1934, the ore miners at Republic, Tennessee Coal and Iron (TCI), Sloss-Sheffield Iron and Steel, and Woodward Iron embarked on a violent strike that was to last for three years. During that time, Gelders wrote, the corporations promulgated beatings, arrests, and frame-up prosecutions of union activists,⁴ justifying these on the grounds that a number of union members were affiliated with the Communist Party. Birmingham’s industrialists worked in league with the county sheriff and the Birmingham police whose Chief, Luther Hollums, declared that the strike was being run from Russia. Hollums assigned two detectives to investigate “Red” activities full time and ordered every member of the department to jail all Communist suspects.⁵ In *Politics, Society and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949*, Glen Feldman points out that antiradical terror had an “official and composite character. The mosaic of forces lined up against Birmingham’s radicals made it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between Klan terror, corporate repression, anti-labor violence, and police brutality. All of these interests worked in concert for the same general objective, preservation of the political, economic, social and racial status quo.”⁶

Such was the mood of the times when the events chronicled in “The Ballad of John Catchings” took place. John Catchings had worked at Thomas Furnace



FIGURE 1

Typical workers' housing in Thomas where Catchings lived. (Photo by Joey Brackner)

for more than a decade before the formation of the union. Born in 1887 in Tennessee, Catchings had moved to Thomas, the company town four miles northwest of Birmingham, around 1922 with his wife, eight-year-old son and two-year-old daughter. In the intervening years he worked his way up to the position of powerhouse operator at Thomas Furnace and his family grew to eight children. His oldest daughter, Velma, recalled that they lived in a nice house. "It wasn't a mansion, but a nice house with nice furniture, and we had a car." When Catchings joined the union, his teenage son was also working at Thomas Furnace and attending union meetings, thus inspiring the lines about his family's "union ways."⁷

Through Catchings the balladeers express the grievances of workers who took part in the strike of '34. He did not like to be paid in "clacker," a slang term for "script" or company currency that could be spent only in the commissary. This arrangement, wrote Horace Huntley, "forced the workers into a state



FIGURE 2

Jefferson County's "Big Rock" Jail, as it appeared in the 1920s. (Photo courtesy of the Birmingham Public Library Archives)

of semi-peonage" similar to that of tenant farmers.⁸ Catchings also criticized the company when they raised the rent on company housing, reduced wages or "doubled up" a job, meaning that one person did the work of two, for the pay of one. Catchings's son recalled working at Thomas Mill twelve hours a day, seven days a week for thirty-five cents an hour.⁹

In the ballad, the composers show Tom Girdler, the Chairman of the Board of Republic Steel, taking an active role in framing John Catchings. They create a scene in which Girdler and his Board of Directors call in the superintendent of Thomas Furnace, who at first scratches his head, indicating either his inability to come up with a plan or his reluctance to take part in a frame-up. After a drink from a silver flask, which hints of the silver that Judas received for turning over Jesus to his persecutors, Superintendent Thomas Carpenter becomes enthusiastic. He vows to make an example of John Catchings and with the help of detective Milt McDuff, bury him in the county jail, locally

called “the Big Rock.”¹⁰

In the 1934 City Directory, McDuff was listed as superintendent of the City Bureau of Identification. In 1935 he is shown as the owner of the McDuff National Detective Agency. Glenn Feldman described him as the director of a “corporate goon squad.”¹¹ Gelders, in the *Labor Defender*, alleged that McDuff had a contract with Republic and other companies to “run the ‘reds’ out of Birmingham in 12 months” at a price of \$1500 a week.¹²

The ballad does not narrate the “dirty stuff” and “the lies that they did tell” to put John Catchings in jail. However, Velma Catchings remembers the night her father was arrested. She says that her entire family was asleep in bed when the police came and accused her father of throwing a bomb in the yard of a non-striking worker near the Catchings’ home. Even though he often loaned his car to the union for their business, it was at home that night. However, a neighbor said she had heard the car come in after the dynamite had been thrown.

