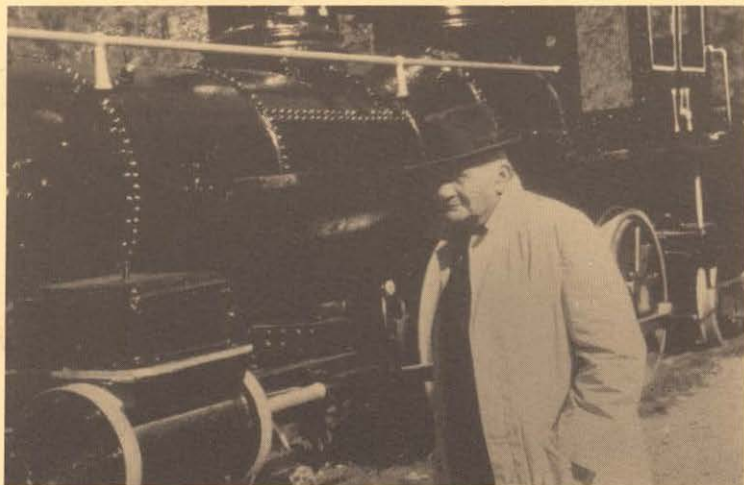


Tributaries

Journal of the Alabama Folklife Association



Courtesy of Hugh Dudley

SPRING 1999

Hank Williams's Last Song
David Anderson and Patrick Huber

Alabama's Outlaw Heroes
Alan Brown

The Poisoning and Demise of Sweet Valley, Alabama
Suzanne Marshall

The Unknown Indians of the South
Fred Fussell

Competence in Performance by African-American Women
Ferrilyn McGregory

Reviews and In Memoriam

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Joey Brackner
EDITOR

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Editor's Note

The Alabama Folklife Association was formed in 1981 "to discover, collect, publish, and thus preserve, the folklife of Alabama, and to further the understanding, appreciation, and performance of the traditional arts and crafts of this state." Three years ago, the Association first published *Tributaries*, a scholarly journal devoted to Alabama folk culture. This effort established a vehicle for articles and research notes, as well as reviews of sound recordings, films, exhibitions, and books about our state's folk traditions. Toward this end, the Association offers this second issue of an occasional-papers journal. *Tributaries* is published every few years and offered as a benefit of AFA membership. It also serves as a much-needed outlet for current Alabama folklife research. With the help of the Alabama State Council on the Arts, the Association will distribute copies to each library in Alabama.

The Alabama Folklife Association was fortunate to have the services of Jim Carnes when it published the premiere issue of *Tributaries*. Jim brought us his experience as a former editor of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and established a high standard for format, consistency and quality. Although he was unable to continue as editor, Jim was generous with his advice and comments. I write this "Editor's Note" with the understanding that I am not an editor in the sense that Jim Carnes was editor of the first issue. He brought to his task a rich knowledge of folk traditions, as well as outstanding literary and editorial skills. I bring only a competent awareness of the diversity and complexity of Alabama traditions, combined with a willingness to harass scholars for their contributions. I appreciate the many suggestions by AFA members, especially President Erin Kellen's idea to ask David Anderson and Patrick Huber for their article. The heavy-lifting editing for style and grammar was accomplished by Mary Johnson Huff, a professional writer and editor, as well as a long-time personal friend and student of Southern folk traditions. In addition, Vinnie Jones, the

administrative assistant at the Alabama State Council on the Arts, entered many of the papers and reviews that were not submitted on compatible computer formats.

This issue of *Tributaries* presents a variety of topics and approaches to Alabama folklife. Patrick Huber and David Anderson give a glimpse of the local cultural sources for a song written by Alabama's most celebrated musician, Hank Williams, and offer some insight and hypotheses about the famous singer's state of mind during his last days on earth. Alan Brown's essay puts Alabama outlaws and their legends in a national perspective, and provides another look at a familiar folkloric text. Suzanne Marshall's piece examines a traditional community under stress and looks at how its members bonded under horrific circumstances. Fred Fussell steps on our toes a bit with a humorous look at the controversial topic of American Indian-ness. With a profile of African-American women singers from the Wiregrass, Jerrilyn McGregory gives credit to overlooked and under-appreciated cultural leaders. Our reviews profile a few important recent offerings of Alabama culture that are now available for researchers, teachers and students. Three obituaries celebrate the lives of Dewey P. Williams, Tommie Bass, and Cornelius Wright. These unique individuals achieved national recognition through their knowledge, teaching and presentation of Alabama folk traditions.

I welcome suggestions, comments and contributions for the next issue.

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“The Log Train”: Hank Williams’s Last Song

David Anderson and Patrick Huber
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A Piney Woods Homecoming

Shortly before Christmas 1952, country music star Hank Williams and his new bride, Billie Jean, spent a few days visiting relatives and friends in south-central Alabama, the northern border of the state’s piney woods region where he had been born and raised. The holiday homecoming marked the closing of a pivotal year in the twenty-nine-year-old singer’s personal life and musical career. Earlier that year, in late May, his first wife, Audrey, had divorced him after seven years of stormy marriage and had received custody of their infant son, Randall Hank (Hank Williams, Jr.), whom Hank adored. “He wasn’t too bad before the divorce,” explained friend and former housemate, country singer Ray Price, “but after it he went off the deep end.” Price remembered that shortly after the divorce he and Don Helms, the steel guitarist in Hank Williams’s Drifting Cowboys band, committed him to a sanitarium for another of what, by now, had become “almost routine” treatments for his chronic alcoholism. Later that year, in October, he married Billie Jean Eshliman, a nineteen-year-old redheaded beauty from Bosier, Louisiana, in a gaudy public ceremony before “several thousand” paying spectators at the New Orleans Municipal Auditorium.

Another blow had staggered Hank Williams that year, only a few months after his divorce. In August, despite more than three years on the show, he was

fired from WSM's Grand Ole Opry in Nashville for drunkenness and unreliability. One month later, he rejoined Shreveport KWKH's "Louisiana Hayride," the regional Saturday night country jamboree on which he had popularized his first hit single, "Lovesick Blues" (1948). For the next three months, his behavior teetering between stone sobriety and alcoholic sprees, Hank augmented his performances on the "Hayride" with short concert tours, playing honky-tonks and small auditoriums, chiefly across Louisiana, Mississippi, and east Texas. Ironically, while his professional career was seeming to crumble around him, Hank Williams's records dominated the country-and-western charts: "Jambalaya (On the Bayou)" was a Number One hit in August, while the double-sided hit "Settin' the Woods on Fire"/"You Win Again" made the Top Ten in October and November, respectively. And "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive," recorded at a June session, was just entering the charts in late December as Hank and Billie Jean sped down U.S. Highway 31 through the green wooded hills south of Montgomery.

The newlyweds stayed several nights with his cousin and childhood friend, Taft Skipper, and his wife, Erlene, who ran a small country store just east of the Butler County town of Georgiana, in a community locals aptly called "Skipperville." "He came in late one Sunday evening," Erlene recalled. "We were ready to go to church. And he brushed up and went to church with us that night." At the East Chapman Baptist Church, Hank accompanied the congregation in a few hymns, but politely refused to sing any of his own songs. The next day, December 22, Hank entertained a small crowd, mostly neighborhood children, who had gathered at the Skipper's store. Seated on a soft-drink cooler and strumming his prized Martin guitar, Hank not only performed several of his current jukebox hits, but he also debuted a new and, for him, rather unusual song, "The Log Train." It was not a forlorn lover's lament over an unfaithful partner nor even a spirited, whiskey-soaked honky-tonker, but, instead, a country-blues ballad that recounted his father's experiences as a locomotive engineer for the W. T. Smith Lumber Company. (The company was in the town of Chapman, Alabama, located three miles north of Georgiana.) Although they heard the song only once, "The Log Train" made a lasting impression on the Skippers, especially Taft, who, at the time, owned an independent logging outfit that contracted with W. T. Smith. "He played

'Kaw-liga' and 'Jambalaya,'" Taft later told an interviewer, "plus a new one I'd never heard. Something about logging trains. It was a purty [sic] tune," he added. Erlene agreed. "It was so pretty," she remarked, "and [Hank] knew it meant so much to us, because Chapman was a log train town, and his daddy had worked there, and Taft's daddy had worked there, and my daddy had worked there. So the song meant a lot to us, but we never heard it any more."

Following their visit with the Skippers, Hank and Billie Jean went to see his father, Lon Williams, who, after divorcing Hank's mother in 1942, had remarried and settled in McWilliams, a small logging town in southeastern Wilcox County. After a decade of estrangement during the 1930s, Hank and his father now saw one another "on a fairly regular basis" and, by this time, had established a friendly, if not particularly intimate, relationship. With his holiday trip in mind, Hank may have composed "The Log Train" as a Christmas gift for his father, and, according to country music historian Bob Pinson, he "probably intended to perform it for his father when he went to visit him on Christmas Day." Unfortunately, Lon was unaware of his son's plans because, like almost everybody else in McWilliams, he did not own a telephone, and had instead gone to Selma for the holidays. "When I got back and found he had been here," Lon later recalled, "I was broken-hearted." Hank and Billie Jean left "a gift-wrapped five-pound box of candy" for his father and then had Christmas supper with Lon's sister, Bertha, and her family, who lived nearby. That night, the couple returned to Montgomery. Hank had been resting there at his mother Lillie's boardinghouse before an important series of upcoming performances that, if all went well, promised to return him to the Grand Ole Opry. One week later, on New Year's Day 1953, as every die-hard fan of country music knows, Hank Williams, high on a deadly mixture of booze and narcotics, died of a heart attack in the back seat of his robin's-egg blue Cadillac while traveling to a concert in Canton, Ohio.

For almost thirty years after his death, Hank Williams's biographers assumed that he took "The Log Train" with him to his grave, but for residents of Georgiana and Chapman, the song did not immediately fade into obscurity. "I looked forward [to] hearing him sing a new song, 'Log Train of Chapman,' on the Grand Ole Opry," wrote one fan, a Mrs. R. H. Henderson of Georgiana, to the *Montgomery Advertiser* two weeks after Hank's death, "but

now we'll never hear him sing it." News about the song apparently circulated throughout the community, because Mrs. Henderson, who had missed Hank's performance of "The Log Train" during his Christmas visit, had somehow learned that he planned to sing it on the Opry's January 3 broadcast. She hoped a recorded version existed so all of Hank's fans could ultimately hear his "latest song."

Rumors about "The Log Train" reemerged in Butler County several years later. Floyd McGowin of Chapman, who was in charge of the independent loggers contracted by the W. T. Smith Lumber Company, remembers that in 1958 Taft Skipper told him that "The Log Train Going to Chapman" was the last song Hank ever composed. McGowin, whose family owned W. T. Smith, was too young to have known Lon Williams when he was employed at the company's Chapman operation, but he had on many occasions ridden on its log trains. An admitted "fan of good music," particularly the jazz recordings of Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet, McGowin took an interest in "The Log Train," and even visited the archives at Vanderbilt University in an unsuccessful attempt to locate a recorded version. Once, while traveling on a Delta Airlines jet from Montgomery to Atlanta, he happened to be seated next to a "bearded hippie-looking young man," who turned out to be none other than Hank Williams, Jr., but when McGowin asked him if he knew anything about "The Log Train," Hank Jr. confessed that he had never heard of it. At this point, it appeared that "The Log Train" was destined to be, as Taft Skipper feared, a "lost" song.

But a recorded version of "The Log Train" did indeed exist. By most reliable accounts, Hank Williams composed "The Log Train" sometime in the fall of 1952 and then made a demonstration acetate disc of the song later that winter, probably in Shreveport at KWKH's recording studio in early December, a few months after his return to the "Louisiana Hayride." According to Bob Pinson, director of acquisitions at the Country Music Foundation and one of the foremost authorities on Hank Williams, this "may well be the last" recording he ever made. In 1954, MGM Records—which was in the process of exploiting Hank Williams's death by posthumously releasing all of his existing recorded material in a series of overdubbed long-playing albums—somehow acquired the acetate of "The Log Train" and transferred it onto

magnetic tape. The company never released the song, however, and this tape, mislabeled "The Long Train," languished in MGM Records' (later PolyGram's) vaults until 1981, when Pinson, searching for unissued material to include on an upcoming collection of Hank's music, discovered the mistake. "The Log Train" received its first commercial release later that year on Time-Life Records' two-album anthology, *Hank Williams: Country & Western Classics* (1981), and has subsequently appeared on at least three additional collections of Williams's recordings. Sadly, Lon Williams, who died in 1970 at the age of seventy-eight, never heard "The Log Train," the tribute song that his son had written expressly about him.

The unearthed demo recording of "The Log Train," discovered twenty-eight years after Hank's Christmas performance, offers a good idea of what Taft and Erlene Skipper and the neighbors who gathered at their store must have heard that December day in 1952. The song, a waltz set in the key of C, features a conventional I-IV-I-V/I-IV-I-V-I chord progression, a structure found in many folksongs, similar to Hank's early hymn, "Wealth Won't Save Your Soul" (1947), and vaguely reminiscent of his more familiar standard, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" (1952). Backed only by his own sparse, haunting guitar chords, Hank's mournful, clipped vocals roll plaintively across the five stanzas of "The Log Train":

If you will listen, a song I will sing
About my Daddy who ran a log train.
Way down in the Southland, in ol' Alabam',
We lived in a place that they called Chapman Town.

And late in the evening, when the sun was low
Way off in the distance you could hear the train blow.
The folks would come runnin' and Mama would sing,
"Get the supper on the table, here comes the log train."

Every mornin' at the break of day
He'd grab his lunch bucket and be on his way.
Winter or summer, sunshine or rain,

Every mornin' he'd run that ol' log train.

A-sweatin' and swearin' all day long,
Shoutin', "Get up there, oxens, keep movin' along,
Load 'er up, boys, 'cause it looks like rain
I've got to get rollin' this ol' log train."

This story happened a long time ago,
The log train is silent, God called Dad to go.
But when I get to Heaven to always remain,
I'll listen for the whistle on the old log train.
(Acuff-Rose Music, Inc.)

At first glance, "The Log Train" appears to be little more than a curiosity, a previously unreleased track of interest only to Hank Williams's biographers and to hard-core collectors who treasure their idol's most obscure recordings. Because "The Log Train" has only recently seen the light of day, it remains outside of Hank's formidable catalogue of classic songs, indisputably one of the most creative canons in not only country-and-western but all of American popular music. Nor does the song mark one of Hank's earliest attempts at songwriting or public performance like other recently-released demos, such as the barely-audible "I'm Not Coming Home Anymore" (1942), one of his first recordings. Thus, "The Log Train" offers no clues for charting his musical development from an unpolished but popular Alabama roadhouse and radio performer to Nashville's King of Country Music. Nor is "The Log Train" consistent with his other songwriting efforts in the year immediately prior to his death. Although collectors and fans alike prize "The Log Train" as his last composition, its simple, straightforward lyrics lack Hank's signature "hook," the clever and subtle reworking of everyday speech he used in most polished songs to guarantee repeated juke-box and radio play. During 1952, the year prior to his sudden death, Hank had penned a string of some of the most commercially successful singles in country music history: "Jambalaya (On the Bayou)," "You Win Again," "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive," "Your Cheatin' Heart," "Kaw-Liga," and "I Won't Be Home No More," some of

which simultaneously (and posthumously) became "crossover" hits with pop cover versions recorded by the likes of Joni James, Jo Stafford, and Frankie Laine. Nor does "The Log Train" cover his standard thematic terrain—love and loneliness, heartbreak and honky-tonking. Although Hank delivered "The Log Train" in a somber voice on the demo acetate, the song eschews the didactic messages found in the melodramatic recitations that he released under his "Luke the Drifter" persona or the weepy religious homilies woven into several of his sacred hymns. In short, when we judge it by the usual standards for assessing one of Hank Williams's songs, "The Log Train" is somewhat of an anomaly.

But far from being an inferior throwaway song and a collector's prized rarity, "The Log Train" stands on its own as an intriguing work that can be used to explore several important themes about Hank's own social and cultural identity as well as his role in and relationship to American folk and popular music. Anyone attempting to understand "The Log Train" must first recognize the fact that both Hank Williams and his art were products of the Southern white working class. As cultural historian George Lipsitz has persuasively argued, "Even when he later attained wealth and fame as a performer, Hank Williams continued to look at the world from the standpoint of a worker," and that his songs "reflected both the historical context in which they were created as well as the personal history of Williams himself." Kent Blaser, another historian, concurs with Lipsitz's interpretation, and observes that the "values portrayed" in Hank's songs "often suggest the kind of rebellion against bourgeois morality" usually associated with the folk music and rock-n-roll of the 1950s and 1960s, and, as such, his music represents a counternarrative to the polite respectability and consensus that supposedly dominated postwar American mass culture. Lipsitz finds the origins of Hank's class outlook in his upbringing as a white working-class rural Alabamian during the Depression, but, for purposes of his thesis, he emphasizes the singer's brief career as a wartime defense worker in the Mobile, Alabama, shipyards as the formative event that "provided an opportunity to escape the surveillance of his mother and to fashion a new identity." Lipsitz concentrates chiefly on the abstract themes of "loneliness and alienation," "instability," and "class resentment" found in Hank Williams's best-known singles, themes which indicate, Lipsitz

argues, the presence of a "culture of opposition" within the mind of the postwar working class against the "romantic optimism" of the era. Blaser, for his part, lists the "sadness, lonesomeness, unhappiness, and . . . strong sense of fatalism" as the dominant themes of Hank Williams's art. Taken together, both historians, considering the selected collection of songs which they examine, ably demonstrate how Hank Williams's music subtly exposed the "hidden injuries of class" lurking behind 1950s social complacency.

The restoration of "The Log Train" to Hank Williams's catalog of classic songs can only enhance the class-based approach to his career and music proposed by George Lipsitz and Kent Blaser. Considered this way, the song's unique subject matter does not preclude it from serious consideration, but instead provides the justification for further analysis. Our brief essay, a work-in-progress extracted from a larger forthcoming study of the song, attempts to provide a social history of "The Log Train," one which considers the song's contents, the possible motivations that Hank had in writing and recording it, and what the song itself can tell us about the author. Of the more than 130 songs that Hank Williams composed during his lifetime, "The Log Train" stands out as one of his most important compositions because it constitutes what Charles Wolfe and Bob Pinson have termed his "most explicitly autobiographical song," and, as such, it offers a window into significant chapters of his personal history. "The Log Train" also stands alone as his only surviving song that recounts a specific and concrete historical experience which Hank witnessed firsthand, and, surprisingly, the only one that introduces a living, flesh-and-blood historical figure, his father, Lon Williams. When Hank wanted to tell the story of a human being, he did not celebrate a famous politician, sports figure, or media celebrity, but rather an ordinary Southern working man. "The Log Train" is also his only surviving song that specifically details an industrial occupational experience, with the daily regimen of work at the center of its narrative and thematic core. Finally, the song's narrative, focusing on the lives of actual working people, their labor, their families, and their community, also reflects the working-class humanism found in Hank Williams's more commercial and spiritual songs. Highlighting these themes reveals that, far from a curious oddity, "The Log Train" can be read as an intensely personal cultural artifact, which provides clues for the development of Hank Williams's class

consciousness as a white, working-class boy in the American South.

Chapman Town and Lon Williams

Chapman, Alabama, today is worlds removed from the bustling company town that Hank Williams knew as a child and later wrote about in "The Log Train." Straddling both sides of old U.S. Highway 31, Chapman is a drowsy little Butler County community that you've got to be looking hard for if you want to find it. Three miles north of Georgiana, two highway markers provide the only evidence that a town is nearby: one signs points west to "Chapman," the other east to "East Chapman." Turning left towards Chapman, an asphalt road leads to Union-Camp Paper Corporation's lumber mill, partially hidden from view at the bottom of a shallow, sloping valley. Every ten minutes or so, semi trucks carrying tons of chipped pulpwood roll out of the plant, a place where, as everyone will tell you, modern efficiency and computerized machinery have enabled the company to reduce drastically the number of employees on its payroll. A gray-haired security guard, nattily dressed in a crisp, blue uniform, occupies a checkpoint about seventy-five yards down the road. His job is to turn away interlopers and lost pilgrims chasing the Hank Williams legend. Only company personnel and workers are allowed past the guard, and it's just as well, because today nobody lives in Chapman, or Chapman Bottoms, as the locals still call the company town that once sat in the valley's basin.

Across the highway in East Chapman, some signs of life still exist. At the north end of town, a few brick houses surround "Miller's Gro.," one of the community's two country stores. Further on up the road sits the McGowin estate, a neo-antebellum colonnaded mansion built by the family who formerly owned the W. T. Smith Lumber Company as well as a quarter-million acres of prime Alabama forestland. In 1965, after more than fifty years in the family, the McGowins sold the company to Union-Camp Paper Corporation of New Jersey. An old Baldwin wood-burning locomotive, its tender car emblazoned across the side with lettering advertising, "W. T. Smith Lumber Company," once stood nearby in a grassy clearing alongside the highway, an ancient symbol of a bygone chapter in the family-owned company's distinguished history. On the southern end of town, there's a union hall, a Holiness

Church, another country store, and, at the road's end, the East Chapman Baptist Church, which Hank Williams attended with the Skippers during his 1952 Christmas visit. Houses of various construction are scattered along both sides of the road, many of them moved here from Chapman Bottoms during the late 1960s when Union-Camp closed the company town and sold off the houses. The old company houses (including the former combination barber shop-post office) rest on brick pilings rather than concrete foundations and resemble the compact shacks occupied by cotton mill workers in other regions of the South. A cluster of wood and brick houses and an occasional mobile home, that new icon of Southern architecture, make up the rest of the community. Once this town was home to one of the largest sawmill plants in Alabama and a thriving center of the state's logging industry, but today East Chapman is an artifact, one of the last of its kind, a small town that owed its existence to the arrival of the modern lumber industry in the Deep South during the late nineteenth century. Like the disappearing factories, machines, and log trains that once made that world possible, East Chapman is also now slowly fading away.

Formerly known as Thurston's Switch, Chapman owes its origins to the New South's industrial revolution. A key component in the region's economic transformation, the modern lumber industry entered Alabama in the 1880s when logging companies, chiefly financed by northern capital, began exploiting the state's expansive forests of yellow pine, cypress, and hardwoods. Alabama's railroads, aided by huge grants of public land from the state government, not only linked lumber companies with distant markets but also created its own demand for lumber products necessary to lay railroad track and to build temporary housing for construction crews. The logging industry expanded at a spectacular rate in Alabama over the next three decades, accelerated by the New South's booming economy (especially railroad building) and by the depletion of the Northeast and Great Lakes regions' forests. Between 1880 and 1914, the manufacture of yellow pine increased sixfold in Alabama to an annual production of more than a billion board feet of lumber. By 1900, lumber manufacturing employed more than 9,200 workers, "making it," according to historian Wayne Flynt, "the state's second-largest manufacturing industry behind iron and steel." A decade later, the number of workers

employed in the industry had risen to more than 26,000, or nearly one-third of all wage workers in Alabama. Large, intensely capitalized firms, like the W. T. Smith Lumber Company, came to dominate the Southern lumber industry, which, despite the attention that historians have devoted to textiles and mining, was the South's largest industry during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Chapman's development as an industrial center paralleled the rise of the W. T. Smith Lumber Company. Established in 1887, the town developed around a sawmill plant operated by the Rocky Creek Lumber Company near the site of Thurston's Switch, a switching point on the mainline of the Mobile & Montgomery (later the Louisville & Nashville) Railroad. Over the next eighteen years, the town grew slowly, as the company passed through the hands of a series of different owners. Then, in 1905, the McGowins, originally from Brewton, Alabama, purchased controlling interest in the logging enterprise, by then called the W. T. Smith Lumber Company.

