

North Carolina

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# Folklore Journal





# North Carolina Folklore Journal

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# North Carolina Folklore Journal

## Volume 56, Number 2 (Fall-Winter 2009)

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Frame Photograph: Brown-Hudson Folklore Award recipient Sid Luck in his display room, Seagrove, NC, 20 June 2007.

Cover Photographs: Front cover: Ruben Olmos holds his Brown-Hudson Folklore Award at the N.C. Folklore Society's annual meeting, Elon University, NC, 6 April 2009. Back cover: Members of the Lowyalty Car Club, friends and families, and cars, Durham, NC, Spring 2008. Photos by Michael Taylor.



## Editor's Foreword

By Philip E. "Ted" Coyle

The North Carolina Folklore Society's 2009 annual meeting was held at Elon University in conjunction with PERCS, the Program for Ethnographic Research and Community Studies. Tom Mould of Elon University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology was our host for the event, which was held in Elon's beautiful Holt Chapel. The theme of the meeting was "We Are All Students of Folklore." This theme was not only meant to emphasize the ongoing importance of undergraduate and graduate student work, such as that completed by Elon students concerning the Cowee community of Western North Carolina, but also the diverse and multidisciplinary approaches of those working on contemporary folklife issues.

A panel discussion moderated by NCFS President Barbara Lau, entitled "From the Front Porch to Beyond: Challenging the Boundaries of Folklore," emphasized the meeting's theme. Ali Neff provided a particularly memorable discussion of her recently published book, *Let the World Listen Right: The Mississippi Delta Hip-Hop Story*. She also showed scenes from her video about this same project, which is available for viewing on [folkstreams.net](http://folkstreams.net). After this panel discussion, Tom McGowan and Orville Hicks explored the borders of intertextuality by giving a witty and insightful combined keynote address entitled "Punkin Buyer & Mule Egg Seller: Stories on Folklor(istics) in North Carolina." In addition to the previously mentioned student-driven study of Cowee, the meeting also included dis-

*Frame photograph: Holt Chapel at Elon University, setting for the 2009 annual meeting of the North Carolina Folklore Society. Photo courtesy of Elon University.*

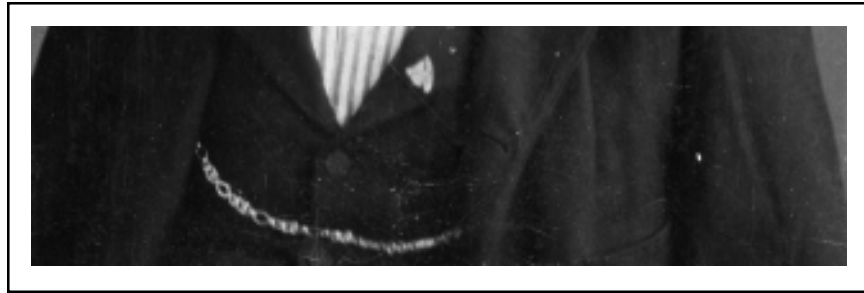


cussion of a recent Center for Documentary Studies research project on the social underpinnings of the Beast of Bladenboro legend, which has recently become the basis of a community festival in that town. The meeting concluded with an evening performance by fiddle and banjo duo Jim Vipperman and Rick Pardue.

As always, the 2009 NCFS annual meeting also included the presentation of our folk heritage awards, the Brown-Hudson Folklore Award to folk artists, tradition-bearers, and folklorists, and the Community Traditions Award to groups that have been working to preserve folk heritage in North Carolina. This year began what we expect to be a new tradition of giving more awards in each of these categories, and so recognizing a broader range of worthy individuals and groups. The expanded awards program also has the benefit of bringing more people to the annual meeting, perhaps best exemplified by the much appreciated attendance of the Lowyalty Car Club, who parked a sampling of their lovingly customized low-rider cars outside Holt Chapel. Folk potter Sid Luck also brought a variety of his pottery, including his beautiful blue tableware. It is an honor for the North Carolina Folklore Society to bestow these heritage awards on such distinguished and deserving people, and it is equally an honor to feature the citations for these award-winners in this issue of the *North Carolina Folklore Journal*.