Catchings’s case came before the Jefferson County Grand Jury during the July term of 1936 on a charge of assault with intent to murder; however, the grand jury did not find justification to bring it to trial.¹³ Later Catchings was convicted of a lesser charge, possibly destruction of property, and sent to the county prison farm at Ketona, near Birmingham. His family recalls that he served about eight months of a two-year sentence there.¹⁴

During the time of John Catchings’s union activity and incarceration, his family suffered. Velma Catchings was assaulted on her way home from school by the children of a non-striking family who pushed her face down in the gravel of the railroad tracks they were walking on. The family was forced to move from the company house in Thomas. In their four-room rental house in East Thomas all eight children slept in one room out of necessity as well as fear. While their father was in jail, all of the older children took odd jobs and the family received relief payments. A neighbor gave the family a ride to Ketona once a week to visit their father who would tell them, “All my family—my children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren—will reap from what I have tried to do.” She also recalls her older brother telling her in hard times, “Sister, you hold your head up because you didn’t do anything wrong. Dad didn’t do anything wrong. He’ll come out of this.”



FIGURE 3

John Catchings, with his son Ronnie Catchings, left, and his grandson Edmund Decker, right. (Photo courtesy of Velma Decker)

Joe and Esther Gelders were a source of comfort to the family during the trials and Catchings's incarceration. They visited with the family, made a list of the children and their ages, and supplied them with the nicest Christmas gifts they had ever had. Velma Catchings considered the Gelders to be lifesavers. They also worked continuously with lawyers to get Catchings out of jail.¹⁵

Though John Catchings is still in jail at the conclusion of the ballad, the Gelders ended their song on a strong and positive note. In 1935, in the midst of the turbulence, John L. Lewis had formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Thus, assert the balladeers, when Catchings was free to work for the cause once more—this time in solidarity with the powerful CIO—they would surely succeed in organizing Republic Steel.

However, Catchings did not ever become the folk hero that the Gelders hoped he would. After this experience with the union and jail, it appears that John Catchings ceased his activism. He briefly returned to Tennessee, then came back to Birmingham to work for Harbison-Walker Refractories until he

retired. When he died in 1966 at the age of 79, his obituary in the *Birmingham News* said nothing of his days as a union organizer and called him neither a Communist nor a hero.¹⁶

A much more compelling subject for a ballad would be Joe Gelders himself.

A victim of anti-radical violence that led to his premature death at the age of fifty-two, Gelders knew first-hand the difficulties faced by those who challenged the status quo in Birmingham's steel industry. He was born in 1898 to a prominent Birmingham Jewish family and studied at the University of Alabama and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but left school to serve in the U. S. Army during World War I. Afterwards he married Esther Frank of Montgomery, who had been studying at Goucher College. Virginia Durr described Gelders as "tall and thin . . . he looked like a Jewish prophet, with beautiful eyes and lovely manners." Esther "was very lively and pretty and a typical Southern belle type who made you feel at home."¹⁷ They completed their master's degrees and became faculty members at the University of Alabama, she in English, he in physics. There, in the midst of the Depression, he studied social science and economics and independently reached the conclusion that Communism offered workable solutions for the nation's economic woes. The Gelders and their young daughters Marge and Blanche moved to New York to associate with the large community of intellectual left-wing radicals there and to work with the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, then returned to Birmingham where Gelders served as the Committee's Southern representative. In this position he fought anti-sedition bills and the arrests growing out of them, championed trade-union activism, and worked on cases like that of John Catchings.

His first case was that of Jack Barton, a communist in Bessemer who had been convicted of possessing radical literature. Barton had tuberculosis and Gelders was trying to get him out of jail. On September 23, 1936, one month after returning to Alabama and hours after attempting to visit the mayor of Bessemer on Barton's behalf, Gelders was forced into a car by three men, later joined by another, who stomped their heels into his face, chest and stomach and beat him continuously as the car proceeded out of town. After several hours, he was pulled from the car, stripped and flogged until he passed out, then was