Between 1905 and 1934, the McGowin family built the W. T. Smith Lumber Company into what one historian has termed "one of the real driving forces in the history of the Alabama lumber industry." Under their shrewd management and their iron-fisted control of their labor force, the company rapidly extended its lumber empire across south-central Alabama, acquiring several smaller lumber companies and integrating them with its Chapman operation. The company also built a series of sawmill plants and planing and veneer mills with which it manufactured lumber, barrel staves, as well as, produce and fruit crates for use in shipping the region's bountiful crop of strawberries. One of the reasons for the McGowins' success lay in their extensive use of logging railroads, which helped to rationalize the inefficient methods of transporting logs from the forest to the mill. Narrow-gauge locomotives and movable track penetrated previously inaccessible tracts of virgin forests and gradually, although never completely, replaced oxen teams that drivers had used to drag the felled trees to the company's mills. By the late 1920s, when Lon Williams was employed at the company's Ruthven plant, the W. T. Smith Company was operating fourteen train locomotives and 125 log cars over one hundred miles of dual-gauge railroad track, and its combined logging operations were manufacturing around seventy-three million board

feet of lumber every year. Eventually, in the mid-1930s, the advent of motor trucks and networks of improved roads made W. T. Smith's wood-burning locomotives which Lon Williams used to run obsolete, and the McGowin family placed an old Baldwin engine alongside U. S. Highway 31 as an advertisement for the family-owned company.

Black and white workers like Lon Williams actively participated in the New South's industrial revolution in the half century following Reconstruction. Born in 1891 on a farm near the settlement of Macedonia, in Lowndes County, Alabama, Elonzo H. "Lon" Williams began working as a water boy in the logging camps at the age of twelve. Over the next two decades, he worked as an ox-team driver, a sawmill hand, log train engineer, and at other jobs in the lumber camps that flourished in south-central Alabama. Although logging was extremely dangerous work, it offered landless Southern men a seasonal economic alternative to tenant farming and sharecropping, and one that additionally provided a relatively steady wage. Like other working-class Southern men of his generation, Lon Williams consciously employed a strategy of moving between farming and wage work in order to take advantage of more lucrative economic opportunities and to escape temporarily what he considered the industry's abusive bosses and its exploitation of labor. This common practice complemented the value that Lon Williams placed on individual independence. "I had lots of different jobs," he later told an interviewer, 'cause that's the way I wanted it. A company gets to feel it owns a man. I always felt I was a free man and could go off and work somewhere else."

An old family photograph, taken around 1910 when he was eighteen, conveys some of Lon's headstrong independence and doggedness. He stands in a forest clearing, sharply dressed in a black bowtie and dark pinstriped wool suit and vest, with a peaked cap—a working-class trademark of the teens—pushed back on his neatly trimmed hair at a rakish slant. His piercing, wide-set eyes stare directly into the camera, and the corners of his mouth are drawn downward in an expression somewhere between a scowling grimace and self-assured cockiness. He stands squarely and rigidly, hands on hips, elbows akimbo, and his chest puffed out, posing like a prizefighter from the pages of a turn-of-the-century sporting magazine. This Lon Williams, in short, looks anything but the fragile, nervous alcoholic figure depicted in several of the



FIGURE 1

Lon Williams, about 1910 (Courtesy of Leila Griffin).



FIGURE 2

Hank and Irene Williams (Courtesy of Leila Griffin).

biographies of his son.

In 1916, a month before his twenty-fifth birthday, Lon Williams married Jessie Lillybelle Skipper, the daughter of a Butler County farm couple. During World War I, he served in the U. S. Army with the 113th Regiment of Engineers, 42nd Division, and saw action on the battlefields of France, where he sustained injuries from gas poisoning and shellshock. After his military discharge, Lon resumed working in the lumber camps of south-central Alabama, eventually working his way up to the coveted position of log train engineer. But by the time Hank (christened Hiram) was born on September 17, 1923, Lon and Lillie Williams were running a country store and three-acre strawberry farm in Mount Olive West, a tiny settlement in southwestern Butler County. In 1924, after a frost destroyed their crop, Lon returned to work in the logging industry, first with the Ray Lumber Company at Atmore and then with the W. T. Smith Lumber Company at McKenzie, an incorporated lumber company town eleven miles south of Georgiana.

By 1925, Lon Williams had settled into steady employment as a log train engineer with W. T. Smith at its Chapman operation on the mainline of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad in south-central Butler County. When Hank lived there as a small boy, Chapman was a full-blown industrial center, complete with a immense sawmill plant, company commissary, boarding-house, post office, school, church, and enough company-owned houses to shelter the approximately eleven hundred residents who lived there. Hank's older sister, Irene, shared some of her brother's fond childhood memories of life in Chapman, especially of their father's occupation. "When we lived in Chapman, we used to look forward to the end of each day when we'd hear the train coming," she recalled. "As the engine came into view, we could hear our dad singing, 'My Blue Heaven.' That was a signal—'Soon I'll be home, Lillie. Get food on the table. Hiram and Irene, get washed up for supper.'"¹⁵

As a log train engineer, Lon Williams held one of the most highly skilled, well-paid positions that a working man could get in the lumber industry, short of being a foreman or manager, and with the money he saved from his wages, he bought a house near Chapman, and moved the family out of the company town. This, of course, proved no small feat in a community in which W. T. Smith owned nearly every house. According to Taft Skipper, "During the

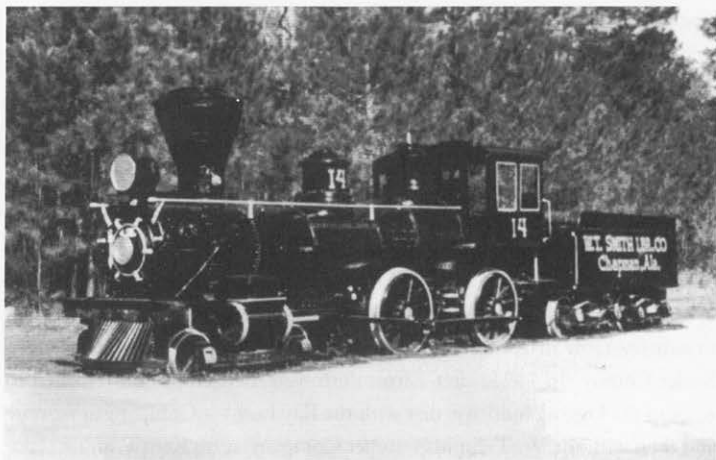


FIGURE 3

W.T. Smith Lumber Co. train engine (Courtesy of Hugh Dudley).

Depression, out of fourteen hundred people working for W. T. Smith around Butler County, there probably weren't over a dozen who owned their own homes. It was mighty hard with the low wages," he added. "If you didn't own it, chances are you moved around a good bit."¹⁶

Around 1927, Lon Williams sold the family home near Chapman and transferred to another log train engineer's job with the McGowin family-owned Schuster Springs Lumber Company at Ruthven, a lumber company town in southwestern Wilcox County. Lon bought another house and a plot of land five miles up the road in McWilliams, and continued working for the company until 1929, when his health began to decline. "My health got worse due to service in the war," Lon later explained. "[And] I was not able to handle the heavy engine that I had." He took a "lighter job" with the Ralph Lumber Company at Bolling, a couple of miles northeast of Chapman, but, unable to work steadily, he was forced to quit. Then, in January of 1930, when Hank was six, Lon Williams voluntarily committed himself to a veteran's hospital in Pensacola, Florida, and for the next nine years he would remain hospitalized,

recovering from the effects of “shell shock” that he had suffered during the war. Meanwhile, Lillie and the children went to live briefly with her brother-in-law, Walter McNeil, and his family in a boxcar logging camp near Garland, in the southwestern corner of Butler County, before moving to Georgiana.¹⁷

Lon Williams’s hospitalization left the family without a male breadwinner, and, eventually, after their divorce in 1942, both Lillie and Lon remarried. As Roger Williams succinctly wrote in *Sing A Sad Song: The Life of Hank Williams* (1970), “the Williams household was left without a man, and . . . Hank was left without a father. Lon Williams never again was a real part of the family.”¹⁸ Although most biographers of Hank Williams focus on his father’s absence from his life, for the first six years of his life, Hank knew his father as a skilled wage worker, a responsible provider, and the head of a “traditional” nuclear family. Sometime in the fall of 1952, Hank Williams would patch together such recollections of his father and childhood memories of Alabama logging towns to form the narrative fabric of “The Log Train.”

Hank Williams, the Songwriter

Unfortunately, no one really knows precisely when or why Hank Williams composed “The Log Train,” but several experiences during the last six months of his life may have stirred the boyhood memories of his father and of life in Chapman found in the song. On August 15, 1952, just four days after his *Opry* firing, Hank performed at a homecoming celebration sponsored by the local Rotary Club, in Greenville, Alabama, the Butler County agricultural and industrial center in which he had lived with his mother and sister between 1934 and 1937. “The famous hillbilly singer and composer of the blues will return to his native county for the first time since he became world famous,” announced the *Greenville Advertiser*. Lon Williams and his ex-wife Lillie attended the event, which included a parade and two concerts, and this is generally believed to be the last time that Hank saw his father. After the Greenville homecoming, Hank returned to his mother’s home in Montgomery to sort out his career and to work on his songs, including “Your Cheatin’ Heart” and “Kaw-Liga,” which he would record at his famous (and ultimately final) studio recording session on September 23 in Nashville. During his stay in Montgomery, Hank went on a legendary bender, beginning at a fishing

lodge at Lake Martin, northeast of town, and ending up a bloody mess in an Alexander City jail. According to Leila Griffin, Lon Williams's daughter by his second marriage, on such occasions Lillie would "call daddy" to take Hank back to McWilliams to sober up. She remembers her father once saying, and it could be in reference to this incident, that Hank "had enough dope in him to kill a mule."¹⁹

After his marriage to Billie Jean on October 19, Hank alternated between periods of sober domesticity and drunken binges. By late October, he was promiscuously mixing chloral hydrate and alcohol, a combination that led to three brief stays in the North Louisiana Sanatorium. From late November to early December, he did a series of concert dates along the Gulf Coast, traveling within a hundred miles of the Alabama piney woods where his memories ran their deepest. Hank probably began writing "The Log Train" around this time, a possibility given credence by Taft Skipper's recollection that Hank had composed it "two to three weeks" before his Christmas visit. Colin Escott, author of the highly acclaimed *Hank Williams: The Biography* (1994), claims to have seen an acetate demo of the song, recorded December 3, 1952, in Shreveport, but, elsewhere in his book, Escott reports that Hank was still on his Gulf Coast tour on this date. Nevertheless, during his first stint at the *Louisiana Hayride*, Hank had cut a handful of demos at KWKH, which, like most large radio stations at the time, had the equipment to produce such recordings, and he probably recorded "The Log Train" here in early December of 1952. The fact that Hank preserved the song on acetate indicates he intended for others to hear it, wanted to protect the copyright, and would probably later show it to his publisher and producer Fred Rose, put some polishing touches on song, and then record it with a full band in a formal studio. Unless other evidence surfaces, the origins of "The Log Train" will remain uncertain, but further analysis of the song provides important clues to Hank Williams's relationship as a songwriter to American folk and popular music.²⁰

Like most "hillbilly" performers of the time, Hank's repertoire ranged far across the cultural landscape of American popular music, from Tin Pan Alley ditties to African-American blues, western swing shuffles to Hollywood cowboy laments. But he was particularly well-versed at an early age in the elements of Anglo-American balladry, a vocabulary that served as an essential element in

much of his songwriting efforts. On at least one occasion Hank Williams even referred to his own compositions as "folk music," but he, of course, meant this in the literal, not the academic, sense. Hank had become familiar with the folk idiom as a young boy growing up in south-central Alabama, where he had heard traditional and semi-traditional folksongs at the Saturday night dances in the logging camps. He learned other folk songs firsthand from local musicians and even from family members, as he explained around 1950 on a weekday morning radio show on Montgomery's WSFA. Before launching into a version of the nineteenth-century folksong, "On Top of Old Smoky," Hank introduced it as "one of the first songs I ever remember singing," one that "my grandmother taught me." He warned the audience, however, that his Grandmother Skipper "didn't sing it like the way they sing now," and cued his band to play it "like the old, old timers use to do it." As with many of his other songs, Hank Williams's extensive knowledge of American folksong provided the cornerstone for the narrative structure of "The Log Train."²¹

As an accomplished composer well-schooled in the various conventions of American popular and folk music, Hank was particularly adept, even in rough demo versions like "The Log Train," at establishing a song's mood through his choice of tempo, harmonic structure, vocal performance, and most especially, his lyrics. "He had a way of reaching your guts and your head at the same time," observed Columbia Records A & R representative and pop bandleader Mitch Miller. "No matter who you were, a country person or a sophisticate, the language hit home. Nobody I know could use basic English so effectively." Whatever his personal shortcomings, Hank Williams was a proven professional songwriter, whose string of self-penned hit songs reached large audiences comprised not only of country-and-western fans who heard his songs on jukeboxes, radio broadcasts, and in live concerts, but of Hit Parade enthusiasts who heard his songs indirectly through lush, orchestrated versions recorded by pop crooners. As a songwriter who won acclaim during his lifetime as "The Hillbilly Shakespeare," Hank clearly enjoyed stringing words together and setting them to tunes, and, over the course of his brief professional career, he proved himself a prolific country songwriter, writing or co-writing more than 130 published songs. "I get more kick out of writing than I do singing," he once told an interviewer.²²

Like all great popular lyricists, Hank Williams used a variety of methods when writing a song. Since he did much of his writing on the road, he typically jotted down lyrics or ideas for a song on any available scrap of paper, wadded them into his billfold, and later fashioned them into a finished song. He sometimes composed furiously, quickly turning a single image or choice phrase into a complete composition overnight. On other occasions, he honed a lyric over several years before finding the phrase that clicked. Some songs received their final polish in editing sessions with Fred Rose, who suggested further revisions before Hank cut the song with a full band in a recording studio. Even during these sometimes marathon sessions with Rose, Hank maintained a professional's work ethic. "They worked as a good team of mules," country singer Roy Acuff explained. "They pulled right together. Hank would come up with the ideas, and Fred would say, 'Well, write it down and let me look at it.' Hank'd bring it to Fred, and Fred would sit at the piano and compliment Hank and say, 'Well, maybe you ought to express this a little differently. Let's change it a little bit,' but Fred never changed Hank's thinking."²³

Hank Williams displayed an artisan's pride in his skill as a songwriter and relished performing a partially finished song for other country musicians, partly to solicit their suggestions on how to improve it, but also to demonstrate to his peers his mastery of the difficult songwriter's craft. As Jerry Rivers, who played fiddle on some of Hank's greatest records, testified: "If Hank ever had a retreat of solitude in which to concentrate and work, he never used it. With only his guitar and a new idea, he wrote and sang his songs in the back of a car on the road, backstage at the *Grand Ole Opry*, or in a nightclub dressing room. Noisy gatherings of friends didn't bother him. When he became involved with a new song Hank was almost overbearing in his drive to complete it and get approval from those around him. 'How do you like this line? Listen to this! Would you use this melody . . . or this one?' On . . . and on . . . perhaps all night . . . maybe for several days, until a single line or single idea unfolded into a tragedy or comedy of life as ordinary people live it."²⁴

As both a brilliant songwriter and a charismatic, emotionally-charged performer, Hank Williams credited his spectacular commercial appeal and widespread popularity to what he called "sincerity"—his uncanny ability to

communicate the everyday-lived experiences and emotions of his working-class audiences in a convincing, concise, and entertaining way. His songs, he always maintained, captured “what everyday Americans are really like.” “You ask what makes our kind of music successful,” Hank told a *Nation’s Business* reporter in late 1952, shortly before his death. “I’ll tell you. It can be explained in just one word: sincerity. When a hillbilly sings a crazy song, he feels crazy. When he sings, ‘I Laid My Mother Away,’ he sees her a-laying right there in the coffin.” Hank continued:

He sings more sincere than most entertainers because the hillbilly was raised rougher than most entertainers. You got to know a lot about hard work. You got to have smelt a lot of mule manure before you can sing like a hillbilly. The people who has been raised something like the way the hillbilly has knows what he is singing about and appreciates it.

For what he is singing is the hopes and prayers and dreams and experiences of what some call the “common people.” I call them the “best people,” because they are the ones that the world is made up most of. They’re really the ones who make things tick, wherever they are in this country or in any country.²⁵

“The Log Train”

Perhaps with a working-class audience in mind, Hank Williams purposefully merged folk and popular song conventions with his own innovations from more recent hillbilly tunes to convey a distant childhood memory in “The Log Train,” one capable of evoking intense feelings from family, friends, and other members of his boyhood community who shared similar working-class experiences. To an extent not found in some of his more popular and abstract songs, “The Log Train” recounts a specific personal memory that reconstructs a concrete time and place in the past. Importantly, through the song’s first four stanzas, Hank eschews the sentimental homilies and abstract nostalgia usually found in traditional “father” songs. Rather than a paean to “Daddy and Home” or “Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine,” he avoids filiofetism and instead provides a deadpan, almost ethnographic description of the work

and family routine of an Alabama log train engineer as seen through the eyes of a child.

Had a folksong collector discovered "The Log Train" on a fieldtrip to a 1920s Alabama logging camp, he would have identified several conventions commonly found in three different models of folksong. Even this mixing of distinct models reflects the evolution of a typical folksong, which, through continual adaptation, will "invariably draw upon not just one way, but two and even more ways of articulating their topics." Our fictional folklorist would have found the song's introductory stanza to be characteristic of the "vulgar ballad," a song that recounts the events and deeds of ordinary people. Hank Williams begins the country-blues ballad of "The Log Train" with a traditional folksong opening. The initial phrase ("If you will listen, a song I will sing"), a variation of the "come-all-ye" introduction, constitutes an example of what folklore scholars have termed a "commonplace incipit," a cliché "entreating the attention of the audience to whom the ballad is addressed."²⁶

After a traditional folksong opening, Hank introduces the song's main character: his father, who is identified first by his "reproductive" family role ("Daddy") and then by his "productive" role (a wage worker who "ran a log train"). Next, Hank enhances the song's verisimilitude, establishing the historical context ("in ol' Alabam'"), reinforced in the final stanza by the vague temporal phrase "a long time ago") by moving telescopically from region ("the Southland"), to state ("ol' Alabam'"), and finally to town ("Chapman Town"). Thus, the first stanza directly corresponds with what is known about Hank Williams's early life—he recounts his own story without the ambiguity found in his more popular and putatively autobiographical songs. ("Mind Your Own Business," a 1949 song which fans have generally assumed Hank Williams composed about his and his first wife Audrey's knock-down-and-drag-out domestic squabbles, comes most readily to mind, although in that song he failed to identify specific characters.)

Our fictional folksong collector would have classified "The Log Train" as an "industrial song," or more specifically, an "occupational song," a composition "in which," as scholar Norm Cohen defines it, "descriptions of work or work conditions, or attitudes towards work, form a significant textual element."²⁷ After establishing the historical setting of "The Log Train," over the

next three stanzas Hank Williams chronicles what appears to be a single, twenty-four-hour day. These lines describe, literally, the daily cycle of his father's working life as a locomotive engineer, following him from evening (second stanza) to morning (third stanza) to afternoon (fourth stanza). What gives structure and movement to this cycle is the log train, the wood-burning, narrow-gauge locomotive used to haul felled logs from the forests to the company's sawmill plants. It is the log train, with its shrill steam whistle, that orders each segment of the workday, and that serves as the catalyst for activity in Chapman Town and the surrounding forests. It constitutes the song's central metaphor (notice the song's title, and the log train's appearance in all five stanzas, in four of which it stands as the concluding phrase), as the actual point of mediation between human labor, on the one hand, and the demands of industrial capitalism for rational and regular production, regardless of seasonal constraints, on the other.

The dominant aural motif of "The Log Train" is, of course, the train whistle, one of the industrial sounds of the New South and a device found in nearly every train song. As a songwriter, Hank Williams had used this familiar country-and-western trope before to different effect: the locomotive whistle in "(I Heard That) Lonesome Whistle" (1951) serves as a constant reminder of the narrator's shameful crime and social alienation as he sits, alone and repentant, rotting in a Georgia prison, while in "Pan American" (1947), the whistle ("hear that whistle scream") evokes a wistful nostalgia and a sense of Southern chauvinism about another train that Hank Williams vividly remembered as a child. In "The Log Train," on the other hand, the train whistle marks the reunion of father and son. In the second stanza, the whistle signals reunites the father and son after a long, back-breaking day of work. Similarly, in the last stanza (the only other one in which the whistle sounds), the whistle signifies Heaven as a reward for a long life of productive labor on earth. Once again, the train whistle signifies the reunion of father and son, but this time the roles are reversed with the son coming to the father.

"The Log Train," in effect, constitutes a parable of structure and agency, worldly work and heavenly salvation. The tersely written lines of the middle three stanzas contain nothing less than Hank Williams's vision of what constitutes the marrow of daily wage labor in the New South: a relentless, daily

cycle conducted under the pressures of time and nature and dictated by unseen forces that are symbolized by the sound and physical presence of machines. The engine behind all "earthly" movement and change, even within a seemingly unchanging cycle, is, literally, a train engine. His father's job consists of hard toil and long hours, of a workday that lasted "from can to can't," as Lon Williams once remarked. Every day, rain or shine, his father must grab his "lunch bucket" and leave home to operate the log train. This is an idealized (in the sense of appearing unchanging or timeless), though hardly romanticized, notion of the work day. Work, in this setting, comprises a relentless cycle (every morning, every season, in a cycle which seems endless), which places constant pressures on those who engage in it ("I've got to get rollin' this ol' log train"), and which constitutes a daily struggle for them ("a-sweatin' and swearin'," while coping with uncooperative oxen, plodding underlings, and an impending rainstorm). No Saturday night honky-tonkin' or Sunday morning worshipping—familiar conventions found in several of Hank Williams's other songs—temporarily punctuates this endless routine.

Yet, despite these structures, Hank does find a modicum of human agency. Hank Williams recognizes in his hard-working father the source of life's dignity, for he invests him—and by extension, all other working people—with human agency. Machines are not yet running men here in Chapman Town, as he reminds us in the first stanza ("my Daddy . . . ran a log train"). Hank Williams celebrates those personality traits and aspects of occupational culture that make his father a hard worker (a "good" company worker): a work ethic, reliability, a pride in skilled craft, a masculine swagger, a certain degree of decisiveness, and an ability to command men. And Hank combines these themes of masculine job culture with the domestic bliss of home life, complete with a singing wife and a hot supper on the table.