This issue of the *North Carolina Folklore Journal* also features two research articles, both of which were presented at the most recent annual meeting of the American Folklore Society, held in Boise, Idaho. North Carolina-based folklorists are active at all levels in the American Folklore Society, which will hold its 2010 annual meeting in relatively nearby Nashville, Tennessee. We look forward to featuring material from both our state and national folklore meetings in upcoming issues of the *North Carolina Folklore Journal*.

Finally, we are pleased to welcome back former North Carolina Folklore Society President E.T. Malone, Jr. as an active contributor to the *North Carolina Folklore Journal*. Ted Malone won the NCFS Cratis D. Williams Prize for student research in 1979 and is publishing again in the *North Carolina Folklore Journal* nearly thirty years later. We appreciate our long-time supporters and life members.



## Prevaricating with All the Masters of Antiquity

By E. T. Malone, Jr.

Sometimes it is difficult to determine immediately who is the butt of a joke in a story. The teller, especially if he is a person in an inferior social position to that of his audience, may put on the guise of buffoon in order to utter statements with impunity that otherwise would place him in jeopardy. Hence, though at first glance it may appear that the teller is making a fool of himself, his persona of fool may permit him actually to speak more candidly.

Consider the following example.

Recently I read the Reverend Edward Hill Davis' book *Historical Sketches of Franklin County* (1948), a collection of newspaper columns on local history that had been published over several decades in the weekly *Franklin Times* of Louisburg, North Carolina. In this volume there is an anecdote, which I shall paraphrase, about a local African-American barber, Tom Dunstan, who had spent a number of years prior to 1900 serving the tonsorial needs of the University community in Chapel Hill, after which he retired to his old home in Louisburg.

*E. T. Malone, Jr., a former president of the N. C. Folklore Society, instructor in English at N. C. Central University, and documentary editor with the N. C. Division of Archives and History, lives in Warrenton, N. C., and is an independent scholar. He was winner of the Society's Cratis D. Williams Prize in 1979.*

*Frame photo: Watch fob and lapel pin from an 1895 photo of Tom Dunstan from the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

According to an account in Archibald Henderson's book *The Campus of the First State University* (1949), Dunstan called himself "Professor of Tonsorial Art."

Apparently prone to flamboyant expressions, he loved to speak grandly of the intimate acquaintances he had established with various professors and presidents, and to hold forth in a style which illustrated the learned vocabulary he had vicariously acquired. "Why yes, I remember old Dr. Battle and old Dr. Winston," he once bragged. "But Dr. Alderman, there is the man for you. He could expatiate and expostulate and prevaricate with all the masters of antiquity!"