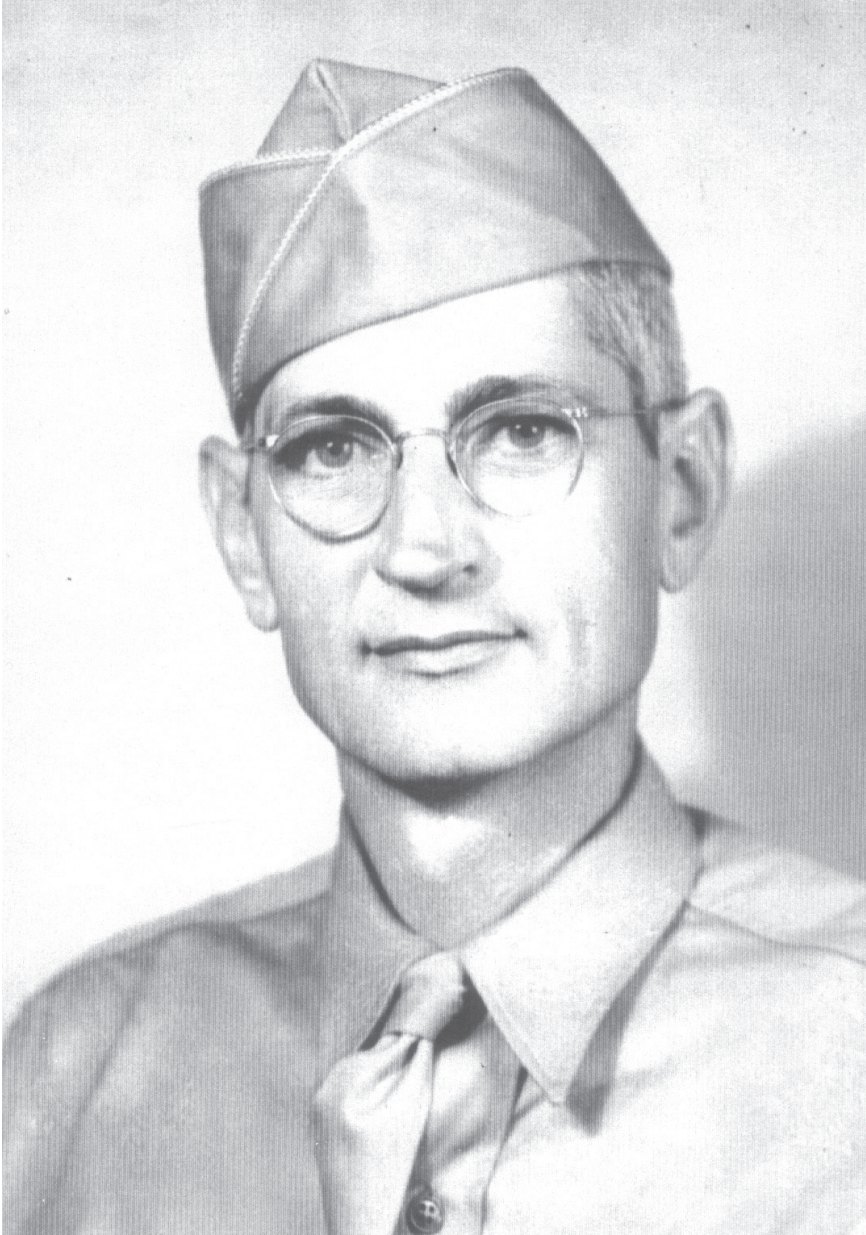


FIGURE 4

Joe Gelders, in his World War II military uniform. (Photo courtesy of Marge Frantz)

abandoned. His injuries, according to the *Birmingham News*, included cuts and bruises all over his body, a broken nose, two blackened and bloodshot eyes, stripes and welts across his back, several lost teeth, and a ruptured heart muscle. Editorial columns across the nation expressed outrage, and Governor Bibb Graves ordered state police to investigate the attack, authorizing a \$200 reward for the arrest and conviction of the floggers. However, when it became apparent that the attackers had close ties to TCI, a powerful steel company that was pumping millions into the economy of the Birmingham District, all further investigation and public discussion ceased. Despite what Glenn Feldman called “a mountain of evidence implicating two TCI agents and state guardsmen,” a prosecutor antagonistic to Gelder’s radical leanings failed to make a case against the men and two separate grand juries refused to indict them.¹⁸