Our fictional folklorist would also observe that the concluding stanza of "The Log Train" contains an extremely subtle "moral tag," a common convention of parlor songs, what folklorist D. K. Wilgus described as "late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century music hall or popular songs," often with sentimental portraits of repentant fathers, dying mothers, and orphaned children (the final stanza's melodramatic reunion in heaven between father and son constitutes another hallmark of parlor song). Characteristic of "fire

side poetry” and commonly found in disaster songs, a moral tag imparts an important lesson for the spiritual benefit of listeners’ souls. A moral tag appears in most, if not all, of the recorded versions of “The Wreck of the Old 97,” the famous railroad disaster ballad popularized by light opera tenor-turned-hillbilly crooner Vernon Dalhart on his 1924 Victor recording. As Katie Letcher Lyle observes of this train wreck song, such a final stanza “has nothing to do with the ballad itself, but is added as a sort of assurance that the audience of the song will not fail to take away with them something uplifting and sobering.” This would have been very familiar to rural, working-class Southern audiences, who, as folklorist John Minton reminds us, “inhabited a world where most occupations were intrinsically hazardous, where working men routinely died young, where grief-stricken women often found small comfort in a culture where inherent individual guilt was a fundamental religious doctrine.”²⁸

“The Log Train,” with its moral tag in the final stanza, contains a prescription for leading a moral life. Hank Williams employs the log train as a metaphor for the superiority of a Christian work ethic over the New South entrepreneurial ethos of capital accumulation and upward mobility. “The Log Train” constitutes a counterpoint to Williams’s songs such as “Wealth Won’t Save Your Soul” (1947), “Mansion on a Hill” (1948), and the posthumously released demos, “A House of Gold” (1954) and “Heaven Holds All My Treasures” (1990), in which he harshly criticizes selfishness, materialism, and greed. By linking Heaven’s rewards to a life of labor, the song constitutes nothing less than a parable about *who* among earthly beings shall enter the Kingdom of God and achieve eternal salvation, and about *how* that salvation shall be achieved. If the daily cycle also represents life’s journey, then, Lon Williams successfully completes both—at least in the song. His competency in bringing home the log train every evening (as seen in the second stanza) translates metaphorically to the moral life and righteousness one must strive for on earth in order to bring the train into its final destination, Heaven (a sentiment that conjures up the traditional hymn, “Life’s Railway to Heaven”). In other words, in the fading snapshot of one day in Lon Williams’s life, stored away in the recesses of Hank’s memory, lies the key to the “good and righteous life.”

"The Log Train," with its autobiographical content and evocation of a specific, concrete work experience that Hank Williams knew intimately, corresponded to the daily facts of life in the logging town of Chapman. But rather than emphasizing the dark, harsh vision of work found in songs such as guitar virtuoso Merle Travis's self-penned "Dark as a Dungeon" and "Sixteen Tons" (both of which appeared on his 1947 long-playing album, *Folk Songs of the Hills*), Hank made a different statement on work and life's rewards. This philosophy is evident in several of his other songs, in what historian Steve Goodson has termed Hank Williams's "hillbilly humanism." Goodson finds an ethical tension between Hank's sacred and secular songs, two ethics that, taken together, reflect the mentality of rural and working-class Southerners who comprised his core audience. According to Goodson, Hank Williams's sacred songs stress "the heavenly rewards awaiting those who choose to devote their lives to God." The central thrust of these songs is positive and populist because "[h]uman dignity and human happiness . . . are not founded upon wealth or station" but rather on whether one "choose[s] between sinfulness and salvation." His secular songs, on the other hand, detail violations of a "secular moral code" of not harming others and describe a world of "unyielding . . . bleakness," where "love and compassion are in . . . short supply." "Within the religious world is the tension between God's moral code and promise of salvation on the one hand and the flawed human beings who resist it on the other," Goodson writes. "Within the secular works is a similar tension between a fixed ethical code and those who would violate it." The "primary tension" in Hank Williams's songs, Goodson concludes, is the one "between a positive view of human beings rooted in a Christian humanism and an overpowering sense of human powerlessness and doom."²⁹

According to Goodson, "The Log Train" is one of the two songs ("I'll Never get Out of This World Alive" is the other) that represents a "particularly full expression and a forceful recapitulation" of this tension. Full of vivid details, the song "evokes the best elements of rural Southern working-class life just prior to the Depression," and "presents a warm family unit and evinces the dedication and pride with which these people performed their work." The final stanza of "The Log Train," Goodson notes, "contains a moving vision of the hereafter," where "Heaven is anticipated as a place where these simple and

happy days, symbolized by the distant evening whistle of the log train, will be relived forever." "The Log Train," Goodson argues, represents a different type of secular song because it not only "long[s] for a less complicated past" but it also "draws sustenance from the hope that after death such an idyllic place (found in no other secular song) and time will be recaptured."³⁰ "The Log Train," then, bridges the gulf between these two ethics characteristic of Hank Williams's music, and reflects the working-class humanism found in his more commercial and spiritual songs. "The Log Train," in the end, stands as a testament to the creative genius of Hank Williams, the songwriter, who in only five stanzas presents what appears to be a mundane ballad about the quotidian details of a log train engineer's occupational and family life, and develops it into a moral lesson about the redemption of Southern working people.

Conclusion

One more story remains aboard "The Log Train," however. Steve Goodson, in his brief but insightful interpretation, universalizes the song, but it is important to remember that its main subject was a specific person, Hank's father Lon Williams. Perhaps the major theme of the Hank Williams's mythology concentrates on his father's abandonment of the family when his son was only six years old. The honky-tonk singer's biographers have treated Lon Williams as an insubstantial, shadowy figure in his son's life, and emphasize the more sordid details of his debilitating illness and his decade of hospitalization rather than his life as a hard worker and family breadwinner. The purpose of this approach is to establish the psychological foundations for Hank Williams's later self-destructiveness. Biographer Jay Caress, in *Hank Williams: Country Music's Tragic King* (1979), for example, asserts that after 1930, when Lon Williams entered the hospital, Hank "simply had no stabilizing masculine model for his life," and consequently never developed an "assertive" and "independent" identity apart from his strong-willed mother.³¹ But the psychological explanation for Hank Williams's adult behavior may have more complex sources than Caress claims, and the contours of his adult psychology may lie somewhere else than in his estrangement from his father while growing up.

"The Log Train" not only reconstructs Hank Williams's childhood

memories of his father's working life, it also effectively constitutes what might best be described as Hank's own historiographical intervention into his own life, positing an effective counternarrative of his father that clashes with the usual portraits found in biographies and leading us to revise our conventional image of Lon Williams. In "The Log Train," Hank consciously chose to write a song about his father, and, furthermore, the memories which he consciously or unconsciously selected out of his entire childhood focuses on his father as a working man and not as, in the standard portrait, a shell-shocked, no 'count drunk. The song indicates, as Bob Pinson and Charles Wolfe have noted, that Hank possessed a "deep affection" for his father, and adds to the growing evidence that the two men reestablished a close friendship in the final years of Hank's life. Through this act of recognizing his father as a concrete historical figure, Hank stressed his father's dignity as a human being, one whose story was worthy of telling, rescuing an ordinary man from what British social historian E. P. Thompson has termed "the enormous condescension of posterity."³²

As our reading of "The Log Train" suggests, biographers of Hank Williams might reexamine the father-son relationship for more clues into his consciousness in his last year of life, as he stood at the crossroads of his public career and private life. Because biographers have cast Hank Williams as a tragic genius whose premature death appeared imminent, the song can plausibly be read as a premonition of his own death, as "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive" (1952)—one of his hit songs that was on the charts when he died on New Year's Day 1953—has been. Such a reading imagines Hank Williams listening for the shrill blast of the train whistle of the final stanza, symbolizing reunion with his father in Heaven. But a better, more historically grounded reading (and certainly one that eschews the kind of ahistorical determinism that anticipates his untimely death) would seriously consider the notion that Hank Williams sincerely wanted to rehabilitate his life and to resuscitate his career when he returned to his boyhood community in south central Alabama in December of 1952. Thus, Hank would be listening for the train whistles of the second—not the final—stanza, the one that orders everyday life and provides stability, that reminds us that life is a cycle and that daily life is composed of hard work. Perhaps his piney woods homecoming and particu-

larly "The Log Train," which he had recently written and recorded, represent his attempts to rediscover those qualities that Lon Williams had relied on as a father, husband, and family provider during Hank's formative years, solid working-class qualities which Hank himself could emulate as a way to anchor himself in a stormy sea of personal turmoil as he began to put his life back in order. Such analysis does not stretch the limits of belief when we consider Taft Skipper's recollection of his cousin's last visit: "Hank said he was gonna settle down and try to lead a decent life and that him and Billie had plans to rebuild his life. The way they talked at supper that night," Taft added, "I believe they'd-a done it."³³

NOTES

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- 1 Colin Escott, with George Merritt and William MacEwen, *Hank Williams: The Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1994), 186-189, 190-191, 205; Roger Williams, *Sing A Sad Song: The Life of Hank Williams* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981 [1970]), 191-194, 203-204.
- 2 Escott, *Hank Williams*, 208-210, 213-214, 221-223; Williams, *Sing A Sad Song*, 198-205; Joel Whitburn, *Joel Whitburn's Top Country Singles, 1944-1993* (Menomonee Falls, Wis.: Record Research Inc., 1994), 418-419.
- 3 Escott, *Hank Williams*, 234-235; Williams, *Sing A Sad Song*, 210-211; Betty Langham, telephone conversation with David Anderson, May 9, 1997; Charles K. Wolfe and Bob Pinson, booklet notes on the music, *Hank Williams: Country & Western Classics* (Time-Life Records TLCW-01), 32. There remains some confusion whether Hank arrived in Georgiana on Sunday, December 21, or on Christmas Eve, Wednesday, December 24.
- 4 Escott, *Hank Williams*, 21-22, 235; Williams, *Sing A Sad Song*, 211; Bob Pinson, brochure notes to *Hank Williams, Rare Demos: First To Last* (Country Music Foundation Records CMF-067D); Vernon Hendrix, "Father of Famed Singer Lives by 'Side of the Road,'" *Montgomery Advertiser-Journal*, December 24, 1967.
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“Steve Renfroe, Rube Burrow and Railroad Bill:”

Alabama’s Outlaw/Heroes”

Alan Brown

One Sunday afternoon last March, the tranquility of my home office was destroyed by my blonde-haired, blue-eyed, thirteen-year-old daughter, who was wandering through the house singing a song entitled “Gangsta’s Paradise.” When I asked her why she was singing a song about urban street gangs, she replied in a disgusted tone, “Dad, don’t you know that it’s cool to be bad?” At this point, it occurred to me that my daughter’s rather precocious observation revealed more to me than the simple fact that she had forsaken the “good-as-gold” heroes and heroines of her childhood. Actually, it has always been “cool” to be “bad.”

Folklorist Richard Chase points out in his book *American Folk Tales and Songs* (1971) that the settlers who first colonized America in the seventeenth century brought with them from England stories and ballads about Robin Hood (some of which can still be found in the Appalachian mountains). However, as America began forging its own identity, a new type of outlaw emerged. In the nineteenth century, Americans found the prototype of the American outlaw in Jesse James who, ironically, was transformed into a Robin Hood-type figure even in his own lifetime. And, although most Americans today associate outlaws with the American West, Alabama produced its own outlaws who became larger-than-life figures by undergoing the same sort of transforming process as did Jesse James. (His twentieth century counterparts,

such as Bonnie and Clyde and Pretty Boy Floyd, enjoyed the same romanticization.) Indeed, Steve Renfroe, Rube Burrow, and Railroad Bill are more than old-time outlaws; they have now joined the ranks of America's bonafide folk heroes.

The characteristics of the classic American folk hero are embodied in historical figures such as Davy Crockett, the Tennessee bear hunter; Mike Fink, a Mississippi keelboatman; and Johnny Appleseed, an itinerant planter of trees. Most of these historical personages came out of what folklorist Richard Dorson refers to as the "Heroic Age of American Culture" (210). This was a period in American history when the lines separating the wilderness and civilization were barely distinguishable. The fact that anyone could not only survive, but actually thrive, in such a harsh environment stimulated the imaginations of nineteenth-century Americans and contributed to the almost mythical portrayals of these individuals. Dorson says that fluid societies, in which people live restlessly and wage battle with their neighbors, have traditionally produced outstanding champions, such as Siegfried in Germany (209).

Like the epic heroes of Europe, America's folk heroes share some common elements. Dorson points out that they all "exalt physical virtues and perform, or boast about, prodigious feats of strength, endurance, violence, and daring" (201). In other words, brawn and muscle were much more highly valued on the frontier than were the powers of the intellect. These men embraced life, taking their pleasure in hunting, playing sports and in making love with enormous gusto (209). And, even though they labored under very harsh conditions, they still maintained an infectious sense of humor (201).

Men who live in a lawless land tend to develop their own codes of behavior, as did Crockett, Fink, and Appleseed. These men were unfailingly loyal to their friends and sweethearts (238). Despite the fact that none of them were wealthy, they were always willing to share what they had with the poor (243). In truth, the only possessions that really mattered very much to them were their guns, which they loved dearly and could fire with deadly accuracy (211). Dorson concludes his profile of the American folk hero by asserting that most of them died of foul means, just like the champions of the great folk epics (237).

Additional attributes of the American folk hero are provided by Horace P. Beck in his article entitled, "The Making of the Popular Legendary Hero." Using Davy Crockett and Ethan Allen as his models, Beck says that these men became folk heroes partially because of their willingness to advertise themselves (130). Both Crockett and Allen came from the frontier, Allen from the North and Crockett from the West. They were, like many other Americans who have become legendary, such as Benjamin Franklin, poor and lacking in formal education. Unlike the romantic heroes of children's literature, these men had a dishonest streak which, however, did not detract from their heroic stature because "they cheated the cheatable. . . They cheated the landlord and the absentee landowner; they outsharped the sharpie. The rather substantial results of these dealings accrued to them, but always a few scraps were thrown to the poor" (128).

Alabama's outlaws emerged from a "fluid society" strikingly similar to that which produced Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, and Johnny Appleseed. Alabama during Reconstruction was a world in flux, struggling to recover from the physical devastation of the Civil War and the indignities heaped upon white Southerners by carpetbaggers and scalawags. In his article "Spindle, Mine and Mule," the historian Wayne Flynt explores the factors that made some men desperate enough to turn to lives of crime. Although poverty, lack of education, and the worthlessness of Confederate currency must certainly be included as factors, Flynt believes that the upheaval of Reconstruction is the primary reason behind the resentment and lawlessness that proliferated in the South then (378). Life had become a bitter series of disappointments and insults. Many whites who had led prosperous lives as planters or merchants before the Civil War found themselves reduced to the status of tenant farmers after it was over (379). The time was ripe for a champion that was not only strong, but unscrupulous enough to help these disenfranchised to regain their dignity. Frequently, the "champion" turned out to be an outlaw.

Steve Renfroe

"The Outlaw Sheriff of Sumter County," Steve Renfroe, is a prime example of a historical figure who has assumed extraordinary proportions through tales spun by a close-knit group of people (Dorson 209). Renfroe, who



FIGURE 1

Steve Renfroe (*Montgomery Daily Dispatch*, July 14, 1886)

was born in Georgia in 1843, moved with his family to Butler, Alabama, in 1853 (Rogers 4). He enlisted in Captain E. Y. Hill's Jeff Davis Rangers on June 6, 1861, but deserted in 1864 (possibly to help out on the family farm [5]) after having fought in five battles. He married Mary E. Shepherd in 1865, and the two of them then shared a house with her married sister in Lowndes County. They were forced to flee to Sumter County in 1867 after Renfroe shot and killed his brother-in-law in a dispute over the ownership of some chickens (6).

Through his wife's family connections, Renfroe became a member of the local Ku Klux Klan and was instrumental in the expulsion from Sumter County of Daniel Price, who had set up the Union League, an organization formed in 1871 to mobilize the black vote (37). Renfroe was elected sheriff of Sumter County soon thereafter, but was eventually indicted for the embezzlement of county funds and thrown into his own jail. On his first night there, Renfroe broke down the door, set all of the prisoners free, and burned the circuit clerk's office where his indictment papers were kept. His friends presented him with a pot of money they had raised and asked him to leave town. Renfroe took the money but appeared on the town square the next morning where he was arrested again (Carmer 128). After being transported to a more secure jail in Tuscaloosa, Renfroe escaped by burning a hole through the eighteen-inch floor (129). He fled to Slidell, Louisiana, on a stolen mule and saddle, but was recaptured and returned to Livingston, where he was sentenced to hard labor in the mines of the Pratt Coal and Iron Company in Birmingham. Within sixty days, Renfroe escaped from the mines and headed for the flatwoods, a heavily wooded area between Livingston and the state line, where he hid out while he robbed plantations and other rural homes.

In the first week of July 1886, Renfroe struck out for an area sixty miles from Enterprise, Mississippi. He was apprehended and returned to the Livingston jail on July 10, 1886, by three Mississippi farmers who had heard of the reward offered for his capture (132). Finally, on July 13, 1886, a mob of twenty men removed him from the jail, escorted him down to the Succarnochee River, and lynched him from a chinaberry tree (132-133).

One might wonder why such a rebellious "bad boy" became a local hero. Like Davy Crockett before him, Renfroe was a lothario whose good looks and charismatic personality endeared him to the local belles. Carl Carmer explains

Renfroe's popularity in *Stars Fell on Alabama*: "Steve Renfroe had a way with women. They liked him because he was reckless and beautiful and courtly" (126). Carmer goes on to say that Renfroe's willingness to confront carpetbaggers on the street, as well as his apparent involvement in the murder of the bodyguard of a local magistrate, contributed to his heroic stature (127).

Stories of his relentless persecution of carpetbaggers and blacks were so strong that he became part of what Dorson calls the "tradition of the Returning Hero, who reappears after his alleged death to defend his people in times of crisis" (243). According to William Warren Rogers, local legend has it that every July 13, Renfroe's ghost, dressed in billowing white robes and riding his white horse named Death, returns to the spot of his hanging: "As the rider and his mount descended, the sky turned green: the leaves in the chinaberry tree rustled without benefit of a breeze, and the waters of the Succarnochee suddenly rippled into mild turbulence—a warning to the wayward" (134). Even local blacks contributed to the body of lore concerning the foul death of this "noble" man. In an interview conducted by the WPA on August 2, 1937, ex-slave Henry Garry said, "One night a gang took him outen town an' hang him to a chinaberry tree. I'se hyeard iffen you go to dat tree today and' kinda tap on hit an' say, 'Renfroe, Renfroe, what did you do?' de tree say right back at you, 'Nothin.'" (Brown 93). Stories of Renfroe's stubborn insistence of his innocence still persist in Livingston.

Crawford Young, an eighty-year-old white resident of Livingston, told the following to this writer on February 17, 1997: "When we were boys, we didn't really know which tree Renfroe was hung from, so we would knock on any tree we came to and say, 'Renfroe, what did you do to get yourself hung?' and the tree would always say 'nothin'."

The origin of the folk traditions that have sprung up around Steve Renfroe can be attributed in large part to the gaps in the historical record, especially regarding his death. A shroud of silence descended upon Livingston shortly after his hanging. Even though the lynch mob made no effort to disguise themselves, the Jury of Inquest determined that Renfroe's hanging "was done by persons unknown" (*Livingston Journal*, July 22, 1886). To this day, some of the older residents of Livingston insist that no one really wanted to discuss the identity of the men who lynched Renfroe because they were all prominent



FIGURE 2

Site of the lynching of Steve Renfroe (Alan Brown).

citizens of the town who feared that Renfroe would reveal to the newspapers that they were members of the Ku Klux Klan (Carmer 132). Tempie Ennis, who witnessed the lynch mob march past her house when she was a little girl sitting on her front porch, refused to say anything to anyone about what she had seen until 1964 when she was in her eighties (Rogers 128).

Folklore has also stepped in to explain the location of Renfroe's corpse. Frank Herr, son of *Livingston Journal* editor Benjamin Herr, reported that Renfroe was buried in an unmarked grave in a potter's field (12). Judd Arrington, a retired railroad worker from York, Alabama, provided this writer on January 14, 1997, with a "true" account of the location of Renfroe's corpse: "Well, after Renfroe was hung, they wouldn't let him be buried in the Livingston Cemetery because he was a horse thief. So they ended up burying him in a field across the tracks on the other side of the graveyard. Well, years later, this field became the town dump, and Renfroe's brother-in-law didn't want Steve to be buried there. So late one night, he went down to the dump. He dug up Renfroe's body and took him to Old Side Cemetery, where he

buried him between his two wives, Molly and Mary." The folk version of Renfroe's end gives the outlaw/hero of Sumter County a much more appropriate, and romantic, final repose.

Rube Burrow

Another flamboyant outlaw was Rube Burrow from Lamar County. (Note: The spelling of Rube's last name without a final "s" might look like a mistake to the reader; indeed, there is a final "s" on his tombstone. However, the family reports that the correct spelling is "Burrow.") Born near Jewell, Alabama, on December 11, 1855, Burrow grew up with his four brothers and five sisters on a rocky hill farm where his father struggled to raise corn and cotton (*The True Adventures* 2). In the fall of 1873, Burrow went to live with his uncle Joel Burrow on his ranch in Stephenville, Texas (7-8). He was joined on the ranch in 1876 by his brother, Jim Burrow. Inspired by tales they had heard about Jesse James and Sam Bass, Rube, Jim, and two cowhands robbed a train in Bellevue, Texas, in 1886. Two months later, they robbed twenty-five hundred dollars from a train in Gordon, Texas, and in September they found twenty-four hundred dollars in the express car safe of a train in Benbrook, Texas.

Flush with money, Rube and Jim returned to Lamar County and shared their new-found wealth with their family (Carmer 135). After having given away most of their money, Rube and Jim decided to rob another train in Genoa, Arkansas, on December 9, 1887 (*True Adventures* 31). They made off with thirty-five hundred dollars, but a member of the gang, W. L. Brock, was captured and taken to prison in Texarkana, Arkansas. In exchange for a lighter sentence, Brock revealed the identity of the other gang members (36). Upon their safe return to Lamar County, Rube and Jim took their father into their confidence about the train robberies, whereupon he came up with a plan to use their extensive family connections in an effort to protect his sons. However, the appearance of a large number of detectives in Lamar County forced Rube and Jim to escape to Montgomery, where, in an altercation with two police officers, Jim was captured (Carmer 135-136). Rube wired a friend of his from Texas named Joe Jackson to help him break his brother out of prison, but, tragically, Jim died of typhoid fever in a Texarkana jail while awaiting trial.