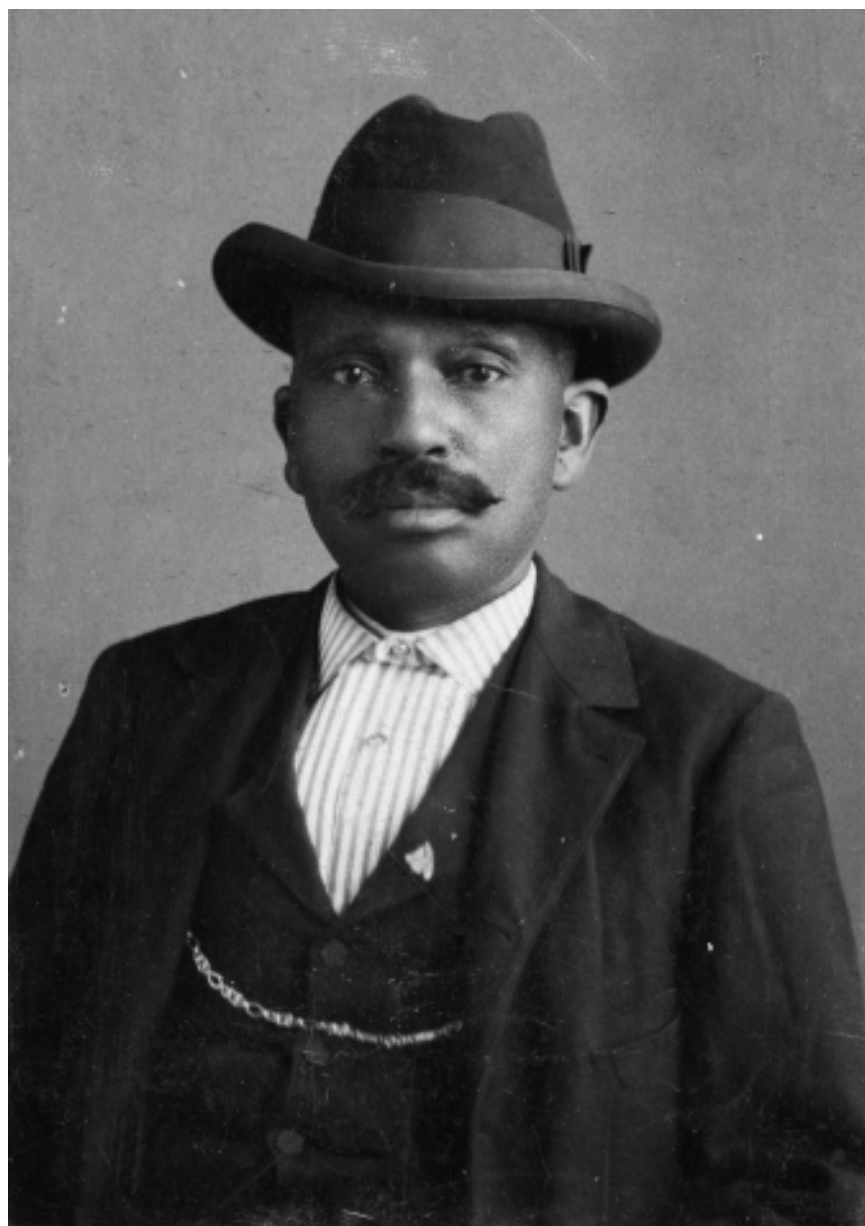
This story exemplifies a number of things. First and most obvious is the use of malapropism, in which an uneducated person with grandiose pretensions unconsciously reveals the falsity of his posturing by misusing big words. It is the stock literary situation of the person making a fool of himself in the process. In that sense, this basic type of story occurs in the literature of many nations and many periods. But in America such stories were often used in the past to poke fun, in particular, at the African-American community, whose members were stereotyped as comic buffoons who lacked education but were strongly attracted nevertheless to ritual and oratorical posturing. From that perspective, therefore, the joke is on the speaker, the bragging barber.

On one level the story is racist in intent. When told by a member of a dominant group about a member of a minority group, it alleges the cultural superiority of the former and the inferiority of the latter. It is presented as a kind of proof intended to reinforce existing values and social hierarchies. The barber is an outsider because he does not appear to understand the language of the ruling class. And his claimed social equality, here the supposedly close relationships with important people, obviously is a fiction since he may even have been their dupe, tricked like a child into using words whose meanings he did not know. In the secular world of the American South, in the early twentieth century when this column was written, servant and master are not equals. The servant who claims such equality violates propriety and thus is deemed deserving to suffer. Likewise, a person who lacks facility in a particular job or realm of learning—in this case correct application of English vocabulary—yet claims to be expert, demonstrates himself to be both unskilled and a liar because of his false claims to knowledge.



Professor Edwin A. Alderman (1861-1931) in an 1890s photograph. He left Chapel Hill in 1900 to serve as president of Tulane University and the University of Virginia. According to his barber, Alderman could “prevaricate with all the masters of antiquity.” Photo from the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.