Gelders remained in Birmingham for six more years. Refusing to be intimidated, he worked individually or with whatever committee, conference, union, or coalition that he believed would help establish and protect the civil and economic rights of its people. It was shortly after the flogging that he worked on the Catchings case, wrote the ballad with his wife and sang it with her for Alan Lomax of the Library of Congress. He eventually left Alabama in 1942 to serve in World War II, then settled in California to work on a Ph.D. in mathematical statistics at UC Berkeley. However, wrote Virginia Durr, Gelders was never well after the beating. When he died in 1950, she said, “an autopsy was performed and they found that his chest was just a mass of cartilage and bone that had been crushed by their stamping on him.”¹⁹

Joe Gelders is remembered with admiration by colleagues and historians. His story is particularly well told by Robert P. Ingalls (1981)²⁰, Robin Kelley (1990)²¹, and Glen Feldman (1999). Despite Gelders’s efforts, however, John Catchings remains unsung as a hero of Birmingham’s labor movement. ■

Notes

- ¹ Virginia Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 114.
- ² Margie Gelders Frantz as quoted by Archie Green in *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes: Laborlore Explorations* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 301. The Gelders also submitted the ballad, with musical notation, to *Labor Defender*, where it was published in July 1937.
- ³ Joseph S. Gelders, "Tom Girdler in Alabama," *Labor Defender* XI (July 1937): 8.
- ⁴ Gelders, 8.
- ⁵ *Birmingham News*, May 9, 1934.
- ⁶ Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 247.
- ⁷ Interview with Velma Catchings Decker, Irondale, Alabama, October 2, 2000.
- ⁸ Horace Huntley, *Iron Ore Miners and Mine Mill in Alabama: 1933-1952*, University of Pittsburgh Ph.D dissertation, 1977.
- ⁹ Telephone interview with Ben Catchings, January 1995.
- ¹⁰ The "Big Rock" was a large, gloomy, castle-like gray stone structure in downtown Birmingham, known for its gallows and solitary confinement cells. It was no longer in use when the Gelders were writing the ballad, however.
- ¹¹ Feldman, 244.
- ¹² Gelders, 9.
- ¹³ Robert G. Corley, Birmingham Public Library. Letter to Archie Green, March 23, 1979.
- ¹⁴ Velma Catchings Decker.
- ¹⁵ Velma Catchings Decker.
- ¹⁶ *Birmingham News*, October 18, 1966.
- ¹⁷ Durr, 111.
- ¹⁸ Feldman, 257.
- ¹⁹ Durr, 111.
- ²⁰ Robert P. Ingalls, "Antiradical Violence in Birmingham During the 1930s," *The Journal of Southern History* 47 (November 1981):521-44.
- ²¹ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

Video Recording Review

Sweet Is the Day: A Sacred Harp Family Portrait (Alabama Folklife Association, 2000, DVD and VHS, 59:25 minutes, \$20.00.)

DUNCAN VINSON

Students of Sacred Harp singing know the Wootten family of Alabama's Sand Mountain region as one of the key "singing families" who have kept this tradition alive during the twentieth century. Anyone who has traveled to Sand Mountain to sing with the Woottens, or who has heard their recordings, has heard what Buell Cobb calls "the purity of their blended sound, an ardent pressing of voices against the discipline of the music they know so well."^{*} In an already remarkable musical tradition, the Woottens stand out as a doubly remarkable presence.

Thus it is fitting that a film now joins the print materials and sound recordings which present the Wootten family to the wider world. *Sweet Is the Day: A Sacred Harp Family Portrait*, produced by Erin Kellen and directed by Jim Carnes, is part of a documentation project which also includes the sound recording *The Wootten Cousins: Sacred Harp Singing on Sand Mountain*. A moving sequence in the film portrays the making of this recording at the home of Terry and Sheila Wootten in 1995—including a rendition of "Morning" over the phone for Freeman Wootten, who was in poor health and unable to attend. Though most of *Sweet Is the Day* consists of recent footage, it also incorporates some 1980 footage shot by Alan Lomax.

Kellen and Carnes follow an unobtrusive approach to filmmaking. There is no direct narration, except for a few brief screens of text on the history of Sacred Harp singing at the beginning of the film. The Woottens speak for

themselves, while the filmmakers gently guide the narrative by grouping the material into thematically organized sections named after key phrases in the interviews. In the section “You will go, you will smile, and you will enjoy it,” for example, Terry Wootten teaches a singing school at Antioch Baptist Church in Ider, and other members of the family talk about their early experiences in singing schools.