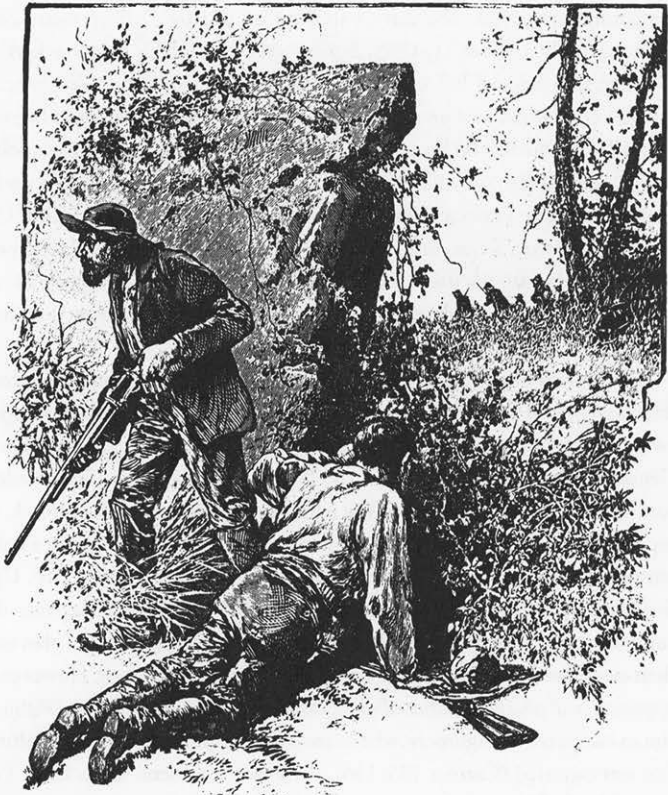
FRANK LESLIE'S
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[PRICE, 10 CENTS.]



Rube Burrow on the cover of Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, November 16, 1889.

Rube's next train robbery in Duck Hill resulted in the murder of a belligerent passenger named Chester Hughes (136), which greatly increased the price on his head. Despite the fact that the railroad was offering a very large reward for his capture, Rube and Joe robbed three thousand dollars from a train in Buckatuna, Mississippi, in 1889. They then bought a yoke of oxen and set out for Florida to hide out. However, Jackson, for some reason, decided to turn back about midway through the journey, which resulted in his capture in Millport, Mississippi. But, before he could be tried, Jackson jumped from his jail cell window in Jackson, Mississippi, and killed himself (137-138).

Rube subsequently emerged from the Florida swamps long enough to rob a train in Flomaton, Alabama (138), but in October 1890, he was captured by two black sharecroppers and held in the Linden jail. He escaped from jail on October 8, 1890, but was immediately killed in a shootout with a local merchant named Dixie Carter (141).

The legends surrounding Rube Burrow connect him with Steve Renfroe as well as with nationally known folk heroes. Like Davy Crockett, Burrow grew up poor and uneducated. Joe Acee reports that Rube's father, Allen Burrow, tried to teach his children "the three R's for three months each summer with little success" (*The True Adventures 2*). As Burrow got older, stories of his athletic prowess and superb marksmanship began circulating throughout Lamar County. Supposedly, he was such a strong young man that he could pick up a seven hundred-pound sack and carry it without his knees buckling (Breihan 6).

Like the ancient warriors of epic legend who were known for their skill with the sword, Rube was said to be such a good shot that when he was barely a teenager, he could, nine times out of ten, hit a silver dollar at thirty paces with a pistol shot (6). Rube is also reputed to have shared Davy Crockett's legendary affection for his firearms. Carmer reports that one of Burrow's primary reasons for wanting to kill Dixie Carter, a desire that resulted in Rube's own death, was to retrieve the sixteen-chamber rifle that Carter had taken from him (14).

When he was barely a teenager, Burrow is said to have initiated a series of romantic encounters that certainly rivaled in enthusiasm Davy Crockett's trysts with girls like Lottie Richers and Sal Fungus. Joe Acee relates the story of eighteen-year-old Burrow's brief encounter with a Cajun girl who had lured

him into an upper room of a New Orleans saloon:

When Rube walked in the room, the sight of the beautiful Cajun girl, lying on the bed with only black silk panties and a black silk bra on was something he had never seen before. He started to take off his coat, but someone was behind him. "Put up your hands—fella—Now! I said I would kill I would kill the next man I caught fooling around with my girl." The man was holding a .38 caliber pistol in Rube's back . . . "You got some money?" the tall man said, "Just drop it on the table and get out!" "Yep," Rube replied, "it's here inside my coat," and, as though reaching for the money, he came out with his derringer, firing once. The bullet hit the tall man's right hand holding his pistol, and the pistol fell to the floor . . . [Rube] ran out of the place and down the street . . . (*Rube Burrow: The Robin Hood of Train Robbers* 13).

Burrow's wry sense of humor allies him with Jesse James as well as the outlaw/heroes of Europe, who jested in the face of danger. Joe Acee recalls one of Burrow's favorite jokes: "We had a bantam hen that wuz having trouble keeping a head-strong chick in line. She give him hard peck on the head saying, 'If your paw cud see the way you're doing now, he'd turn over in his gravy.'" (*Rube Burrow: The Robin Hood of Train Robbers* 9). Carl Carmer portrays Burrow's keen wit by retelling his parting statement to a messenger in the express car of a supposedly impregnable crack M. & O. train that he had just robbed in Buckatuna, Mississippi: "Tell the boss to put steps on his express cars. It's too much trouble to rob them." (137)

However, it is Burrow's legendary generosity on which his reputation as the "Robin Hood of Train Robbers" rests. A lawyer named J. C. Milner, who had represented Lamar County in both the state senate and house of representatives, said that Burrow "did use the money he took to help his family and other poor people. He was fair and kind to his family and friends and people he thought he could trust . . . Reuben seemed to realize early in life that being easy-going makes you a sucker and a fall guy; that the tough, demanding people reap all the harvest, while the nice folks get pushed around . . . The man actually did lots of good for people who could not help themselves" (*Rube*

Burrow: The Robin Hood of Train Robbers 41).

Both Acee and Carmer illustrate Burrow's kindness with a tale about his gift of seven hundred dollars to an elderly lady in Lamar County who needed the money to prevent her landlord from foreclosing the mortgage on her little home. "Be sure to get a receipt," said Rube. That afternoon as the landlord walked smiling back toward town—seven hundred dollars in his pocket, he suddenly looked into the muzzles of two pistols. "Hand it over," said Rube" (Carmer 134). This tale appears to be a subvariant of an almost identical story related by Homer Croy in his book *Jesse James Was My Neighbor* about Jesse James: "That afternoon the skinflint called on the woman, signed the receipt, and left. After he had driven about three miles away from her cabin, on his way home . . . three mounted men popped out of the timber; one seized the horse's bridle, and all leveled cruel-looking weapons at him. The man chanced to have eight hundred dollars, but not for long. The horsemen appropriated it, then they whipped up his horse and sent it spinning down the road. . . ." (102-103).

Railroad Bill

A train robber of a far different sort was Railroad Bill, the famed black outlaw of Escambia County. Less is known about Bill than the other two outlaws, primarily because there were few written records of any kind kept on blacks at that time. In fact, historians are not even sure what the outlaw's real name was. In the absence of a specific name, he became known as "Railroad Bill," which was a catch-all nickname for anyone who menaced railroads (Penick 89). Later on, local newspapers began referring to him as Morris Slater, although there has been no confirmation of the identification (85). Because of the lack of factual information concerning the life and criminal career of Railroad Bill, he has become a much more legendary figure than either Renfroe or Burrow.

Carmer reports that Railroad Bill was most likely a "turpentine nigger" who had escaped from a turpentine camp in Escambia County in 1893 and sought refuge in a freight train. While he was sitting in the boxcar, it occurred to him that he could make a good living for himself if he threw the contents of the cars, which were mostly canned goods, off the train, went back and picked them up off the tracks, then sold them to poor blacks living along the railroad



FIGURE 3
Railroad Bill derailed.

(122). For the next two years, his endeavor proved successful, partly because of the assistance of the black community, who both feared and admired him, and helped him elude the authorities.

His criminal career ended soon after he killed Sheriff E. S. McMillan of Brewton on July 4, 1895 (124). Although he escaped capture for eight months, Bill's luck finally ran out on March 7, 1896, when he entered Tidmore's store in Atmore, Alabama. Just after Bill walked through the door, R. C. John jumped up from his hiding place behind the counter and shot him once. John's accomplice in the ambush, Leonard McGowin, then charged through the door and fired a shotgun at Bill's head, blowing most of the right side of his skull completely off. John and McGowin shared the \$1,250 reward for Railroad

Bill, whose body was displayed in Brewton, Montgomery, and Pensacola, Florida (125).

Railroad Bill is perceived by the black community as being an entirely different kind of hero than John Henry. Unlike the "steel drivin' man," Railroad Bill had the audacity to confront the social system that had exploited his race for centuries. Whereas John Henry was held up to black children as a man to be emulated, Railroad Bill became a negative role model whose antisocial behavior was clearly self-destructive. None of the variants of the folk song that records his criminal career portray him as any kind of hero whatsoever. For the most part, he is depicted in a very negative light, as the following stanza from the song indicates: "Railroad Bill was worst old coon/killed McCarty by the light of the moon. / Was lookin' fer Railroad Bill" (Carmer 124).

On the other hand, the local tales—those that have circulated in Escambia County for over a century—imply that he was a person to be admired, if not imitated, because he had the courage to do what few members of his disenfranchised race would have even dreamed of doing: he took advantage of the very system that had been using them for years. Indeed, there are many legends about Railroad Bill's ability to change his shape into that of an animal; most have him using this power to humiliate the whites who were pursuing him. Carl Carmer says that once, when a posse was chasing him, "a brown short-haired dog appeared from nowhere to yelp with the Mississippi bloodhounds on the trail. But as soon as he joined them, the beasts with the big ears and red eyes lost the scent. Then the [strange] dog disappeared" (124).

Elaine Hobson Miller, in her book *Myths, Mysteries, & Legends*, relates two legendary incidents in which Railroad Bill fooled Sheriff McMillan. Once when McMillan and his men were chasing Railroad Bill through a swamp, a little red fox emerged from the very spot where Bill's tracks had stopped. The sheriff fired both barrels of his shotgun at the animal, but missed. On another occasion when McMillan and his men were chasing the outlaw through a woods, "They saw a black sheep just standing there, watching them. They did not realize until much later that a clearing was a mighty strange place for a sheep to be" (40).

While many poor blacks undoubtedly received a sense of deep satisfaction

from listening to the stories of Bill's ability to fool the railroad and the law, another reason they revered him was his fabled generosity. Although Bill undoubtedly made a tidy profit from the canned goods that he sold to the poor (since he had nothing invested in them), he was perceived as a benefactor by the black community, because his prices were lower than those of the lumber company stores. Consequently, many people showed their gratitude by hiding him in their cabins when the law was after him (Carmer 122).

It wasn't long before he was also changed into an avenging hero who, like Davy Crockett, was a such a good shot that he killed as many as twelve men (123). Railroad Bill's reputation as a Robin Hood figure persisted into the time of the Great Depression, when many people believed that the commodities given to them by the federal government, to keep them from starving, actually came from Railroad Bill (Miller 44-45). Like Steve Renfroe, Railroad Bill became the Returning Hero who cared for his people in times of need.

The explanation given by folklorists for the transformation of thieves and murderers into folk heroes is not entirely satisfactory. A psychological basis for the popularity of Alabama's outlaws might be the vicarious thrill that we all experience when we violate the law, even in a small way. However, the fact remains that Alabama's outlaws share a common trait—courage—and we will always admire those among us who possess it, even those who live outside the law.

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“Even the Houses Die!” The Poisoning and Demise of Sweet Valley, Alabama.

Suzanne Marshall, Ph.D.

Introduction

John Caffey, Jr., gazed through the screen door, raised a gnarled, steady finger, pointed to the community of Sweet Valley down the hill where he had spent most of his eight decades, and declared, “The people die and even the houses die.” The death of Sweet Valley, an African-American community in Calhoun County, Alabama, crept silently among the people, over many years, until the fall of 1995, when health officials astonished the residents with an announcement that toxic contamination had occurred which was lethal to humans and the environment. The danger was great enough, in fact, that humans should vacate the site forever. John Caffey, Jr., and the majority of his community struggled to understand what had happened, to understand how the soil and water, their homes, and even their own bodies, had become toxic places haunted by fear and anxiety instead of bolstered by health and security.

The memories of those people who used to live in Sweet Valley are all that remain. However, the past they recall is of a dynamic community filled with children’s voices, the music of church congregations, the experiences of laboring in factories, laundries, defense plants, and the pleasures and pains of daily life in the South. John Caffey, Jr., remembered family stories of the 1916



FIGURE 1

Sweet Valley streetscape (Suzanne Marshall).

winter journey from Lowndes County, Alabama, northeast to Anniston, an industrial New South town nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. He was just six months old when they reached the predominantly black west side of town and found Sweet Valley, a fledgling community with a few houses and a church growing near the industrial and transportation complexes of the city. The Caffey's numbered among the thousands of Southern blacks who comprised the Great Migration from rural areas to urban industrial centers, a great demographic shift that began before World War I and burgeoned afterwards. Blacks were trying to escape the political, social, and economic restrictions of Jim Crow segregation. Cotton sharecropping and tenancy promised little prosperity; they were consistently deprived of opportunities, racial violence always threatened, and political disfranchisement left them powerless to achieve much change. They were drawn to cities because of the hope, and often the reality, of jobs awaiting them there; and if they went north, political opportunity existed. Moving to a Southern industrial boom town like Anniston enabled people to seek a better life, find higher paying jobs,

and still remain close to friends and kin left behind in the Black Belt. But, if they elected to stay in the Southern city, they did not escape discrimination, segregation, disfranchisement or violence.

Environmental Racism

Settled during the early 1900s through the 1960s by successive influxes of African Americans, Sweet Valley was located in a low-lying area, through which an intermittent nameless stream, called "the ditch" by local people, meandered. During rains, the ditch filled and the neighborhood flooded. Poor drainage caused standing water in yards and streets, but since it was a black community, white city officials ignored the problems. The earliest residential buildings were on Crawford Street, two of which were owned by John Caffey, Sr. Houses ranged from inexpensive shotgun styles covered with tin roofs, and vernacular four-room frame houses, to substantial brick dwellings. Nearly all had front porches situated close to the streets where families gathered, children played, and people conversed with neighbors who strolled by in the evenings. Sizeable side and back yards were used for garden plots, fruit trees, and livestock such as pigs, chickens, or cows; residents made a habit of transplanting rural farming habits to the city. Two churches, Bethel Baptist and Mars Hill Baptist, offshoots of a single congregation, anchored the community. Through the 1920s, Mars Hill also served as the elementary school.

The potential for air and water-borne pollution was high in Sweet Valley, because it was situated in the midst of the industrial section of town. Today it provides a sterling example of what scholars define as environmental racism. The realities of Jim Crow segregation, vestiges of which remain today, determined that blacks, working class, and poor people must live "across the tracks" in the most industrialized, dirty, noisy area of Anniston. Sweet Valley, in the flood-prone lowlands, next to the chemical industry complex and its waste dump, the railroads, and a main thoroughfare was situated close to major polluters from the start. Because of segregation, blacks had few choices about where to reside; poor people could not afford housing beyond the industrial zone.

Manufacture of PCBs

Jobs were available in Anniston, a young town born a few decades previously in the 1880s. The iron industry was the basis of the city's economy; pipe shops, foundries and other manufacturing prospered. With the advent of World War I, new opportunities arose. Camp McClellan was established, and, significant to the Caffey's, Southern Manganese Corporation built a plant to manufacture shell casings. John Caffey, Sr., helped construct the facility, which was located just west of Sweet Valley and a few blocks from his home on Crawford Street. Following the war, Southern Manganese produced phosphates. During the 1920s, Theodore Swann, the owner, improved the facility, changed its name to Swann Chemical Company in the early 1930s, and eventually attracted the attention of the Monsanto Company, which purchased Swann and made Anniston the headquarters of its phosphate production division.

Swann had also just begun production of PCBs (a family of 209 chemicals called polychlorinated biphenyls because they are made by adding chlorine atoms to a biphenyl). Monsanto took over production and manufactured the PCBs by heating a solution of biphenyl, a specific form of chlorine, and iron filings, obtained from Anniston's huge iron industry. The firm generally sold the product under the name Aroclor-1254, and was, at first, the sole producer. Such entirely new chemical creations were the result of World War I military-driven innovations in chemistry, that had been redirected to commercial uses. PCBs were nonflammable, very stable, and became essential to the electric industry for use in transformers. They were also used as lubricants and hydraulic fluids, as additives in paints, inks, and pesticides and as preservatives for rubber. PCBs could be added to wood and plastic to make them nonflammable. Such a miraculous substance appeared to be an example of the American chemical and manufacturing prowess that was leading the world.

Largely ignored at the time, the new industry also inaugurated a boom in pollution. Sweet Valley residents never knew the PCB hazard was seeping into their creek, contaminating their soil and their blood, and putting them on the front lines of the severe pollution that would destroy their communities. However, industrial leaders knew as early as the 1930s that polychlorinated

derivatives caused chloracne, fatigue and depression in workers.

The Working Class

Sweet Valley residents lived in the confined boundaries of a segregated society until legal separation ended; however, Anniston remained a racially divided place. Most of the residents of Sweet Valley and the black west side were working class people. The men and boys found jobs in the pipe shops, in the foundries and the chemical industry. John Caffey, Sr., after helping construct the Southern Manganese plant, went to work in the Anniston Foundry from "sun to sun for \$2.00 a day," recalled his son, until his death in 1925. By that time, though, he had bought two frame houses on Crawford Street in Sweet Valley, a significant indication of his rise in status since the move from Lowndes County. Women raised gardens, took in boarders, did others' laundry, and performed domestic work in the houses of white Annistonians. A couple laboring together as the Caffeys did could accrue the funds to purchase a house, although most blacks remained renters. Children also did wage labor—take a 1910 example from the Knox brothers: fourteen-year-old Edward worked in a pipe shop, and Albert, a year younger, worked in a grocery store. Other children labored without earning wages. Caffey Jr.'s twin sisters assisted their mother with the laundry duties, and all the children picked up the dirty clothes and later delivered freshly washed items to the white neighborhoods. Through the hard work of the entire family, blacks achieved a degree of upward mobility and fulfilled some of the dreams they held when they migrated.

The Great Depression brought the worst hardship to minorities, the working class, and the poor. People in Sweet Valley "made do," John Caffey, Jr., explained. Their gardens, always important, became the prime source of food during these years. Lugertha Bailey moved to Sweet Valley in 1929 at the age of ten and recalls the vegetable gardens and fruit trees that all the neighbors kept. Many also had a few hogs. Wild foods added to the diet during the summer. Children picked blackberries and in the fall gathered pecans. Men and boys hunted rabbit and squirrel to supplement their meals and headed outside the community to fish upon occasion. Lorenzo Hardy, Lugertha's twin brother, and his friends dug ore out of the banks nearby and sold it. The people

had developed an intimate knowledge of the local environment, exploited it for sustenance, and treasured the agrarian landscape they had created in the midst of urban industrial Anniston.

Black women, most of whom had always supported their families, not only through wage labor such as domestic work, but through wageless household production such as tending the garden, preserving food, and sewing clothes, continued the practice. However, the Great Depression added to their burdens when husbands were laid off. Women responded by adding more duties to their schedules, perhaps taking a second job or renting rooms to make ends meet. For example, Della Long, a single woman, ran a boarding house in Sweet Valley across from the chemical plant. Lugertha Bailey's mother added a paying job to her duties when she found work at the Anniston Steam Laundry on 13th Street, an exhausting, hot job often done by black women. Her movement from unpaid housework into wage work at the laundry reflected the trend women's history scholars have found of married women entering the work force in the 1930s when their husbands were laid off from heavy industrial jobs. Women also revived abandoned skills such as making soap from ashes, lye, and lard. Finally, according to Bailey, "people swapped" work and goods to survive in the nearly cashless Depression economy.

John Caffey, Jr., who was in his teens when the Depression hit, could not find work in Anniston and decided to relieve his family of a mouth to feed by "taking up the hobo life." He traveled around the South on foot, never riding the trains. However, on his return to Anniston in 1936, he decided to hop a train to speed the journey, but fell as he boarded an L&N car and lost his leg in the accident. The company paid his hospital bill, gave him fifty dollars in cash, as well as seventy-five dollars to his mother, and sent him on his way. As he recalled this tragedy, he asked, "Do you think a one-legged black man could find a job in this town?" Eventually, though, he did find jobs, inherited the houses his father had bought, and purchased his own home in the neighborhood where he had grown up.

The Life of a Community

During the 1930s, the community consisted primarily of single-family residences, Della Long's boarding house, a small grocery, two churches and a



FIGURE 2

Mars Hill Baptist Church (Suzanne Marshall).

funeral home. Few houses were constructed during these desperate years. But people tried to maintain their homes with white wash or paint made from local clay. Eloise Mealing recalled that "front yards then were bare and swept clean" of loose dirt, twigs and debris. An array of carefully tended fragrant and colorful plants such as zinnias, hollyhocks, sunflowers, roses, dahlias, hydrangeas, and sweet shrub accented the yards. Back lots were for gardens and pens for hogs, chickens and cows. The "ditch" ran through the community, and patches of wooded land lay between the Bethel Church area and Mars Hill Baptist. Children spent endless summer days in the fields and woods. They played in the ditch water even though it sometimes had such a foul odor that one could smell it on the children's skin hours later. John Caffey, Jr., recalled playing in a dump where his bare feet got burned so badly that a visit to the doctor was required.

During the course of the community's existence, people congregated at the two churches in the area, Bethel Baptist and Mars Hill Baptist, each of

which was an offshoot of a single church organized in 1906. Mars Hill also served the community as a school through the 1920s. Residents gathered for school-sponsored programs, spelling bees, graduations, and sporting events. The school, along with the church, helped to produce a cohesive social network. Lugertha Bailey recalled that the churches hosted box suppers and meetings of various sorts. Often the young single women and men met at these events, courted and married. Ties created by marriage among the residents were not uncommon. Other gatherings, such as potluck suppers, dances and barbeques, Bailey said, were held in people's homes or yards. Near the area were bars and gathering places frequented by workers after the day's shift ended or by people out for Saturday night entertainment.

World War II brought another influx of migrants to Anniston. The upgrading of Camp McClellan to fort status, the construction of the Anniston Army Depot, and the surge in war production by the extant industries drew thousands to town and ended the Great Depression. Beatrice Williams Edwards, her husband Walter, and their five children left Lowndes County in 1941 headed for Anniston. They settled in Cobbtown, a neighboring community, and had four more children, all born at home. Her husband found employment in the pipe shops and at the depot in Bynum, a few miles to the west. She recalled that the Monsanto plant "was stinking" when she arrived, but she heard nothing to indicate any health threat, although, Edwards exclaims, "I done inhaled a heap of it!" The couple raised gardens with corn, beans, beets, onions, garlic, and "anything they had seeds for" along with pecan and fruit trees. Her husband liked to plant the tomatoes in the front yard. Their children roamed the community and played in the dirty water of the ditch. (All eight of her daughters have had reproductive disorders, cancers, and all have had hysterectomies.) Edwards worked as a short order cook, a salad maker in a restaurant, and as a domestic, retiring at the age of sixty-six to take care of her sick daughter. She lived in a house she owned, built in the early 1970s, until the fall of 1996.

The peace that followed World War II brought a decline in production at the Monsanto facility until 1957, when the company decided to manufacture Parathion, a pesticide used for cotton and grain crops. For three decades Monsanto, the only producer of the pesticide, expanded its laboratories,

warehouses and other facilities. PCBs continued to be produced until the late 1970s, when the United States banned their manufacture but not their continued use in sealed products such as transistors and small appliances. Sweet Valley residents, few of whom worked for the chemical company through the years, recalled the sickening odors the plant emitted daily until the 1980s. None, however, recalled any information or warnings of health effects that might result from the industrial processes. From the 1920s until the 1990s, they built and maintained their communities and lived what they described as ordinary lives.

People continued to move into the area in the prosperous 1950s. Eloise Miller left Bynum, Alabama, for nearby Sweet Valley in 1956. There she met Frank Mealing, who had been born in Montgomery but whose family had moved to the community when he was a child. After they married, the couple, like everyone had for years, kept a garden, peach trees, and raised chickens and hogs. Frank built three one-story vernacular houses by hand on Boynton Street during his time off from work, and the Mealings reared a family. By the 1950s most people had quit sweeping their front yards bare, Eloise Mealing said, and instead planted grass lawns accented with flowers and shrubs. She spent much of her free time tending her flowers and vegetables.

An Awful Truth is Learned

Everything changed in October 1995, when Eloise Mealing learned during a meeting held by the Alabama Department of Public Health that her community was contaminated with PCBs, and she was warned not to go outdoors without a mask to filter the air. No longer could she safely or comfortably work in her garden, rest on the front porch at day's end, or visit with the neighbors. Monsanto denied culpability, but was quietly offering residents a buy-out of their homes, which some owners accepted. The company also contracted with a laboratory to do PCB tests on soil, water, house dust, and blood. Eloise Mealing's results from the blood test revealed that she had the highest levels of anyone in the community, 240.0 parts per billion (ppb). A normal level should be between 0 and 20 ppb. Her body, home, garden, and community had become a poisoned zone.

Eloise Mealing's daughter, Cassandra Roberts, began to make contacts

throughout the state and the South to find ways to deal with the situation. She called the Southern Organizing Committee for Social and Economic Justice (SOC) based in Atlanta, a group with roots in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Connie Tucker, the energetic head of SOC, came and brought organizers to Sweet Valley and Cobbtown. Information on the health effects of PCBs, dioxins, and other chemicals were distributed in a meeting that also addressed issues of environmental injustice, and political and social action. The people of the communities learned for the first time about environmental racism and saw what it meant very clearly. They formed the Sweet Valley/Cobbtown Environmental Justice Task Force. (Cobbtown is another threatened, poisoned community, but it also has awakened and is ready to join the larger grassroots environmental justice movement in the United States.) Several lawsuits are pending, not to garner big settlements, but because, as Roberts states, "This was where people grew up. These people have memories here. You can't put a price on that." And the historical record showed that Sweet Valley had existed prior to the establishment of the chemical company, which came during World War I, and Sweet Valley was vibrant when PCBs first began to be produced in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Once motivated, the communities began to work together to bring their issue to the media, the public, and to effect change in the way they were being dealt with by the corporation. For example, Monsanto, the residents believed, had agreed to refrain from bulldozing abandoned and company-purchased houses until everyone in Sweet Valley had been moved away. Residents feared that PCB-contaminated dust from demolition might be harmful to the people remaining in the area. However, late one evening in February 1996, word spread that Monsanto was planning to demolish some houses the next morning. Cassandra Roberts and others began to plan a protest that night. Early the next morning, Eloise Mealing heard the growl of heavy machinery and ran to determine the source. She saw a yellow bulldozer grinding its way through the front yards of three unoccupied houses one street behind her home.

She quickly alerted her daughter, other neighbors, members of the task force, and the press. The funeral home in the community, a gathering place for elders and a Task Force sympathizer, was called for special help. A small coffin,

about the size for a child, was obtained, and the Task Force protestors performed a mock funeral signifying the death of the community as well as the threat of death for a child growing up amidst the toxic PCBs. The protestors then lay down in the bulldozer's path. The local television station arrived, the cameras rolled, and almost immediately the bulldozer stopped, but not before three houses were wrecked. Monsanto, the Task force understood, promised not to renew the dozing efforts until all residents had moved.

Just a few months later, however, the earth moving machines returned to Sweet Valley. "They told us they weren't going to do this again," Roberts said, "But they didn't keep their word." Monsanto claimed that no promises had been made. In response, the Task Force decided to act. Sweet Valley citizens took time off from work on a sunny May morning to picket the company along the highway separating the plant from the neighborhood to express their anger at the resumption of house demolition. The group wore surgical masks, waved their signs at passing motorists and again got the attention of the press. Monsanto officials closed the chain link gate across the highway from the protestors. No more houses were destroyed even after all the residents vacated the community.

In addition to numerous planned and impromptu protests, the Sweet Valley/Cobbtown Environmental Justice Task Force, with the help of several groups including SOC and Serving Alabama's Future Environment, along with Jacksonville State University and Auburn professors and students, conducted a public health survey to determine if patterns of cancers or health problems had occurred. Although the survey was not scientifically rigorous, it was done as a community effort to bring attention to the issue and to force an official study. Surveys were conducted on Saturdays from nine a.m. to five p.m. from February through May of 1996. Each survey instrument took one to three hours per person to administer. People gathered at Mars Hill Baptist or Bethel Baptist, depending upon which church was free, and surveyers interviewed people about their health. Children who had moved away came from as far as California and Maryland to take part. Each surveyor was surrounded by a whole family, so the elder members could remember far back in the family history and the younger ones could help to make connections between recent illnesses and deaths and their new knowledge about chemical

contaminants. The women of the Task Force provided lunches similar to traditional church potlucks with fried chicken, sweet potato pie, bread, vegetables, and homemade cake, and the Saturdays often turned into family and church reunions. People learned of the illnesses that had seemed unusually numerous in their memories, but now with the compiled health surveys took on a new significance. Were their health problems, cancers, and reproductive system ailments more than just bad luck or bad genes? Many seemed to think so after the collective experience of hearing the stories of disease and death during the weeks of surveys. And they continue to worry about their health even after moving from the toxic neighborhood.

"We worked so hard to get something, and then you get something and they want to take it away. I never said this place was a mansion, but it's mine," lamented Odessa Reese, one of the last Sweet Valley residents to give up the home where she reared six children after she was widowed at age twenty-eight. She lived across the street from Eloise Mealing, who, on moving day, sadly recalled the time when the community rang with the voices of children. "In many ways I'm glad my husband isn't here to see this," she said about the forced vacating of the houses he had built. "He put his sweat and tears into building these homes and had two heart attacks doing it. He would hate to see what's happened." She thought back over the months since she first learned of the contamination and the changes that news had wrought in her life. "You know you hear about stuff like this all the time and you just never in a million years imagine it's going to happen to you," she said. "But now it has and I have to leave the home I thought I'd live in for the rest of my life."

Mealing, Reese, Linda Thomas, and Flora Corbett waited as long as possible before leaving Sweet Valley because it was home and they loved the place and its people; but as others left, change inevitably came. A secure community of interconnected families and neighbors deteriorated. "It's just scary around here now," Mrs. Mealing said. "I don't feel safe outside." She recalled, "it used to be that you'd leave your home and yell over to your neighbor to watch over things while you were gone. Now there's no one there." Without people, the community lost its vital force; it became a landscape of memories.

Eloise Mealing and others in Sweet Valley and Cobbtown continue

fighting. Although their houses have been boarded up or bulldozed, and the communities dispersed in little more than a year, the people are not vanished—they are all still very much alive. Several lawsuits are pending against Monsanto, asking for better compensation for houses and for continuous follow-up health monitoring. Mealing and her daughter, Cassandra Roberts, became activists for the first time in their lives. Roberts now heads the Sweet Valley/Cobbtown Environmental Justice Task Force. In addition to her full-time job as a juvenile probation officer, she organizes in the community, contacts the press, pickets Monsanto, gives talks on the issue, flies to Washington for conferences on health risk assessments, and attends meetings such as the Third Annual Dioxin Conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Her group won a twenty thousand dollar Environmental Protection Agency grant to buy computers, a fax machine, other items for publishing a newsletter, and funding for a conference.

The houses have died; the neighborhood is no more. A settling pond for contaminated water is being constructed. However, some Sweet Valley people have been awakened and radicalized by their experience. Their organization is reaching out to others to share the story, educate, plan strategies, and work for environmental justice in the hopes of preventing another disaster in someone else's beloved community.

“My Great-Grandmother Was a Cherokee Princess”: The Unknown Indians of the South

Fred Fussell

In folklore and anthropology circles in the South, it is common knowledge, and often the subject of humorous skepticism, that many Americans — particularly Southerners — make ambiguous claims to a Native American ancestry. Frequently such claims include a Cherokee great-grandmother, one who (more often than not) is remembered as a “Cherokee Princess,” whose true identity has been long hidden — except to those who are her rightful and true descendants.

Introduction

At the time of the United States census of 1990, nearly two million people in the United States claimed to be of Native American descent. Of those, over three hundred sixty-nine thousand — more than nineteen per cent — proclaimed themselves to be Cherokee, making that group by far the largest Native American tribal group in the United States today! Yet according to the Dawes Rolls of 1898, a total of only thirty-six thousand persons was listed by the United States government as Cherokee tribal members. What can possibly account for this hundred-fold increase in the Cherokee population in less than a century?

My five years of work at Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia, with the Festival of Southeastern Indian Cultures, and a longer



FIGURE 1

The dance circle, Alabama State Powwow, Montgomery, Nov. 2, 1996 (Fred Fussell).

examination of traditional Southern folk culture, including that of several Southeastern Indian tribal groups, has provided me with an intense and prolonged exposure to popular claims of Cherokee and other tribal ancestry. Several years ago an interest in this topic inspired my wife, Cathy, to have the members of her multicultural literature class at Columbus High School each survey twenty people regarding the possibility of their having American Indian ancestors. The result was that nearly ninety percent of the respondents reported maternal Cherokee or other Indian forebears. While this informal survey was in no way scientific, it piqued our interest. The number and the variety of people who claimed Indian lineage surprised us. The claimants ran the gamut from the bluest of bloods to the bluest of collars. The phenomenon crossed the black/white color line. It also crossed the Mason-Dixon line. Several of those who answered in the affirmative were military personnel stationed at nearby Fort Benning, who had come here from places outside the South. None of the claimants had listed themselves on school enrollment forms as Native American.

My purpose in examining this topic is not to prove or to disprove anyone's ancestral claims, but simply to explore the subject in an informative and entertaining way and to raise in the minds of the reader some questions, such as: How is it that so many people possess such specific, but unproven, links to Cherokee or other tribal ancestry? What are the social and cultural implications of this phenomenon? Why in the world do so many Southerners want to be American Indians?

Although their ancestral claims may be academically tenuous, most tribally unaffiliated American Indian ancestral claimants have very specific (albeit frequently far-fetched) bits of oral family history from which to draw in trying to prove their Indian kinship. Many recite tales of ancestral family members who, out of the goodness of their hearts, generously adopted abandoned or orphaned Indian children and then provided them with a decent Christian home upbringing, side by side and on equal terms with the other, legitimate, children of the family. Others recall the haunting yet irresistible beauty of the Cherokee maiden who is ardently courted by the buckskin-garbed frontiersman, whose bravery in the face of danger forever endears him in the eyes of the mystically cunning Cherokee king, her father. They marry. The "princess" then leaves her Cherokee heritage behind and unhesitatingly adopts the superior cultural ways of the white frontiersman, yet her "Indianness," though so easily abandoned, is never quite forgotten in family folklore.

Here is a characteristic family story: A member of a local Alabama historical society, a person who understands basic genealogical research and methodology, recalls her descent from her Cherokee great-grandmother. Her ancestor is remembered as one of a set of orphaned and neglected north Alabama Cherokee triplets — all girls. The three abandoned children, in desperate need of care, are all three kindly adopted by the woman's great-great grandfather, who is a rugged hill country frontiersman. They are raised by him and his wife as their own. Later, one triplet, having grown up, falls in love with and marries the eldest son of a neighboring plantation owner. The couple then happily proceeds to establish their own farm home, on which they work hard, prosper, and provide with several offspring. The woman's identity as an orphaned Cherokee is all but forgotten. Certainly any Indian cultural traditions that she might have brought with her when she was adopted into the



FIGURE 2

Mrs. Sandy Faulk of Montgomery dances at the Cherokees of South Alabama Annual Powwow, Osmussee Creek Park, Columbia, Alabama, September 7, 1996 (Fred Fussell).

FIGURE 3

Bumper sticker on a car near the dance circle, Osmussee Creek Park, September 7, 1996 (Fred Fussell).



white family are put aside, except possibly for her uncanny knowledge of woods lore and herbal medicine or her persistent knack for correctly predicting untimely changes in the weather. The story of the heroic and loving adoption of the little Cherokee triplets remains a part of the family's oral tradition down through the generations. The ancestral relationship, however, goes unproven. An "unfortunate" courthouse fire in the late nineteenth century destroys all but a few of the county's legal records. Among the records lost are those of the adoption and marriage of the Cherokee woman in question. The Cherokee connection, solidly accepted as a fact of family history, can never be properly documented through genealogical research.

Such detailed and specific tales of unproven, yet firmly held, ancestral Indian family connections abound in the Southeast. There are ever-increasing numbers of people from all across Dixie who actively engage in trying to reestablish their lost or faded ancestral connections with a Native American

past. Interestingly, most of the people with whom I've had occasion to discuss their Indian ancestry present very little in the way of Indian physical characteristics. If you encountered nearly any of them on the streets of Atlanta, Birmingham, Jackson, or Knoxville, you wouldn't be likely to suddenly stop in your tracks and think to yourself, as Oklahoma Choctaw artist and culturalist Gary White Deer has put it, "Well now, my goodness! There's a face that would look good on a nickel!" One very European looking young man, pale skinned and fair-haired, with whom I was conducting an interview on the subject, stated, "Just look at my profile!"

Many claimants regularly participate in highly organized activities that afford them opportunities to publicly display their "Indianness." The most readily available and most popular form of public participation is the weekend powwow, a kind of community festival that typically features Pan-Indian style dancing, drummers and chanters, demonstrations of Native American crafts, vendors selling "authentic" foods and "authentic" art work, and a miscellany of additional related activities. There is usually a Master of Ceremonies who announces each event in its turn, and serves as an interpreter or explicator of the customs and traditions that are being demonstrated. Often there is a dance competition in which dancers register to compete with each other in a dozen or more categories for cash prizes. At each powwow, there are numerous bits of specific ceremonialism including a "Grand Entry," during which the assembled dancers, rhythmically walking or striding to the slow and steady beat of the drum (the "Heartbeat of the Indian People"), file into the "dance circle," reverently following behind an American flag that is proudly carried by an honored veteran of military service or an esteemed tribal elder. During the afternoon and evening, a variety of dance styles and ceremonial regalia are shown and the significance of each explained by the Master of Ceremonies for the benefit of the uninitiated. A component of virtually every powwow is the "blanket dance," a solemn moment during which the assembled dancers circulate to the beat of the drum around an unfolded blanket upon which audience members are invited to place donations of cash, usually meant for the relief of the needy, to assist with the expenses of a member who is hospitalized, or to subsidize the travel costs of the powwow singers and drum team.

There are literally dozens of powwows held all around the Southeast every



FIGURE 4

A mobile taco stand operated by the Cherokees of Southeast Alabama, at their annual powwow near Columbia, Alabama. The menu includes Indian fry bread, taco's, hot buttered corn, chips, pickles, suckers, and coffee (Fred Fussell).

year. Many are sponsored by community civic groups, which stage them as fund raisers. Others, thought of by some as being closer to authentic and of greater spiritual value, are endorsed by local or regional tribal organizations, whose leaders serve as the hosting officials and whose members take an active role in the planning and proceedings of the event. Some participants, at fairly great expense, make or purchase elaborately fashioned and feathered "traditional" powwow Indian regalia to wear as they dance. They proudly don colorful ceremonial attire and enthusiastically and intensely dance for hours on end, powwow style. Members of various State-recognized Indian organizations wear tee shirts emblazoned with the names and logos of their particular tribal group or clan affiliation. Many wear deerskin moccasins, fringed or ribbon-decorated shirts, finger-woven sashes, ankle length dresses, beaded chokers, western style hats or turbans, turquoise and silver jewelry, and other bits of regalia, all of which serves to identify them as accepted members of the

group.

Other people, apparently less inclined toward public displays of their Native American connections, participate in semi-esoteric sweat lodge ceremonies, conducted by "real" Indian healers, advisors, or elders. This activity is particularly popular among whites who feel a strong connection to Indian cosmology and spirituality, as they understand it. Many who believe that they are of partial Native ancestry, but who were raised in white culture, are attracted to Indian "sweats." But this practice is also enthusiastically embraced by others — non-Indians who steadfastly proclaim the wonderful psychological and physiological healing effects of sweat ceremonies. Many who participate in these ceremonials imply that they are somehow drawn to them by an "ancestral connection," an inner feeling of identification with Native American spirituality and ceremonialism, whether they themselves claim a specific Indian ancestry or not.

Still others avidly seek out and attach themselves to such Indian-related hobbies as artifact collecting, beadworking, leatherwork, or learning and practicing "primitive" skills. Flint knapping, bow hunting, wild food gathering and preparation, open-fire cooking, teepee construction and pitching, and the various medicinal uses of native herbs and roots are all popular fields of pursuit.

Some claimants routinely signal their Indianness by wearing silver and turquoise rings or bracelets, powwow tee shirts, braided hair, or other identifying ornaments. They attach feathered prayer wheels and dream catchers to the rear-view mirrors of their sedans and pickup trucks, the rear bumpers of which may sport bumper stickers reading "I Brake for Fry Bread," "Indian and Proud of It!!!," "Custer Had It Coming," or "Indians Discovered Columbus!". These are surely the people who, by declaring their presumed Indian ancestry during the 1990 U.S. Census, swelled the ranks of the Cherokee Nation to its zenith. All of this makes for wonderful folkloric fodder!

Gary White Deer, whose legitimately traceable ancestral lineage lies among several Southeastern tribal groups and also among English ancestors in Colonial Georgia, recently wrote, "As an American Indian, I have been approached on many, many occasions by folks who wish to assure me that they too have Indian ancestry. These claims transverse racial and economic lines,



FIGURE 4

Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Hill at the Alabama State Powwow, Montgomery, Mr. Hill is Chief of the Blue Holly Clan, Cherokees of Southeast Alabama. The Hills live in Valley, Alabama (Fred Fussell).

and international boundaries as well. Last year in Birmingham, England, I was approached by several individuals who, in clipped British accents, proclaimed Cherokee forebears!"¹

White Deer has also remarked upon the seemingly ever-increasing presence of non-members at Southeastern tribal ceremonial events in eastern Oklahoma, where strangers are customarily welcomed with great hospitality. Many of the visiting outsiders enthusiastically express at least a spiritual, if not an ancestral, connectiveness with the tribal people and their annual Green Corn ritual. Such visitors have in recent years appeared in sufficient numbers that, in fact, they have become something of a problem to the hosting Indian groups, who often find themselves torn between their cultural tendency to be gracious and generous hosts to strangers, and their need to protect the integrity and purity of the traditional ceremonial occasion that is being observed.

Most claimants, however, seem not so much inclined to go and connect directly with the truly traditional and practicing Southeastern Indians as they are to identify with others in their own home communities who are as equally misplaced from their ancestral Indian heritage as they. From such local associations have sprung several organizations in Alabama that have achieved State recognition as Indian tribal groups. There are seven State-recognized Indian groups in Alabama. They are the Cherokees of Northeast Alabama, the Cherokees of Southeast Alabama, the Echota Cherokees, the MaChis Lower Alabama Creeks, the MOWA Band of Choctaws (named for their home counties — MOBILE and WASHINGTON), and the Star Clan of Muscogee Creeks. The Poarch Band of Creek Indians, headquartered near Atmore, is Alabama's only federally recognized Native American tribal group.

Georgia has no Native American group that has attained federal recognition status, but has six aspiring Indian organizations: the Cane Brake Band of Eastern Cherokees, the Cherokees of Georgia, Inc., the Georgia Tribe of Eastern Cherokees, the Lower Muscogee Creek Tribe East of the Mississippi, the Southeastern Cherokee Confederacy, and the TAMA Indian Tribe. In all, Indian claimants within the two states represent a total population of more than twenty-nine thousand people. In Alabama, the 1990 census listed 16,506 American Indians, Eskimos, or Aleuts, comprising four percent of the total population of the state, while Georgia counted 13,348 American Indians,

Eskimos, or Aleuts, representing two percent of the total state population.²

It is obvious then that many families in Alabama, Georgia, and across the South have references to Cherokee or other Native American ancestors. But how can such claims be legitimately substantiated? To become enrolled as a legally verifiable Cherokee, you must identify and establish a direct link to an ancestor who is listed on certain rosters or rolls prepared by the United States government in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Locating and examining these documents is the absolute first step toward proving that you have a Cherokee connection. These documents include the Miller Roll, the Dawes Rolls, the Baker Roll, and others. There are certain additional criteria that must be demonstrated or proven before you are in, depending on the particular tribal entity with which you are attempting to identify. According to a document published by the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, individuals of Cherokee ancestry fall into the following categories:

(1) Living persons who were listed on the final rolls of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma (Dawes Commission Rolls) that were approved and descendants of these persons. These final rolls were closed in 1907.

After about a half century of self-government, a law enacted in 1906 directed that final rolls be made and that each enrollee be given an allotment of land or paid cash in lieu of an allotment. The Cherokees formally organized in 1975 with the adoption of a new Constitution which superseded the 1839 Cherokee Nation Constitution. This new constitution establishes a Cherokee Register for the inclusion of any Cherokee for membership purposes in the Cherokee Nation. Members must be citizens as proven by reference to the Dawes Commission Rolls. Included in this are the Delaware Cherokees of Article II of the Delaware Agreement dated May 8, 1867, and the Shawnee Cherokees of Article III of the Shawnee Agreement dated June 9, 1869, and/or their descendants. Public Law 100-472 authorizes, through a planning and negotiation process, Indian tribes to administer and manage programs, activities, function, and services previously managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Pursuant to PL 100-472, the Cherokee Nation has entered into a Self-Governance Compact and now provides those services previously provided by the BIA. Enrollment and allotment records are now maintained by the Cherokee Nation. Any question with regard to the Cherokee Nation should be

referred to the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, P.O. Box 948, Tahlequah, OK 74465 (918-456-0671; fax 918-456-6485).

(2) Individuals enrolled as members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians of North Carolina and their descendants who are eligible for enrollment with the Band.

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians of North Carolina is a federally recognized tribe and has its own requirements for membership. Inquiries as to these requirements, or for information shown in the records may be addressed to the BIA's Cherokee Agency, Cherokee, NC 28719 (704-497-9131), or the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, P.O. Box 455, Cherokee, NC 28719 (207-497-2771; fax 704-497-2952; ask for the Tribal Enrollment Office).

(3) Persons on the list of members identified by a resolution dated April 19, 1949, and certified by the Superintendent of the Five Civilized Tribes Agency and their descendants who are eligible for enrollment with the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians of Oklahoma.