One of the strengths of the film is that it avoids confining itself to narrowly musicological topics. Instead, the filmmakers show how Sacred Harp singing functions in the daily lives of the Woottens. Not only do we see the family at Sacred Harp singings, but we also see Dewayne Wootten working on his chicken farm and Gertha Wootten Parker baking pies in her kitchen. Just as Robin Smith and Sheila Wootten remind the viewer that Sacred Harp singing is a spiritual practice for them, not simply an “art” or “folk music,” the filmmakers strive to ground their view of the music’s importance in the close-knit family life and the religious devotion which the Woottens consider the purpose of the music.

Because *Sweet Is the Day* does not dwell on the history and musicological background of Sacred Harp singing, it is most appropriate for those who have had some exposure to this information and would like a better understanding of how Sacred Harp singing is a part of daily life. This film could serve as an illustration of Sacred Harp singing for undergraduate courses on American music or religious music, though the instructor would have to provide some context for students unfamiliar with the tradition.

In one of most memorable lines of the film, the late Chester Wootten says, “I’m proud of what I love, and that’s Sacred Harp singing. There’s a lot of people that can beat me at singing, but there’s not a whole lot of people that can beat me at loving it.” *Sweet Is the Day* is eloquent testimony to a remarkable extended family and their love for a musical tradition. By focusing on this love, and not just on the singing itself, Kellen and Carnes have shown that Sacred Harp singing is a lot more than just old songs and a unique notation. ■

*Cobb, Buell. 1995:40. “Sand Mountain’s Wootten Family: Sacred Harp Singers.” In *In the Spirit: Alabama’s Sacred Music Traditions*, ed. Henry Willett. Montgomery: Alabama Folklife Association.

Book Review

Alan Brown, *Shadows and Cypress: Southern Ghost Stories* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 231 pp., ISBN 1-57806-270-5, unjacketed cloth, \$45.00; 1-57806-271-3, paper, \$18.00.)

JIM BROWN

Southern” here means all thirteen states of the old Confederacy, from Texas to Virginia and from Florida to Kentucky. That includes lots of places with no cypress, poetic though the title is. Each state has from an even dozen to a dozen-and-a-half accounts, some only a paragraph sketch, others several pages long and rich in detail.

The tales are from two distinctly different kinds of sources. Half the tales are of scholarly collection—most from the author’s students and fellow faculty members at the University of West Alabama where he has professed English for some years now, some from the folklore collections at Western Kentucky University, a few from the Ozark Folk Center, and such. The other half of the ghost stories the author drew from the WPAs Federal Writers’ Project files of the 1930s. Arkansas, Georgia, Texas, and Virginia tales are almost exclusively WPA; Alabama, Kentucky, and Mississippi have no WPA tales at all; the rest of the states have some mixture.

The reviewer initially supposed this division would make for a schizophrenic book, but it doesn’t at all. First, the scholarly collections include not

only recent tales but tales scattered back across the decades to and beyond the 1930s, in setting if not in recording date. This “feathers in” the chronological gap between the two main kinds of sources. Second and more profoundly, this book is proof that the ghost story genre is alive and well and remarkably little changed in essentials over the past three-quarters of a century. About all that gives the WPA stories away is the extravagant and tortured dialect transcriptions of Appalachian and Cajun whites in particular and Southern blacks generally. The “scholarly” tales include a suspiciously high percentage of campus ghosts, revealing the faculty and student source of most of these. General themes and settings in common, however, submerge these differences. Here cutting across “scholarly” and “WPA” sources are the stocks in trade of the genre: the man with the golden arm, will o’ the wisps, headless horses and headless humans, nights spent in haunted houses, and searches for pirate gold foiled by supernatural forces. But here also from both kinds of sources are unique ghosts, in fact a whole clutch of them from Louisiana (a “clutch” of ghosts, yes?).