By the Act of August 10, 1946, 60 Stat. 976, Congress recognized the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma (UKB) for the purposes of organizing under the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act. In 1950, the UKB organized under a Constitution and Bylaws approved by the Secretary of the Interior. Members of the UKB consist of all persons whose names appear on the list of members identified by a resolution dated April 19, 1949, and certified by the Superintendent of the Five Civilized Tribes Agency on November 26, 1949, with the governing body of the UKB having the power to prescribe rules and regulations governing future membership. The supreme governing body (UKB Council) consists of nine members, elected to represent the nine districts of the old Cherokee Nation, and four officers, elected at large. Information may be obtained by writing UKB, P.O. Box 746, Tahlequah OK 74465-9432 (918-456-5491; fax 918-456-9601).

(4) All other persons of Cherokee Indian ancestry.

Information about Indian ancestry of individuals in this category of Cherokees is more difficult to locate. This is primarily because the federal government has never maintained a list of all the persons of Cherokee Indian descent, indicating their tribal affiliation, degree of Indian blood or other data.³

It is the wording of item (4) which gives hope to those who are unable to otherwise qualify.

Another factor that may be critical in the desire of so many white Southerners to identify themselves as having Native American connections is a need to establish a sense of cultural place for themselves. While no research has been conducted to confirm this, it appears that the great majority of claimants are from lower middle class origins, and as such they have been culturally isolated from the more elitist and genteel parts of Southern society. So, too, have Indians. The popular, romanticized "Hollywood" imagery that has been projected of Native Americans is very compelling. It also invites great sympathy for lost nobility, something that virtually all native Southerners can easily understand.

Now that many former socially and economically hard-placed Southerners have attained positions that afford them a trace of leisure time, there is the opportunity for contemplating one's historical past and position in Southern society. Since proving an ancestral connection to a genteel planter or industrialist forebear is a very unlikely thing for most (they would know, wouldn't they, if great-great uncle Buster had been the nineteenth-century kingpin of Opp?), they then seek their rightful inheritance through other means. Among the most conveniently positioned of possibilities is that of the prolific "princess," the Cherokee great-grandmother.

The historical factors that forced Indians who avoided removal to fade as quickly as possible into the cultural woodwork, or be found out, are well known. Several small groups and a number of individual Indians were removed from Alabama as late as the latter years of the 1840s. A better course, if one chose to stay behind undetected, was to acculturate into the majority culture as quickly and completely as possible. Thus the opportunity for a "hidden" ancestry is presented to potential descendants. Along with slowly changing attitudes regarding race, more relaxed freedoms of association, and a greater flexibility of social intercourse in the waning years of the twentieth century, some Southerners have put aside their stalwart claims of racial purity (lily whiteness), and have brought out their Indian ancestors from the deep recesses of the family closet and into the powwow dance circle of the Montgomery Coliseum.

But why Cherokee?

They were farmers. They were prosperous. They were peaceful. They were literate. They were industrious. They were (almost) like us. They were (almost) civilized! It's too bad they had to go. Too bad, yes, they nearly 'bout made it. But now we should admit we were greedy! We wanted their land. We wanted their cotton. We wanted their mules. We wanted their slaves. We wanted their daughters. Uh-oh! Oh well, let us now alleviate our guilt, once and for all. Bring great-grandmother back home. It won't hurt. She can be revealed at last. Besides, she was, after all (it's true!), a royal princess among her people — noble, proud, and brave. Welcome home, Grandmother! WADO!

Notes:

- 1 Gary White Deer to author. Personal correspondence. January 21, 1997
- 2 1990 Census of Population, United States Bureau of Census
- 3 Bureau of Indian Affairs, United States Department of the Interior, URL http://www.usgs.gov/doi/bia/ancestry/cher_anc.html, Web Page Revision: 6/6/96.

Because We Care: Competence in Performance by African-American Women in Wiregrass Alabama

Jerrilyn McGregory

This study is based on ethnographic research within the Wiregrass section of Alabama, that area of the state in the most southeastern corner.¹ The name wiregrass refers to *aristida stricta*, a flora that depends on fire ecology for germination and, ultimately, contributed to a way of life.² Because the composition of the soil could not support its production, "King Cotton" played a less-pronounced role in this region's early economic development than elsewhere in the state. This allegedly poorer soil quality, combined with the threat of malaria, initially prohibited settlers from flocking into Wiregrass country, although a few deliberately chose this "chills and fever" area. However, this part of the country was generally characterized as being historically under-populated, economically poor, and predominantly white. Most of the inhabitants of Wiregrass country were yeoman farmers, and the region's lifestyle more closely approximated that of the western frontier, not the plantation South.

After the Civil War, African-Americans generally emigrated to the area because land was relatively cheap, thus increasing their prospects of becoming landowners.³ Agnes Windsor, an African-American lay historian, provides this account of her family's history in Slocomb, Alabama, a small town of the Wiregrass:

Alex Johnson was born in 1835. He was from Alexandria, Virginia.

Jane was born in early 1840s. She was from Tanya, Georgia. In tracking records down from Virginia and from Georgia, the meeting place had to be in Brundidge, Alabama in Pike County. Now, they got married there. But at that time, Pike County consisted of Geneva County, Dale County, and Barbour County. You see, they were split off later. So they were from Pike county up there. They were working on sharecropping. The census records show that they were sharecropping. In 1882, Alex came here with Jane and Shade Allen and some others discovering land. They had heard that there was land down here. So, they came here to see if they could homestead land. I don't know how many trips they made here to see how much of this land could they homestead. Anyway, the families moved here in 1882 and established this place. Now, they already had children who were grown and married. Because my grandmother, who was Sally, was already married. She had married Joe Miller before coming here. And there were some others in the family also married. It was about fourteen of my father's people. You had to stay here five years before you could homestead your land. So, my grandfather made his homestead papers. He had to name everything that he had. He was worth \$130 in 1882.⁴

Another attraction of the area was the opportunity for employment in the forest products industry. However, despite their becoming landowners or wage earners, the very survival of the African-American family in the Wiregrass invariably depended on a stringent adherence to such principles as collective economics, hospitality, and spirituality. These cultural principles continued to gain full expression through the maintenance of various reciprocal support networks.⁵ These reciprocal networks depend upon the formation of secular or sacred performance communities, which share a unique canon of taste.⁶ The theme of reciprocity represents the main bond connecting a network to its particular performance community. The staging of highly patterned, repeatable, ritualized cultural performances constitute the network's primary means of producing revenue.⁷ As Melvin Williams states, community can be defined as "patterned interactions among a delineated group of individuals who seek security, support, identity, and significance from their group."⁸ Those mecha-

nisms, originally put in place to ensure survival, form the core of African-American life in Wiregrass Alabama today.

Throughout Wiregrass country, cultural performances that utilize sacred musical traditions are predominant. Moreover, African-American women comprise the bulwark of these sacred performance communities. On one level, this study explores the nature of the competence that underlies their musical performances, across several genres of sacred music. By referring to competence, I allude to more than performance skills. Competence speaks also to women as cultivators of culture, another form of communicative competence. I mean that they possess a cultural fluency regarding societal rules—how to implement them as well as how to manipulate them.⁹

As it turns out, greater autonomy is afforded certain women because their cultural performances commonly occur outside the formalized patriarchal system associated with churches. Far from being passive participants, these women orchestrate and aver the ritual process by “making things happen.” The sacred performance communities under consideration embrace exponents of the old Sacred Harp musical tradition, a rural district of Baptist union meetings, as well as a federation of gospel singers.

For the most part, the cultural productions are an outgrowth of the once-popular Sacred Harp singing conventions. In Wiregrass Alabama, even among African-Americans, Fasola singing prevails. In this tradition, the notes are in shapes and the shapes have names: fa is a triangle; sol is an oval; la is a square; and mi is a diamond. Singers first familiarize themselves with the tune by singing the notes to the song and then they sing the lyrics. This singing of the notes gives Sacred Harp music its most distinctive sound, as the music is in four-part harmony. Although a dying tradition, the death knell has not yet been tolled. African-American women are actively engaged in the maintenance of this key tradition.

For instance, Doris Lewis is the daughter of African Methodist Episcopal (AME) preacher H. Webster Woods, one of the few African-American composers of this music.¹⁰ Lewis is instrumental in keeping her performance community alive. Although, technically, she is only the recording secretary for the Florida-Alabama Sacred Harp County Convention, she holds the real authority. The male president and vice president are titular heads only; theirs

are positions governed by tradition and seniority but without a true hierarchical thrust.

The Alabama-Florida County Convention would have succumbed to dissolution, like so many others, without Lewis's intervention.¹¹ In spite of a massive stroke the year before, Lewis in 1966 acted as recording secretary, presided over the singing in the absence of an infirm president, and taught the rudiments of singing, filling in for the absent manual reader, who had experienced a recent death in the family. Moreover, Doris Lewis (visually impaired since her stroke) robustly participated in the singing. Depending on rote memory, she led "Happy Sailor" from the Cooper edition of *The Sacred Harp*.

Doris Lewis comes from a family steeped in the performance and creation of sacred music. Her mother composed a song, which she named for her daughter, "Doris," that appears in *The Colored Sacred Harp*.¹² Lewis spearheads the Glory Train Special, a notable Wiregrass family ensemble, which recently celebrated its thirty-sixth anniversary. Her husband performs with the group, but Lewis is its undisputed leader, although she credits the Supreme Being:

When I sing, it's what the Lord gives me to sing that day. Now, I may go on to the next program and sing the same thing. Or He may give me something else to sing because I'm talking to Him. When it comes my time to get up, I have a song on my MIND; and when they get ready to call "Glory Train Special," that song will leave me just like that. But He will put something else in place of it. See, it wasn't intended for me to sing that one.

In addition, Lewis is the long-term South Conference AME secretary, the district president of the laity, and holds an office in the Women's Missionary Society.

African-American performance communities, both sacred and secular, use an organizational leadership model based on the Afro-Christian church. Church politics are often such that ministers reign over their flock, unencumbered, for years. Their brand of democracy, without being an oxymoron,

amounts to benevolent monarchies. A good leader seldom abdicates; and following the democratic process, an election is held annually with the same results every time. Only death disrupts this flow. The perpetuation of a performance community really only requires the dedication of a single soul, male or female. Commonly, African-American women garner this access to power.

Within the sacred music tradition in Wiregrass Alabama, African-American women certainly predominate as singers. Lack of vocal ability is no deterrent, placing it outside the traditional Western musical aesthetic. Vocal techniques borrow the same drones, moans, and inflections that are used in blues music to express deep feelings.¹³ The often-quoted motto is, "You don't have to sing like an angel," which says it all. According to gospel singer/emcee Ovella Cunningham, "I don't feel that we sing that well, but it's the anointing of the Holy Ghost to get the message over. When the Lord gives it to us, there is a difference."¹⁴ These women use an African-American cultural/gendered discourse to stabilize their own position as subjects and not mere subordinate objects.

It is within their sacred performance communities that the time-honored principles—hospitality, collective economics, and spirituality—endure, led by the women. They are in the forefront of the faith. As recorded for even a small sect like the Shouter Baptists of Trinidad, "Women are always great thinkers, scripture scholars, and forceful with wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, who live austere lives of sacrificial work and prayer in the communities they serve."¹⁵ Divine unction represents a recurrent theme among these women who express routinely, "I've been anointed by God to do His work. I couldn't do it by myself."¹⁶

Baptist Union meetings constitute one network of sacred performance communities that are centered within the hegemony of the church, yet slightly outside of it. Within Wiregrass country, African-American worship services are still regularly held on alternate Sundays each month. The Fifth Sunday then traditionally operates as a sort of wildcard, a time best used to unite various religious communities. On Fifth Sundays, residents participate in events ranging from Baptist Union meetings to singing conventions and gospel fests. Most calendar years boast four Fifth Sunday weekends—with

social activities usually commencing as early as the preceding Friday of each weekend.

Throughout Wiregrass country, Baptist Union meetings operate on a rotating schedule within their various districts. Each district church gets to host a joint session in turn. These meetings supply an egalitarian framework in which the taking of turns provide women with the same speech platforms as the men enjoy, and even the children get an opportunity.

As a matter of fact, it was their participation in Baptist unions, conventions, and associations that taught African-American women, as children, their elocutionary, musical, and leadership skills. Once nurtured, these special gifts and talents are supported throughout various stages of life. Sheryl Melton, in her thirties, epitomizes this upbringing, and is now taking her turn as her district's youth advisor.

Melton is a resident of Gordon, Alabama, located in Houston County near the Georgia state line. She belongs to Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, and her church is affiliated with the Rural District. Raised in a singing family, her life is devoted to Christian experiences promoted via membership within various church choirs and other gospel ensembles such as the Combined Voices. She expresses a willingness to undertake whatever role will ensure the survival of her sacred performance communities: "If I'm not serving, I'm singing; and if I'm not singing, I'm keeping record or whatever the case might be."¹⁷ It must be stressed that these actions amount to women granting themselves social authority through the acquisition of visible leadership roles.

Throughout their roles as lead singers, the power of these women negotiates respect. They use their vocal virtuosity to secure an eternity of personal honor and esteem. Many belong to federations of gospel singers, entering into the more dynamic aspect of sacred music. The status that they derive largely from their reputation as singers grants the same freedom of comportment that is extended to women who sing blues. They exhibit an assertiveness not generally afforded Christian women.¹⁸ Moreover, their power of speech often propels them into the foremost role of emcee on special gospel programs.

They use their verbal dexterity to connect disparate performances and occasionally to supply a near sermonic text. Ovella Cunningham of Opp, Alabama, embodies this rank of female commentators. Here is her expression

of the kind of work technology involved in the art of emceeing:

You have to know HOW to keep a program up, see. And a lot of people bring it down, you know. If you don't know what to say and when to say it, (when a group sings), you bring down the program and the spirit of the Lord leaves out. So the Lord gives me how to keep it up. I don't like a quiet program . . . (laughter)

This astute ability to understand and direct performance is another level of competence.

Summary

Such extraordinary performances are the undergirding force behind the survival of the collective. On one hand, these African-American women perform duties as they have always been done, but in the name of the collective. This study illustrates that African-American women give more than lip service to the womanist ideology of which Alice Walker speaks. According to Walker, womanism offers a spiritual foundation in which women are more "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female."¹⁹ This consciousness is engendered through a cultural awareness, which allows transcendence over patriarchal discourse.

The voices of African-American women are those of persistence and resistance. They often belong to women-only fellowships, but they do not situate themselves discursively and gesturally in only one mode of representation. These women also engage in transsexual participations performing multivocal roles. Alas, all African-American women do not engender this degree of agency. They lack the same competence because theirs is a more superficial understanding of the rules. However, these more expressive roles are part of their identity to claim through the cultural signifier of respect. The life histories of the women, who gain honorific titles such as "Aunt Flossie," "Ma Henry," and "Mother Jefferson," indicate how these women repeatedly resurrect their own subjectivity. The closest parallels to their power of authority exist in traditional West African contexts. For example, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, certain women are believed to possess female mystical power. This is

why they are called "our mothers" and are addressed personally with "my mother" or "old wise one" in recognition of their positive dimension as protective progenitors, healers, and guardians of morality, social order, and the just apportionment of power, wealth, and prestige.²⁰ By staking a claim to power, they do not allow others to objectify them.

Notes

- 1 Alabama residents have greater knowledge of the existence of this neglected cultural region of the South. However, many of them do not realize its vastness. Wiregrass Country ranges over parts of three states, extending from above Savannah across the rolling meadows of southwest Georgia, the southeastern corner of Alabama, and the panhandle of Florida. See *Wiregrass Country* by Jerrilyn McGregory (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).
- 2 Wiregrass depends on recurrent blazes to survive and accompanies a "fire climax" species of tree, the longleaf pine. The wiregrass ecosystem relies on a high incidence of low intensity culture links fire to destruction; wiregrass is now relatively extinct. Several works discuss plant life in the region, especially wiregrass. See Roland Harper, *Florida Geological Survey, Sixth Annual Report* (Tallahassee, 1914); Richard M. Smith, *Wild Plants of America* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1989); Norman Christensen, "Vegetation of the Southeastern Coastal Plain," in *North American Terrestrial Vegetation*, ed. Michael Barbour and William Billings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 317-63; Wayne Faircloth, "The Vascular Flora of Central South Georgia" (Ph.D. dis., U. of GA, 1971); George Rogers and R. Frank Saunders, Jr., *Swamp Water and Wiregrass: Historical Sketches of Coastal Georgia* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984); George Schwarz, *The Longleaf Pine in Virgin Forest* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1907); W. G. Wahlenberg, *Longleaf Pine* (Washington, DC: C. L. Pack Forestry Foundation, 1946); and Howard Weaver and David Anderson, *Manual of Southern Forestry* (Danville, IL: Interstate, 1954): 154-56. Two specialized articles investigate wiregrass in more detail: David Hall, "Is It Wiregrass?" *Natural Areas Journal* 9 (1989): 219-22, and Robert Peet, "A Taxonomic Study of *Aristida stricta* and *Aristida beyrichiana*," *Rhodora* 95 (1953): 25-37.
- 3 For a fictionalized account by a noted African-American writer, see Margaret Walker, *Jubilee*, reprint (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), which describes many of the ordeals faced by African Americans new to the region. In addition, see Walker's *How I Wrote 'Jubilee'* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971) based on the research behind this historical novel.

- 4 Taped Interview with Agnes Windsor at her home in Slocomb, Alabama, on July 16, 1994.
- 5 Joyce Ladner's *A Tomorrow's Tomorrow* (New York: Doubleday, 1971) provided groundbreaking work, disclosing the role networks play among African Americans in general and African-American women in particular. Carol Stack in *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1974), 90-107, has built on this research. However, most scholarship seemingly has not privileged this data to the degree that it operates as part of an African-American cultural matrix. Here, the term, "reciprocal support network," speaks to a collective identity pertaining to mutual aid, which amounts to an element within a cultural matrix.
- 6 Dell Hymes defined a speech community as "a community sharing knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech," involving more than just verbal alacrity. See Dell Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1974), p. 51. In addition, Gerald Davis recognized that aesthetics play an important role in speech communities as well. An aesthetic community is defined as "a group of people sharing the knowledge for the development and maintenance of a particular affecting mode or 'craft' and the articulating principles to which the affecting mode must adhere or oppose." See Gerald Davis, *I Got the Word in Me and I can Sing It, You Know* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 32. I develop the term "performance community" in light of these definitions.
- 7 To define another keyword, cultural performances, I will use an enumerative list supplied by Milton Singer, ed., *Traditional India: Structure and Change* (Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1959), p. xiii. Cultural performances include "weddings, temple festivals, recitations, plays, dances, musical concerts, etc."
- 8 Melvin Williams, *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), p. 16.
- 9 Once again, I borrow selectively from Dell Hymes in formulating definitions for the following terms: competence, performance, and cultural fluency.
- 10 H. Webster Wood composed "Prosperity," among the fifteen songs composed by him appearing in *The Colored Sacred Harp*. Although patriarchs of the music, Dewey Williams and Japheth Jackson, receive much-deserved recognition for the perpetuation of this tradition, Doris Lewis's role offers a similarly significant intergenerational link.
- 11 I owe the title of this essay to Doris Lewis. "Because We Care" was the name of the benefit program held in her honor on August 19, 1995, as she recuperated from a stroke. Her reciprocal support networks lent their full support. There were not enough hours that evening to accommodate all the singers signed up to perform and to help make this event an economic success.
- 12 See *The Colored Sacred Harp*.

- 13 Western classical music's tonal functional harmony is based on clear, definite pitches and logical relations between them. For discussions of blues performance styles, see Charles Evans, *Big Road Blues*, reprint (New York: DaCapo Press, 1982), 23-25; Daphne Harrison, *Black Pearls* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1988), 66-67; and Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966), 50-68.
- 14 Taped interview with Ovella Cunningham in her home in Opp, Alabama, on May 20, 1996.
- 15 Eudora Thomas, *A History of the Shouter Baptists in Trinidad & Tobago* (Wellesley, MA: Callaloux, 1987), 58.
- 16 Quote taken from interview with Mary Lou Henderson in Thomasville, Georgia, on August 4, 1995.
- 17 Taped interview with Sheryl Melton in her home in Gordon, Alabama, on August 10, 1995.
- 18 Elaine Lawless has extensively studied white Pentecostal women. See *God's Peculiar People: Women's Voices & Folk Tradition in a Pentecostal Church* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988).
- 19 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi. Also, see Chikwenye Ogunyemi in "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English," *Signs* 11 (1985), 79, which expresses that womanists are "concerned with the ethics of surviving rather than with the aesthetics of living." Womanism, then, speaks with cultural specificity to gender politics among African Americans.
- 20 The departing quote is taken from Henry John and Margaret Drewal's *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 8.

BOOK REVIEW

A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories. By Roland Freeman. Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1996. Cloth, \$34.95.

BILL STANFORD PINCHEON

“On this particular evening, my mother was seated in a rocking chair nursing my baby brother Albert. Across from her sat my father in his favorite big spruce-green chair next to a small table with a flickering oil lamp. Between them was what seemed then a huge, dark brown sofa, on which my older sister, Delores, and I were snuggled under a quilt. We were very excited about the snowfall and our visit to our grandmother Goldie’s for Thanksgiving.” — Roland Freeman, in the introduction to *A Communion of the Spirits*.

Scholars of quilting, quilters, and their admirers have much to look forward to in opening the pages of Roland Freeman’s book, *A Communion of the Spirits*. A photographer, Freeman deftly uses brilliant color photos of quilts and their makers. This visual display of quilts demonstrates how they are utilized by those who make, preserve, and use them, in a variety of contexts, from bedding to decorative arts. He includes information about the quilt makers in his narrative, placing the making of quilts in the context of family and social history. Participants in Freeman’s project describe their quilts as being made to keep warm, to record history, to commemorate struggle and

triumph, to give to loved ones, to heal hurts, and to generate income. How quilters learned their craft, why they quilt, what they create, and their thinking about what they are doing guide the narratives Freeman includes with his photographs of quilts, their makers, and the social and familial context in which they are made.

Freeman states at the outset that he felt, even as a child, that quilts were special, even magical. "They could heal and they could curse; they could capture history and affect the future; they could transform pain to celebration." Now, as an adult, Freeman recognizes a special understanding of and connection to quilts. "Added to this was an irresistible fascination I have always felt with being among groups of African-American women."

Most of the quilters featured in the book are female; however, male quilters are also included. Freeman sensed that there were powerful differences in substance, energy, and style in female-made quilts from those of predominantly male or mixed-gender groups, and he wanted to understand those differences and share in the power that women manifested. The book provides that opportunity in many ways, for most of the quilters featured are African-American women. However, male quilters such as New York-based artist Michael Cummings are also profiled, and Freeman notes that while there are certainly fewer male quilters, their numbers and contributions are significant, and overall, the range of their work seems as broad as the women's.

Ostensibly, the book is divided into two sections. Part One includes the Southern survey, "Something to Keep You Warm," in which Freeman explores the origins of his photo documentation project in the Southern U.S., between 1940 and 1992. Part Two, "More Than Something to Keep you Warm," focuses on the completion of his national survey of African-American quilting patterns. The Gallery of Quilted Photographs included near the end of the book integrates two art forms, quilts and photography.

Just as the making of quilts is intertwined with the personal histories of their makers, family, friends and community, Freeman too delves into the many layers of the quilt makers' lives and the personal, spiritual power involved in the production of quilts. He interviews quilt makers from a wide geographical region, including West Africa as well as the United States. Quilting is shown to reflect to patterns of dispersion, resettlement and migration, as the

visual qualities of quilts are unique to personal, family, and community histories. Although most of the quilt makers interviewed are ordinary, everyday black folk involved in quilting, a number of famous African Americans are included in the book, such as Alice Walker and Maya Angelou, whose comments on quilting add to the book's interest. There are as well interesting anecdotes about the world of quilting, which folklorists and others involved in the presentation of folk arts may find of interest.

BOOK REVIEW

MADE IN ALABAMA: A STATE LEGACY. Edited by E. Bryding Adams. Birmingham: Birmingham Museum of Art, 1995. Paper, pp. 392, \$25.

ROBERT COGSWELL

Folk Arts Program, Tennessee Arts Commission

This handsome book and its companion exhibit constitute a milestone in the study and interpretation of Alabama culture and history, which was reached through a decade of diligent research and scholarly teamwork by the Alabama Decorative Arts Survey, under the direction of E. Bryding Adams at the Birmingham Museum of Art. The project ambitiously set out in the mid-1980s to catalog all known Alabama-made artifacts in both public and private collections, and to amass relevant information about their makers, production, and context. The effort entailed an extraordinary, long-range institutional commitment by the museum, untold hours of investigation and fieldwork by the principal researchers, and generous cooperation by a wide network of collectors, sites, and descendants. Given the survey's broad vision, the practical complexities of budgets and logistics, and, we can imagine, the needle-in-a-haystack nature of so many of its specific quests, it was the sort of project that nowadays very rarely gets done, or at least done well.

As part of doing its job well, the Alabama Decorative Arts Survey acknowledges that such an open-ended documentary mission is never actually

finished, so the survey intends to continue its work as other artifacts and information come to light. But by 1994, it had amassed sufficient results to present comprehensive profiles of them. The "Made in Alabama" exhibit, first staged at the Birmingham Museum of Art October 1994 through January 1995 and later toured to three other in-state museums, was a feast for the eyes, an exhaustive exposition of Alabama creativity in tangible form. Likewise this book is a feast for the mind, adding a permanence to the exhibition's accomplishments that will provide an invaluable reference and inspire continued research in the future.

The book brings together all the data and interpretative content which helped make the exhibit so impressive—and which, I recall, left me wishing I had more time to spend in its galleries. Here that information is recast and expanded for posterity, and while the volume as a whole revisits the overall scope of the exhibit, each of its essays also holds up independently as a fine overview of a particular topic or art form. Generous illustrations—including old photographs, color photos of artifacts, historic advertisements, and artisan's drafts—visually complement the textual details. An appended sampling of historic ships' manifests and estate inventories affords a fascinating look at representative primary sources consulted in the survey. A complete descriptive catalogue of objects in the exhibit, a bibliography, and an index round out the contents.

The conception of the decorative arts to which the survey has subscribed emphasizes the handmade and the historic, so the book deals primarily with nineteenth-century Alabama, from the frontier to the early industrial periods. Folk and fine arts are commingled in its coverage, although the survey's dependence on surviving objects does skew the balance somewhat in the latter direction, simply because exceptional art objects tend to be better preserved. Unlike some treatments of decorative arts, this one thankfully admits the folklife perspective, and it surely benefits from it. By acknowledging both the elegant and the rough, the exclusive and the plebeian, articles in the book convey a great deal about differing values and social contexts behind the objects.

Questions of artistic breadth and quality inevitably reverberate around the book's central premise—that Alabama (or any provincial section of the

country, for that matter) has claim to its own unique traditions, styles, and character in the decorative arts. Not long ago, acceptance for this proposition would have been harder won, and there are still lots of antiques snobs who regard the decorative arts of any backwater area as consisting of imported tastes and bad copies derived from European and New England inspiration. Indeed, a transplantation process was part of the decorative arts story in Alabama, detailed here in the arrivals of art wares as ships' cargo in Mobile and the migrations of eastern-trained artists and artisans set on making a name for themselves in new country. But there are also other plots in this story—of unselfconscious domestic and community arts traditions tied to Southern yeomanry; of slave artists and craftsmen and larger African-American legacies; and of distinctive practices, tastes, and proclivities revealed in the work of dozens of individuals. Ultimately, *Made in Alabama* is, through its breadth, a proud assertion of both quality and identity for the state's art legacy and, through its contributors' rigor, a very convincing one.

Folklife and social historical insights make the book less about things than about the people who made, owned, and used them. Adams' brief preface underscores the overreaching focus on creative classes of people and their place in Alabama history by citing occupational census data from the mid-nineteenth century. The first full essay, "Introduction: Made in Alabama 1819-1930," by Leah Rawls Atkins, paints a useful backdrop for the successive articles, identifying circumstances in Alabama's settlement history, geography, and technological, economic, and political life that influenced the course of the decorative arts. Two other opening essays lend useful vantage points to the rest of the book. "The Furnishing of Early Alabama Homes, 1819-1870," by Lee W. Rahe, uses estate inventory lists to create an overview of the typical Alabama period household and its room-by-room contents. "Marking Time in a Plain Style Tradition: The Decorative Lives of Frederick and Narcissa Cooper," by Daniel Fate Brooks, profiles a representative couple—he, a wheelwright, furniture maker, and undertaker; she, a needle worker and teacher—who exemplify the integration of art and everyday life in nineteenth-century Alabama.

The first genre article, Joey Brackner's "Made of Alabama: Alabama Folk Pottery and Its Creators," comments on the state's place in the larger scope of

Southern traditional pottery, on regional distribution and technological change in the craft in Alabama; and on its associations with specific families. "Woven in Alabama: Handmade Textiles," by Pat Jemian, similarly generalizes about both domestic and professional hand weaving activity. A third folk-oriented contribution, Gail Andrews Trechsel's "Covering Alabama: Nineteenth Century Quilts and Needlework," makes ample reference to work of specific women in overseeing production of both quilts and samplers.

The remaining essays have greater bearing on elite artistic forms. E. Bryding Adams's "'True to Life . . . in the Highest Style': Painting in Alabama" is especially thorough, presenting information on the careers of numerous artists involved in forms ranging from portraiture (where associations with moneyed society were particularly strong) to landscapes, mourning art, and calligraphy and maps. "Mortised, Tenoned, and Screwed Together: A Large Assortment of Alabama Furniture," also by Adams, contains sections addressing influences on the cabinetmaking craft; activities in the four major centers of Mobile, Montgomery, Huntsville, and Tuscaloosa; and various forms typical in Alabama cabinetry. I found Frances Osborn Robb's "Engraved by the Sunbeams': Alabama Photographs, 1840-1920" a particularly fascinating addition to the book, photography being both a topic usually disregarded in decorative arts overviews and one in which Alabama activity was very clearly abreast of national trends. "Alabama Silversmiths, Jewelers, and Silver Merchants," co-written by Adams and Frances C. Sommers, skillfully sorts through issues concerning the volume's most exclusive art form, in which matters of provenance were often complicated by imported wares, and summarizes information about known markings and manufacturing in various locales.

Made in Alabama belongs on the bookshelf of every Alabamian seriously interested in material arts, history, and folk culture. Establishing an authoritative common referent that unites these cultural interest groups may, in fact, be the book's most significant accomplishment. There is always more to be discovered and known about the objects that afford us tangible contact with our past. As reference and inspiration, this book will play a pivotal role in how Alabama's legacy continues to be valued, preserved, and understood through its physical heirlooms.

SOUND RECORDING REVIEW

JOHN ALEXANDER'S STERLING JUBILEE SINGERS OF BESSEMER, ALABAMA. Joyce Cauthen, project director in consultation with Doug Seroff. Alabama Folklife Association, 1996. Alabama Traditions 105 (cassette with insert booklet), \$10.

JESUS HITS LIKE THE ATOM BOMB: JOHN ALEXANDER'S STERLING JUBILEE SINGERS. New World Records 80513-2, 1997. CD with 11 page booklet, \$15.

WILLIE R. COLLINS
W. Collins & Associates

While gospel quartet singing is not a fundamental part of black church music, quartets remain an integral part of the church community. This quartet is no exception. They have provided music for anniversary programs of other quartets, union meetings, festivals and other church functions. Their performances in church are no doubt a welcome change from the unaccompanied congregational singing and gospel choruses heard during regular services. Quartet singing has always had an entertainment function. In 1871, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, followed by the Hampton Singers and the Tuskegee Singers, among others, toured and entertained audiences to raise money for their

schools. These early professional quartets associated with schools developed performance practices in the singing of spirituals that were based on a fine arts aesthetic. The independent quartets that subsequently evolved departed from this fine arts aesthetic with an emphasis on instruments or, in the case of *a cappella* quartets, the voices imitating instruments, as well as the influence of commercial music and gospel music. The Sterling Jubilee Singers in this collection are singing by and large gospel songs by Thomas Dorsey and other composers.

While the selections were chosen in advance, the recording attempts to capture the flavor of a Sterling Jubilee Singers' rehearsal. We get the feel of Straight Place, a building by the railroad tracks where JASJS rehearse weekly, when we hear the sound of the train at the end of "Will He Welcome Me There." The rehearsal also shows how JASJS incorporate the liturgy of the Baptist church such as devotion, testimonials and the benediction. The "devotional" consists of "The Lord's Prayer" recited in unison, the "testimony" and "benediction" all part of the recording. The background of the singers, a brief description of their rehearsal space, and brief descriptions of the songs are provided in the notes to the recording. No song texts are provided. The JASJS were sixty-five years old at the time of this recording. Five of the eleven recordings were made at the Hoover Public Library in 1993.

Eleven gospel songs are presented in this collection, mostly in medium to slow tempi. Three songs out of the eleven are exceptional for their topical interest and high artistic quality: "Little Wooden Church" (an absolute gem), "Atom Bomb," and "God Shall Wipe All Tears Away." "Little Wooden Church" moves along with surefooted percussion ably led by John Alexander. In the contrasting section, the quartet provides a recurring "doo-wopish" vamp that propels Alexander to gently preach, drawing from traditional sources. "Atom Bomb" is a lively song warning the listener to be mindful of the second coming—when it comes, it will hit like an atom bomb. John Alexander provides the lead with the rest of the quartet providing a "pumping bass" (bass voice imitating a tuba), sustained harmonies and foot percussion. "God Shall Wipe All Tears Away," as sung and recited here, is probably close to the older Jubilee style of spiritual singing, although some gospel singing practices such as repetition of certain phrases are exploited. "Peace in the Valley," "The Lord

is My Shepherd," "Will He Welcome Me There," "Job," "I Never Hear a Man," "My Jesus Knows," "Every Time I Try to Do My Best" and "Operator" are the remaining eight songs. The artistic quality of these songs suffers. Problem intonation, weak leads and the slow tempi distract the listener. The recording of this seminal quartet is important for documentary and historical purposes and will be reissued in CD format by New World Records as *Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb*.

Like the covenant between Jacob and Laban from Genesis 49, the Sterling Jubilee Singers have committed themselves to the gospel in song for more than sixty-seven years now. The recording ends with a "benediction" (Genesis 49) recited in leader chorus fashion as follows: "May the lord watch between me and thee while we're absent one from another." The leader says: "Let's all say it together children: Amen, GOOD DAY!" [laughter follows]. The JASJS enjoy singing as well as their fellowship.

SOUND RECORDING REVIEW

Here I Stand: Elder's Wisdom, Children's Song. Larry Long with the Youth and Elders of Rural Alabama, Volume 1 Smithsonian Folkways 45050 CD with 23 page booklet, \$15.

JOYCE CAUTHEN
Alabama Folklife Association

Here I Stand is a beautifully produced and very listenable compact disc that celebrates community life in rural Alabama. It was compiled, recorded, and produced by Larry Long in collaboration with the PACERS Small Schools Cooperative and the Program for Rural Services and Research at the University of Alabama, and was issued by Smithsonian/Folkways Records. Long, who is described in the liner notes as a musician, community organizer, father, educator, and "a true American troubadour" (Studs Turkel), does residencies in rural Alabama schools participating in the PACERS program. During his week in each school, he and the students interview four elders and write songs based on the interviews. On Friday evening they perform their songs at a public celebration, which also features other local talent. *Here I Stand* presents ten of the songs and brief excerpts from the interviews they were based upon, plus some of the more outstanding local performers at the various celebrations.

Given that the songs are written and learned in five days and recorded in performance, I would expect and certainly forgive any amateurishness in the

CD—but there is nothing to forgive. The tunes are beautiful and well sung. The lyrics are packed full of details gathered from interviews, expressed in very natural-sounding phrases. The songs are varied in style, with some being bluesy, and others suggestive of gospel music, spirituals, and country ballads. Larry Long's harmonica playing and guitar back-up work add much to the performance, without stealing the show. The sound quality is excellent, with the music and speech having real warmth and presence.

The CD opens with the spoken words of Arthur Slater of Coffeeville, and is followed by a song composed by a third grade class at Coffeeville Elementary. It tells of Mr. Slater's work on the farm, and of race relations as he grew up. Inspired by Slater's singing of the beloved hymn "A Charge to Keep I Have" during his interview, the children called their song "My Charge to Keep," and these words became the chorus.

This interweaving of interviews and music continues throughout the CD, with most of the songs dealing with work—mining, farming, washing clothes, tending a country store, etc.—or of memories of the town in earlier days. One of my favorites is "Guadalajara, Mexico (Ballad of Danny Garcia)," sung by a fifth-grade class in Collinsville. Garcia speaks of leaving Mexico to make a living in the United States, and the song that grew out of his interview is reminiscent of a Mexican folk song, with a few Spanish words in the chorus. You can literally hear pride in the voices of the Mexican children in the class who had probably been coaching their classmates in pronunciation before the performance.

In addition to the students' songs, there is great fiddling by Sabrina Williams, a delightful rendition of "The Charming Black Mustache" by ninety-year-old Lily Mae Stewart, a strong gospel piece by the Centerview Youth Choir from Camp Hill, as well as the singing of "I Know My Redeemer Lives" by Sacred Harp Singers of Camp Hill, from the 1971 Denson Revision of the *Original Sacred Harp*. My only complaint with the project involves the documentation of these performances. Though the twenty-four-page liner notes are thorough, and contain transcriptions of all the songs and interviews, I think the listener also needs to know that Sabrina is a teenager, much younger than her skill on the fiddle indicates, and it would be helpful to know who backed her up on guitar. Was it Chuck Reeves, her great fiddle-playing uncle

and mentor, or was it Larry Long? Where does Lily Mae Stewart live? And who are these wonderful Sacred Harp singers? Giving the name of at least one of the singers would help folklorists and other Sacred Harp singers make contact with them to learn more about their archaic style and the practices associated with their singing. A closer working relationship between PACERS and state folklorists (*i.e.*, those affiliated with the State Arts Council, the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture and the Alabama Folklife Association) could foster further documentation and perhaps provide more performance opportunities for traditional musicians from rural communities.

One of the rare and amazing things about *Here I Stand* is that it undeniably accomplishes two of the somewhat "airy" sounding objectives of the PACERS "Better Schools Building Better Communities" program. One, called "Genius of Place," holds that each community is a wellspring of untapped information and experience and thus encourages students to explore and document their communities. Another, called "Joy," encourages community celebration. According to PACER literature, "Joy" says to student, teacher, and community alike, 'there is a lot here to be proud of and you can have a valuable learning experience by enhancing and celebrating it.'" In *Here I Stand* the conveying of knowledge and experience and the feeling of self-and community pride are palpable.

Another thing that the producer did right, that most folklorists don't, is to seek a recording company with the ability to promote and distribute the recording. Rather than self-producing it and selling it out of a closet in the PACERS office in Tuscaloosa, Long was able to interest Smithsonian/Folkways in the project. Thus it is listed in the "The Whole Folkways Catalogue" and can easily be ordered by calling 1-800-410-9815. Those interested in Alabama folklife, community development, local history, educational techniques and/or good music will want to do so.

SOUND RECORDING AND BOOK REVIEW

In the Spirit: Alabama's Sacred Music Traditions. Produced by Joyce Cauthen and the Alabama Folklife Association. Alabama Traditions 106. (Compact disc or cassette).

In the Spirit: Alabama's Sacred Music Traditions, edited by Henry Willett, Alabama Center for Traditional Culture. Montgomery: Black Belt Press, 1995 CD or cassette with 128-page book, \$15.

JOHN BEALLE, PH.D.
Folklorist

It has long been known that Alabama is a wellspring of traditional religious music. So producing a sampler recording, as Joyce Cauthen and Henry Willett have done with *In the Spirit*, might have been a straightforward matter. But *In the Spirit* quickly exceeds the expectations of its genre, bringing newfound appreciation to the enduring religious music traditions in our state. It is an important recording, meriting our profoundest attention as a paradigm for traditional music presentation.

The topical coverage of *In the Spirit* is derived from the premise that Alabama's earliest Europeans and Africans arrived at about the time of the Second Great Awakening, when Protestant religious fervor and music were wedded to an extent that few today realize. These groups so flourished in

Alabama that their longstanding sacred music traditions remain today, in Willett's terms, "as among the state's most remarkable cultural jewels." Their traditions have emerged from the fullness of history since that remarkable period, and it is that totality of musical and cultural experience which this recording documents with such stunning clarity. *In the Spirit's* producers, of course, are wise to make all of this explicit, for without it, their subtitle, "Alabama's Sacred Music Traditions," suggests an unwarranted measure of comprehensiveness and a dangerous alliance of the term "tradition" with the settlement period.

The recording itself, produced by Joyce Cauthen, includes portions from shape note, psalm and hymn singing, and gospel quartet traditions that Alabama's most tradition-minded Protestants have long embraced with care and dedication. But what makes *In the Spirit* distinctive is that, in most every instance, the producers bypassed readily available and oft-used sources to provide instead uniquely evocative selections. The recording begins, for example, with two selections from the irrepressible *Sacred Harp* (1991 Denson Revision) recorded, not at a public singing convention, but in the home of Terry and Sheila Wootten, with approximately seventy-five family members singing. Likewise, the *Christian Harmony* selection is from the reunion of the Deason family, a large singing family centered in Bibb County. At that same event, Donald Smith and Doug Wyers sing a chilling duet, "Mercy Seat," from Benjamin Lloyd's ageless hymnbook, *Primitive Hymns*. Other recordings were made at worship services, such as hymn singing from Mt. Pleasant Primitive Baptist Church in Birmingham, "Dr. Watts" singing from the *Baptist Standard Hymnal* at a devotional service at Ramah Baptist Church in the Letohatchee community, and improvised moaning from a devotional service in Cotton Valley. The Psalm Singing Covenanters of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Selma were recorded at the Alabama Highland Games.

In other cases, again where field and commercial sources were readily available, rare archival recordings were used. The selection from the *Sacred Harp* (Cooper Revision) is taken from a recording of a singing convention under the leadership of Judge Jackson in Dothan in 1927, the first field recording made by folklorist John Wesley Work. The gospel quartet selection from the oft-recorded Brown's Ferry Four is a song composed by seventeen-year-old

Alton Delmore with his mother in 1925 and was taken from a home disc recording of a rehearsal made around 1942. The selection from the Big Four Singers gospel quartet was a commercial recording made in Bessemer in 1941. It goes without saying, of course, that listeners accustomed to the polished, uniform sound of studio productions will have to give up their comforts; but *In the Spirit* should make that sacrifice worthwhile.

The advantages gained by this impressive collection of sources are intensified manyfold by the accompanying book. Edited by Henry Willett, the book contains twelve essays written for the recording by ten different authorities on various forms of religious music. In contrast with the customary booklet or liner note format, the *In the Spirit* document is a 128-page soft-bound book, set in easily readable type, with a generous complement of photographs for most articles. In every contribution, new research was integrated into a lucid introductory historical essay with suggested references for further reading. Some contributors described previously undocumented Alabama traditions, such as Joyce Cauthen's account of the form of hymn singing that singers themselves call "Dr. Watts singing," or Henry Willett's account of the Reformed Presbyterian Congregation in Selma.

But even for well-documented forms, contributors write specifically to the occasion of the recording. Buell Cobb focuses on the Wootten family of Sacred Harp singers, Charles Wolfe on the role of the Athens Music Company in seven-shape gospel music publication in north Alabama, and Anne Kimzey on the Deason family of Christian Harmony singers. Others that examine performance features are Willie Collins on the moan-and-prayer event in African-American worship and Doug Seroff on the role of community in African-American gospel quartet tradition. Articles on bluegrass gospel music focus on the formative influences of Bill Monroe, the Louvin Brothers, and the Sullivan Family (Jack Bernhardt), or on the specific role of Margie Sullivan of St. Stephens, Alabama (Erin Kellen). Convention gospel singing, so widespread in Alabama, is examined by Fred Fussell, while Joyce Cauthen focuses on the Sand Mountain area. Appropriately, Henry Willett's editorial touch is light, so that each essay speaks with its own voice and makes its own connections to the cumulative effort.

The use of nonstandard and varied sources provides *In the Spirit* the

capacity to project so vividly the depth of these musical traditions. The "spirit" overcomes worshipers at a devotional service in one instance; in another it articulates the shared joy of family gatherings. It attracts vast numbers to compose, listen, or sing at gospel singing conventions, or it inspires a moment of shared sentiment of Alton Delmore and his mother that will evolve into the glitz of commercial country music. It is the enduring faith that propels the Sullivan Family through numerous years and miles of grueling travel, or the compelling testimony of Jerry and Tammy Sullivan in their single performance of "When Jesus Passed By," the closing selection on the recording.

In the Spirit accumulates these spiritual moments, of course, by the premeditated sensitivity of its producers to the circumstance of musical performance. But so much more than this comprises *In the Spirit*. It was, in fact, crafted by countless hands from John Wesley Work's inaugural recording in 1927 to each contemporary photo or recording most driven by a mysterious and powerful affection for traditional culture. Every moment, every page benefits in some small way from the network of folklife specialists that has accumulated around the traditional culture of Alabama. It is only by way of this marriage of religious faith with folkloristic craft in countless circumstances that *In the Spirit* bursts forth into such compelling testimony to the diversity of religious song in Alabama.

It is difficult to overstate the depth of quality of this recording: among many which have shared its ambition, few have achieved its level of accomplishment. Too often, recordings of this type introduce little new material, provide only superficial documentation, or are burdened by the vision of their producers. *In the Spirit* resonates with its diversity of inspirational moments, challenging listeners with complexity of traditional culture. This recording will undoubtedly grow in stature as it takes its place as a classic document of Alabama's traditional culture; in the meantime, a great many listeners will grow in stature because of it.

SOUND RECORDING REVIEW

Traditional Music from Alabama's Wiregrass Alabama Traditions 107 edited by Steve Grauberger, Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, 1997 CD with 23-page booklet, \$10.

CHIQUITA WILLIS-WALLS

There is an African proverb that states, "Every time an old man dies, a library burns to the ground." Few people realize the seriousness of this statement as does the ethnomusicologist.

Ethnomusicologists are those unique people who are ever striving to find three things: a project that is traditional and unique, performers who are willing to share their knowledge and talents, and funding. And while we know that death is inevitable, we constantly search for ways to preserve and maintain traditions that would otherwise be lost. This is what Steve Grauberger has done in the Alabama Wiregrass region with the new musical compact disc, *Traditional Music from Alabama's Wiregrass*. Grauberger has worked tirelessly and faithfully with the artists and performers of the Wiregrass region to preserve valuable spiritual and secular traditions that transcend generations, racial boundaries, and church denominations. The project allows the performers opportunities to reach into their pasts and give a valuable gift of themselves to the future.