Even the sketchy, one-paragraph stories here may have their justification. Lord’s *Singer of Tales* comes to mind, that study of living epic singers in what was then Yugoslavia as a point of inference about composition and transmission of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. These master singers in Yugoslavia, having a fund of tens of thousands of “oral formulas” describing small actions or things and set to the appropriate cultural meter, argued with Harvard researchers that a good singer could hear a short, poor “song” one night and himself give it the next night longer, richer and “truer.” The reviewer imagines a master storyteller such as Kathryn Tucker Windham getting hold of the least of Alan Brown’s ghost stories and mesmerizing yet another generation for a full half-hour . . .

The book has solid scholarly apparatus that is ingeniously designed not to get in the general reader’s way. Tales are organized by states, and introduced only by simple title (and in parentheses WPA, if WPA tale it is); a hefty footnote details source and more about each tale should the reader be interested in following up. The annotated bibliography might serve as a standard reference for scholars of Southern ghost tales; in fact, the reviewer so plans to use it with his own folklore students in the future. Only the introduction may fall between two stools—too heavy for the general reader and lacking in some regards for the

folktale scholar (for example, some key state differences supposedly proven by citing some WPA state guides themselves, which were thrown together under tremendous time pressure and are uneven in scholarship). Last and not least, the book is beautifully laid out and printed, a reader's delight. ■

Contributors' Notes

JOYCE CAUTHEN is one of Alabama's foremost scholars of traditional folk music. Best known for her book, *With Fiddle and Well-Rosined Bow: Old-Time Fiddling in Alabama*, she also produced the documentary CDs *Possum Up A Gum Stump: Home, Field & Commercial Recordings of Alabama Fiddlers*, and *John Alexander's Sterling Jubilee Singers of Bessemer, Alabama* and edited the book and CD *Benjamin Lloyd's Hymn Book: A Primitive Baptist Song Tradition*. She is Executive Director of the Alabama Folklife Association.

LARRY ELLIS is a Ph.D. candidate in English literature at Arizona State University, where he teaches English composition and literature. He has contributed to *Studies in American Indian Literatures*; *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor*; and *Joker, Trickster, Christ: The American Fool in Literature, Mythology, and Popular Culture*, an anthology to be released by Popular Press, Bowling Green, Kentucky, in 2001. He is presently working on a collection and literary analysis of the oral traditions of the Florida Creek Indians.

Although ANN FERRELL has never lived in Alabama, her family roots are there—hence her interest in Alabama folklife. Ferrell holds an MA in Folk Studies from Western Kentucky University, where, while a graduate student, she worked as an editorial assistant with *Southern Folklore* and completed a thesis encouraging folklorists to study traditions of dominance in American culture. She has presented papers at conferences, including the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting (1998, 1999, and 2000) and “Going Native: Recruitment, Conversion, and Identification in Cultural Research” (May 1999, Ohio State University). Ann continues to pursue her academic interests by presenting papers at conferences and preparing articles for publication. She

is currently the principal assistant for project management for the Kentucky Commission on Women in Frankfort, Kentucky.

Reviewers

JIM BROWN is Professor of History (and occasionally Folklore) at Samford University. He edited *Up Before Daylight: Life Histories of the Alabama Writer's Project* and was faculty sponsor for a National Endowment for the Humanities Youth Grant project on folk crafts for Samford students during the 1970s. He sustains an active interest in Alabama folklife, including shape-note singing and old-time food-fishing techniques. His principal academic research relates to the folk consciousness behind the emergence of the modern nation-state.

DUNCAN VINSON is a Ph.D. student in ethnomusicology at Brown University and is teaching part-time at Northeastern University during the 2000-01 academic year. In 1999, he wrote his MA thesis on Sacred Harp singing in New England and Alabama. He is currently at work on his dissertation, an anthropological study of an amateur classical chorus.



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- White Spirituals from the Sacred Harp: The Alabama Sacred Harp Convention*** (\$10 for cassette, \$15 for CD). Alan Lomax recorded these shape-note songs from the Sacred Harp in 1959 in Fyffe, Alabama.
- The Colored Sacred Harp*** (CD, \$15). The Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers of Ozark, Alabama, sing from Judge Jackson's 1934 compilation of shape-note songs.
- Desire for Piety*** (CD, \$15). A rare example of black Sacred Harp singing from rural southeast Alabama as sung by the Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers.