The liner notes describe the Wiregrass region of southeast Alabama as a predominantly rural region where traditional music flourishes and bluegrass,

gospel, blues, and shape note singings are among the diverse styles of music found throughout. The beauty of Grauberger's work lies in the fact that he has presented so many samples of the musical genres indigenous to the area.

In many areas of the state, the church remains the central institution that affects community life. The Wiregrass region is no exception. The church is the public place where hope is found to face the daily struggles of life. On *Traditional Music from Alabama's Wiregrass Region*, the people and their sincerity are believable and easy to embrace. Their enthusiasm for God and respect of their heritage is inspiring to hear.

The traditional performances on this project bring alive the true aesthetic found in traditional church settings. Music and praise in worship are avenues of expression for both the singers and the listeners in many church settings. The church serves as a place of refuge from storms, of encouragement, and of celebration of God's grace and love. Family interaction, community support, personal expression and testimonies, verbal reinforcement and encouragement, shouting, and audience involvement are natural elements found in both black and white services.

The display of diversity of musical traditions is this CD's greatest asset. There are black renditions along with white. There are Pentecostals, Baptists, Methodists and more. There are congregational numbers, shape note conventions (four and seven), choirs, and solos. There are female and male group selections. There are young performers and older, more seasoned singers. There are slow and upbeat numbers. There are formal church settings, home settings, and public stage settings. *A cappella* as well as instrumental versions are featured. There is something for everyone.

For my grandmother who would proclaim that she "could not understand this new stuff," there are long metered hymns, and Sacred Harp tunes and seven-shape songs with and without musical accompaniment. For my children who swear they can never figure out what is going on in a long meter hymn or a shape note singing convention, there are upbeat quartet numbers with today's familiar instruments. And the wonder of all this is each song complements the previous. The strategic placement of the songs gives the listener a feeling that he is floating through musical eras in history.

Traditional Music from Alabama's Wiregrass Region begins with two lined

hymns. "Amazing Grace" (1779) from Benjamin Lloyd's *Primitive Hymns* is lined out in the traditional fashion in which the song leader recites each line and the congregation follows by singing the same words. The performance took place at the Mt. Pisgah Primitive Baptist Church in Chambers County. A second style of the lined-out hymn, performed at the Pleasant Grove Primitive Baptist Church in Dale County, has the leader sing each line, and the congregation follows by the singing the same words. This hymn, including moans from the congregation, is performed preceding an opening ceremony prayer. Later, this congregation performs "David's Lamentation" from the Cooper revision of the *Sacred Harp*. The Alabama Florida Convention sings "Jesus Rose" from Judge Jackson's *Colored Sacred Harp* at Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church in Henry County. These congregations, the first white and the other two black, do outstanding jobs.

The St. Elizabeth Senior Choir, composed of five older black women and led by Ida Mae Peeble, were recorded singing "I'm Traveling Home" *a cappella* at the Sweet Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church anniversary celebration in Pike County. Like the St. Elizabeth Senior Choir, the Zion Juniors, a male quartet, have been singing together since the 1950s. Their song, "Family Prayer," led by Robert Wilson, was recorded at the Pike Pioneer Museum in Troy. Both were made up of active senior citizens with decades of performing experience. On the other hand, the Glory Bound Singers is a young group that sang "One of These Days" *a cappella* for a benefit program at the Tarentum Community Center in Pike County. Their sound is reminiscent of the contemporary Christian groups A cappella, Take 6, and Glad.

The Sixty-sixth Annual Alabama State Gospel Convention used the piano to accompany a seven-shape song "I'll Be Going Home" by Ozark native Stanley Smith. The song is upbeat and lively. "Glory Glory I 'm So Glad" is performed by the Fifth Sunday Singing Convention in Pike County at the Mt. Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church. Like many conventions in central Mississippi, this convention sang the notes and lyrics with a piano accompaniment to enhance the weaker voice parts. The modern choir sound is demonstrated by the Reverend J. C. Folks Choir in "It's Hard to Stumble When You're On Your Knees." This African-American church choir arrangement featured a wide range of ages. Alternating voices were sung on the lead, and the song is

enhanced by strong backup from the choir members. One can feel the younger members' enthusiasm and excitement when it comes their time to sing backup.

"Working on a Building" by Southern Comfort, a white group with a bluegrass gospel sound, features Lonnie Magoo on lead vocal. This song is from the Mac Opry — a monthly show and live broadcast in Opp — that features many bluegrass bands from the region. The performance has all the bluegrass band sounds — guitar, mandolin, acoustic bass and fiddle — and sweet harmonious backup vocals. "Glory Land March" by the Circle City Bluegrass Band of Dothan is the only instrumental sacred number on the CD. With William Frank McGlaun on fiddle, Howard Linsey on mandolin, Luther Hasty on guitar and Buster Watson on banjo, the song is a demonstration of sheer talent and professional playing skills.

A blues man turned preacher is showcased in "I Found a Solid Rock in Jesus" by Bishop Perry Tillis of the Savior Lord Jesus Pentecostal Holiness Church in Geneva County. His improvisational upbeat blues-like style was performed during worship where he accompanied himself on electric guitar.

If it is safe to assume that many people older than sixty enjoy lined-out hymns and shape-note songs, it is highly likely that a good many under the age of sixty enjoy and even prefer the jubilee quartet gospel sound that includes a lead singer, tenor and bass guitar, baritone, drums, keyboard, and lead guitar. The jubilee gospel group featured here is A. Z. Stanley and the Sensational Bibletones and their selection "Hold On." This male gospel group is well known in southeast Alabama because of their regular performances and radio broadcasts which are heard throughout the region and in neighboring states. Recorded at an anniversary singing for The Traveling Stars, a fellow gospel group, the Bibletones feature smooth backup vocal harmonies and complementary tenor and bass guitars along with a strong male lead. Based on the Biblical story of Moses leading the children out of Egypt and across the Red Sea, "Hold On" is paired with today's life struggles. The familiarity with Moses and everyday problems was something the audience could highly relate to. Hence, there is a lot of audience response and encouragement to the group.

The Holy Bible, like the St. Elizabeth St. Choir, are all women. This group, made up of Sue Elizabeth Ford and her four daughters is, however, much younger, and they were backed by guitar and drums as they sang their

rendition of an old favorite "This Little Light of Mine." The recording was made at the L&J Music Hall in Dothan.

"I Shall Not Be Moved"/"I'm Going Home to Jesus," led by Ed Youngblood of the Hartford Community Church in Geneva County, is representative of the passionate and emotional worship service at a white Pentecostal Holiness church in the region. The songs are accompanied by backup vocals and musical instruments and are accentuated by hand clapping and shouts from the audience.

Just as sacred traditional music thrives in the church, so does secular traditional music flourish in the world of rural entertainment. Here, the secular realm is represented by performances of country and blues styles, using harmonica and fiddle. The Depression Era tune "No Hard Times," performed by Southern Comfort, shows the influence on the area of country music greats Jimmy Rogers and Hank Williams. J. W. Warren of Ozark and his song "Louise," which he composed during his youth, represent the local blues sound. "Freight Train Blues" by David Johnson, recorded outdoors at Johnson's home near Elba, captures the skill of a harmonica player combined with the sounds of nature. Everis Campbell and his older brother Newt are third-generation fiddlers who traveled the region to participate in fiddle contests and square dances. Here, Everis performs five traditional tunes: "Tom and Jerry," "I've Decided to Follow Jesus," "Soldier's Joy," "Dill Pickle Rag," and "Methodist Preacher." It is obvious that the secular genre is just as diverse and appreciated in the region as the sacred.

Finally, a mention must be made about the significance of Mr. Grauberger's work as an ethnomusicologist. It was with much delight that I met Stephen in 1995 at a shape-note singing convention in the Wiregrass region. It was refreshing to meet someone who felt that the shape-note tradition was important and needed to be preserved. His work on this CD gave an opportunity to those inside the community to express themselves and represent the things they love, and give the truest rendition of their musical traditions. At the same time, these performers were able to enlighten outsiders by giving a peek into the Wiregrass region.

Traditional Music from Alabama's Wiregrass Region is a definite and worthwhile accomplishment for the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture,

the Pike Pioneer Museum, and the National Endowment for the Arts. It is a project well done for Stephen Grauberger who worked so diligently to ensure its success. Most importantly, *Traditional Music from Alabama's Wiregrass Region* is a faithful tribute and celebration of a region's talent in the field of traditional music.

IN MEMORIAM:



Kim Appel

Tommie Bass (1908 - 1996)

Tommie Bass, herbalist from Leesburg in Cherokee County, died on August 28, 1996 at the age of eighty-eight. In his later years, Bass had become widely known as a traditional herbalist, and in 1985 was even featured in a story on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*.

“Mr. Tommie” was born on January 24, 1908 in Rash, Alabama (near Stevenson). As a youngster he supplemented his family’s income by fur trapping and by gathering ginseng and other medicinal herbs from the woods to sell to drug companies. Eventually his knowledge of the local flora grew to include more than three hundred plants and nearly as many herbal remedies to treat everything from arthritis to hepatitis and jaundice.

For more than seventy years, the herb doctor applied his skill “to give ease” to the people who came for advice and to purchase his salves and tonics. He shared his knowledge of healing with many people, including Darryl Patton, who wrote *Tommie Bass: Herb Doctor of Shinbone Ridge* (1988, Southern

University Press, Birmingham). In 1988, Duke University Press published *Plain Southern Eating: From the Reminiscences of A. L. "Tommie" Bass, Herbalist*, compiled and edited by John K. Crellin. His skill at storytelling and performance on the harmonica complemented his knowledge of medicinal plants and made him a popular interview for newspaper feature writers and television producers.

Bass was also the subject of a documentary film, *Tommie Bass: A Life in the Ridge and Valley Country*, produced by Tom Rankin of the University of Mississippi and Allen Tullos of Emory University. He was also featured in the Alabama segment of Turner Broadcasting's *Portrait of America* series.

Thousands of Alabamians met Tommie Bass at the Alabama Folklife Festivals of the early 1990s. He was a crowd favorite and the audience at his herb table was always two or three people deep. After each festival, he would make a point of expressing his gratitude to the festival staff for inviting him. His humility and kindness cannot be overstated and the body of knowledge that he left will be studied for generations.

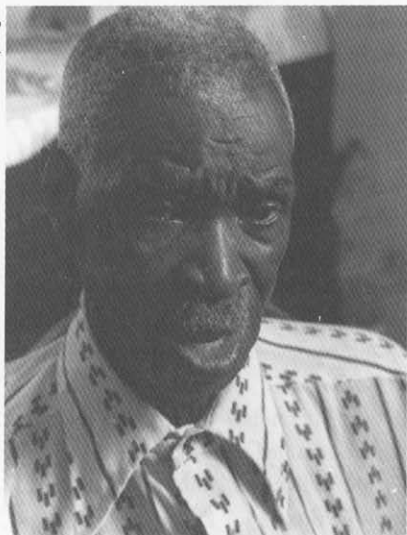
—JOEY BRACKNER, ANNE KIMZEY AND AIMEE SCHMIDT

DEWEY P. WILLIAMS (1898-1995)

Ozark, Alabama native and Sacred Harp singing master Dewey P. Williams passed away in November of 1995. The first Alabamian to be named recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts' National Heritage Fellowship, Williams devoted most of his ninety-seven years to the preservation of Alabama's African-American Sacred Harp singing tradition.

I first met Dewey Williams in 1977, a few months prior to his eightieth birthday celebration. He was a vigorous man totally dedicated to his musical mission in life. Fishing was the only activity which would occasionally divert him from his work on behalf of Sacred Harp singing. He would drive from Ozark to my office in Montgomery two or three times a month. While in my office he would call the Governor's office, and nearly always, get through to the

Melissa Springer



Governor himself. To the Governor, and to others who met him, Dewey Williams was an important man; yet in many respects his was a rather humble life.

He was born in the Haw community of Dale County in 1898, the son of sharecroppers, the grandson of slaves. For most of his life he worked as a sharecropper and farmer, obtaining only minimal education. He married Alice Casey in 1921 and they raised seven children. It was in his life-long dedication to Sacred Harp singing,

that sturdy Southern sacred vocal tradition, that Dewey Williams's life was truly remarkable.

Williams's first instruction in Sacred Harp singing began at the age of six, under the tutelage of his parents and grandfather. By the time he was forty he was a master of the music and a teacher of singing schools. When he retired from farming, he dedicated himself fulltime to Sacred Harp music, producing and directing local Sunday morning radio and television programs, organizing singings and singing schools, and recruiting new participants.

In 1970, Williams organized the Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers who traveled to Washington to perform at the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife. It was in 1983 that he received the prestigious National Heritage Fellowship, the federal government's highest recognition of the nation's traditional artists. In 1990, Williams was featured in *Amazing Grace*, the widely acclaimed television documentary produced by Bill Moyers.

With Dewey Williams, Sacred Harp singing was not a recreational diversion. It was a way of life. He was constantly looking for ways to help preserve this joyful vocal tradition, through concerts and festivals, on radio and

television, and through singing schools. Williams's mission was Sacred Harp music, and it was a spiritual mission. In an interview from several years ago, Williams commented on the spiritual nature of Sacred Harp singings: "Real singing is what God wants me to do. He don't want us getting out there singing something to make you jump and cut up. He wants you to sing something to stir you up—make you sling your head. Tears may drop out of your eyes."

Like the music to which he dedicated his life, Dewey Williams was a man of grace and dignity, his gentle spirit impressing and affecting everyone with whom he came into contact. His funeral drew more than five hundred family members and friends who gathered to pay final tribute to this Sacred Harp singer who had dedicated most of his ninety-seven years to the nurturing of a powerful musical tradition.

On the occasion of his death, Jane Alexander, Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, wrote "We are consoled by the knowledge that the spirit of Dewey P. Williams will live on in the lives and music of the many people that he touched throughout his lifetime."

In her tribute read at the funeral service, Bess Lomax Hawes, former director of the National Endowment for the Arts' Folk Arts Program, captured the essence of Dewey Williams's spirit:

"I first met Deacon Williams twenty-five years ago at the Festival of American Folklife on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., where he stood directly in the shadow of the Washington Monument and led his friends in programs of inspired songs that could have lifted the heart of the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, himself. Many people who came to Washington seem a bit stunted and diminished by comparison with our national heroes, but Dewey Williams always stood tall, confident and proud in their company. Today, as we mourn our loss and grieve with his family, we need also to remember that Dewey Williams lived his whole life with joyful vigor, with energy, and with great style. In my mind's eye, I always see him marching inside the square, "bound for the promised land," leading his singers, his steps a bit slower as he aged, but always with that hint of elegance and verve. He always knew just exactly where he was going, and he gloried in the

journey. As we prepare to follow him, I hope we can follow his example as well, remembering how he caught hold of his life and infused it with his own unconquerable spirit, his special determination and grace. Goodbye and God bless you, Mr. Dewey. May every one of us who have learned so much from you live out our lives as well as you have lived yours.”

Dewey Williams was buried on November 18, 1995 at the Greater Old Salem Baptist Church cemetery, just a few miles from where he was born almost a century earlier.

—HENRY WILLETT, *Alabama Center for Traditional Culture*

Cornelius Wright, Jr. (1929-1996)

At a 1997 screening of the documentary film *Gandy Dancers* in Brunswick, Georgia, I suggested that someone needed to go to Birmingham, Alabama, and sit down with one of the film's subjects, Cornelius Wright, Jr., to tape record all that he had to tell. The combination of his knowledge, experiences, stories, and wit was a book waiting to happen. I made the suggestion not knowing that the opportunity was already lost forever. Cornelius Wright, Jr., had died four months earlier.

I first met Mr. Wright in 1988 while researching folk music traditions for the Alabama State Council on the Arts. It didn't take us long to realize that Mr. Wright was a living repository of African-American occupational lore, including the work songs associated with railroad track maintenance. The African Americans,



Ken Reynolds

whose work it was to lay and maintain railroad tracks by hand labor, were known as "gandy dancers." Section crews sang task-related work chants to synchronize their efforts and uplift their spirits. Their chants, or "calls" survive as artistic expressions for religious faith, working conditions, racial discrimination, and sexually explicit poetry. Cornelius Wright, Jr., like his father before him, was a gandy dancer: he practiced their skills, sang their work calls, and worked his way up the ranks to retire as a track supervisor for U. S. Steel. He was also a musician, scholar, educator, historian, union member of the Brotherhood of Maintenance and Way, and a dedicated member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity.

Of all the people I have come to know in my work, Cornelius Wright, Jr., stands out as what we folklorists like to think of as a "star informant"—an individual who embodies a cultural tradition, excels at its performance, is committed to passing it on, and has an uncanny ability to interpret it for those outside the tradition. When Cornelius Wright, Jr., spoke he was more articulate than most of us ever dream of being.

Mr. Wright was one of eight retired gandy dancers interviewed by the Alabama State Council on the Arts back in the late 1980s. So rich was their occupational lore that they were invited to perform at Birmingham's first City Stages Festival in 1989. They have continued to perform to large crowds there ever since. Repeated requests for performance created an opportunity for these retired workers to enjoy an unexpected vocation as folk performers. Though he would kiddingly refer to himself as "the baby of the group," Cornelius became the spiritual and practical leader of the group. Admittedly, performing for mixed-gender audiences was a far cry from calling track off to themselves. Wright and his reassembled section crew developed their own interpretive performance, enabling audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds to appreciate their occupational folk music. They in turn became the subject of interviews, newspaper articles, radio features, and public performances, including appearances at folklife festivals, railroad museums, and prestigious concert venues such as Carnegie Hall's Wiell Recital Hall in New York City (1992) and The Barns at Wolftrap for Folk Masters in (1995). Mr. Wright was featured in the 1994 documentary film, *Gandy Dancers*, which aired on National Public Television. In September of 1996, Mr. Wright and cohort

John Henry Mealing were honored as National Heritage Fellows in Washington, D.C., a national recognition wholly deserved.

Cornelius Wright, Jr., was deeply committed to preserving the gandy dancers' work songs and occupational folklife. In speaking to the audience at a workshop held during the first Alabama Folklife Festival in Birmingham, Mr. Wright gestured to his fellow gandy dancers on stage and said, "Even though years have passed and these gentlemen are a little slow, it is hopeful that they can impart some of their rhythm and their knowledge, and some of the folklore to our younger generation to let them know that this country was built, and this Southland was built, from blood, sweat, and tears."

Thank you Cornelius Wright, Jr., for imparting some of your rhythm, knowledge, and folklore. You will be sorely missed.

—MAGGIE HOLTZBERG, *Georgia Council for the Arts*

Contributors' Notes

DAVID ANDERSON is a Ph.D. student in labor history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he is completing a dissertation on a 1950s strike at an automobile parts plant in New Castle, Indiana. PATRICK HUBER is a Ph.D. student in Southern United States history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is currently writing his dissertation, a social history of pre-World War II hillbilly music and the working-class Southern musicians who recorded it.

ALAN BROWN is a professor in the Division of Languages and Literature at the University of West Alabama. He became deeply interested in Southern folklore after moving to Alabama in 1986. Since 1990, he has presented several lecture topics on folklore for the Alabama Humanities Foundation Speakers Bureau. In 1993, Dr. Brown edited a book entitled *Dim Roads and Dark Nights: The Collected Folklore of Ruby Pickens Tartt*. He has recently produced a documentary cassette, *Rich Amerson: Selected Songs and Stories* and wrote the book, *The Face in the Window and Other Alabama Ghost Stories* (University of Alabama Press). His newest book is *Literary Levees of New Orleans* (Black Belt Press).

FRED C. FUSSELL is a native Alabamian who lives in Columbus, Georgia. He is director of the Chattahoochee Folklife Project, a subsidiary of the Historic Chattahoochee Commission, Eufaula. His first professional involvement in the study of Native American cultures was in the late 1960s, when he traveled to eastern Oklahoma to document Yuchi tribal celebrations for the Columbus Museum. From 1992 to 1996, he co-directed the Festival of Southeastern

Indian Cultures at Columbus State University. He is a founding board member of the Chattahoochee Indian Heritage Center at Fort Mitchell, Alabama.

JERRILYN MCGREGORY is assistant professor of English at Florida State University. A specialist in folklore, she is the author of *Wiregrass Country*, the first holistic study of the folklife in a little known region of the South. She is currently at work on an ethnographic study of the Wiregrass region's African-American sacred music traditions, focusing on the social aspect of the music.

SUZANNE MARSHALL is assistant professor of history at Jacksonville State University in northeast Alabama, where she teaches courses in U.S. Environmental History, U.S. Women, the Twenties and the Great Depression, and Black America. She published *Violence in the Black Patch of Kentucky and Tennessee* with the University of Missouri Press in 1995 and recently completed a Historic Resources Survey of Little River Canyon National Preserve for the National Park Service. Her teaching and research always include oral history and folklife, as well as traditional historical methods. She is currently continuing research on Southern grassroots environmental movements.

Reviewers

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

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 Alexanders's Sterling Jubilee Singers of Bessemer, Alabama*. She is currently

working on a documentary book and CD about Primitive Baptist Hymn Singing in Alabama.

ROBERT ("ROBY") COGSWELL, a native of Shelbyville, Tennessee, holds a BA from Vanderbilt University and MA and Ph.D. degrees from the Indiana University Folklore Institute. He taught in the American Studies Program at the University of Louisville and conducted public folklife projects for the Kentucky Arts Council before joining the Tennessee Arts Commission as Director of Folk Arts in 1984. He has produced programs for the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife and the National Park Service, and chaired the Folk Arts Advisory Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts. His projects involving crafts in the past few years include publication of the *Handbook for Tennessee Folk Artists*, production of Southern folk craft programs for the National Folk Festival in Chattanooga, and curation of exhibits including "Dixie Frets: Luthiers of the Southeast" and "Portraits of Tradition: Photography from the TAC Folk Arts Program," featuring his own documentary work.

WILLIE COLLINS, a California-based ethnomusicologist and folklorist, is a versatile cultural specialist and scholar. He earned his BA degree at the University of California, Los Angeles and received his MA degree at the University of California, Santa Barbara; he took a Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has served as a city folklorist in Los Angeles and Oakland, California, and is a former faculty member at Tuskegee University. Collins has researched and published monographs on the moaning and prayer tradition in southeast Alabama, among many other African-American music subjects.

BILL STANFORD PINCHEON earned his Ph.D. in folklore at Indiana University in 1997. He worked in 1996 and 1997 as the Media Resource Center and Speakers Bureau Coordinator for the Alabama Humanities Foundation in Birmingham. In June 1998, he produced a public program based upon his work with storyteller and folk artist Elizabeth Dailey of Camden.

CHIQUITA WILLIS-WALLS earned an MA in Southern Studies from the University of Mississippi. In 1993, she produced *The West Harmony Singing Convention 1993*, a documentary recording of African-American shape note singers in Northeast Mississippi and Northwest Alabama. Currently, she resides in Oxford, Mississippi.

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Melissa Springer

In Memoriam
Dewey Williams (1898-1995)



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

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