Franklin County native Tom Dunstan, shown in an 1895 photo, called himself Professor of Tonsorial Art during the time he ran the most popular barber shop in Chapel Hill. He died in about 1906, after retiring to Louisburg. Photo from the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



The same story, however, viewed from the perspective of the minority group, may take on a different light. It becomes quite different, in fact, if, for the sake of argument, one assumes that the African-American barber *did* know what the words meant. He could express a personal opinion about President So-and-So (who could “expatiate and expostulate and prevaricate” with the best of them), whom he personally thought was a pompous blow-hard and a liar, without fear of retaliation. The uneducated white men of his home town wouldn’t understand the words either. (Interestingly, as the story has been told down through the years, the phrase evolved into “pontificate, expectorate, and prevaricate.”) And if he himself let no hint of comprehension escape, the educated white men would simply laugh at his apparent linguistic blunders. And the rare sympathetic soul, who perhaps had attended the same college and observed the same phenomenon, might exchange with him a subtle, knowing wink. This, again, is a classic motif in which the weak deceive the strong by use of words, postures, or actions open to more than one interpretation. The joke, therefore, may be on the audience, his white auditors, as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century black man often played the role described by African-American writer Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906) in his *circa* 1895 poem “We Wear the Mask.” It contains the lines “With torn and bleeding hearts we smile/And mouth with myriad subtleties.” Conversely, the black community is not without its “white man” jokes.

There is a basic sense in which almost all extreme statements made by one group against another backfire and injure the originators, who are “hoisted by their own petard.” The author’s use of this anecdote, although not vicious in intent, was typical of a period in our history when stock humor could be evoked by such allusions to the alleged failings of African-American “character.” But attacking the reputation of any one man, woman, or group is a dangerous occupation. It strikes somehow at the sense of fair play and at something of the primitive association of names with magic, tribe, and totem. It is not surprising that our legal system provides remedies and punishment for libels, false claims, and defamations. The racial joke has always said as much about the teller as it did about the supposed butt of the humor, ridicule being one way of dealing with perceived threat. And it was by demonstration of their own virtue rather than by attacking the weakness of others that the true “masters of antiquity” derived their laudatory titles. Yet, today in our reaction to such discrimination, we have arrived at another sterile extreme,

termed “political correctness,” that seems almost incapable of humor.

The Irish, Italians, Swedes, Poles, and many other immigrant groups have been the subjects of the most jokes in this country at the period when their presence created the most demographic stress, perceived competition for jobs, and allegations of criminal activity. In the rural South of 2010, therefore, one is more likely to hear a joke about Mexicans than one about African-Americans. There were Yankee and Rebel jokes during the American Civil War, there are the liberal arts versus technical college jokes; rival religious groups castigate one another in jokes, and, most recently, political jokes contrast Democrats and Republicans. Who has not heard a joke about Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jimmy Carter, Jesse Jackson, Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, or George Bush? The shape of Obama jokes is coming into focus. Rivals of all sorts have a penchant for belittling one another, and these items range in tone from hilarious humor to the most vicious personal attacks. Yet they all inform us about the essence of our country.

Folklorists should continue to collect, classify, and study these jokes, despite their patently ethnocentric or even racist content. Despite what one may think of “national character” studies, any stereotype must also be viewed as an exaggeration of a to-some-extent observed trait, whether applied to a group or to an individual. Such jokes represent a duality, in that they illuminate both the subject and the teller. Psychologically, they would seem to provide an outlet for aggressive or fearful feelings generated by the presence of an alien group, a recurring phenomenon in an immigrant nation such as ours. It is to be hoped that in our society’s quest to alleviate the inequalities between various segments of the population, we will still be able to appreciate the potential, and need for, humor in viewing our differences. We may even learn from that humor.



2009 Brown-Hudson Folklore Award

## Sidney G. Luck: Fifth Generation Potter

By Charles G. Zug

Even for a Seagrove potter, Sid Luck possesses unusually deep roots in the North Carolina clay. His ancestors were associated with two of the most prominent clay clans in the state, the Coles and the Cravens. Great-great-grandfather William Luck worked with his son-in-law Evan Cole, who ran one of the largest shops in the state. William's son Henry worked there and also for J.D. Craven, who was the most prolific potter in Moore County. Grandfather Bud and father James Luck continued the family tradition of producing salt-glazed stoneware, thus setting the stage for Sid's career. And Sid has ensured the future of the family business by training the sixth generation, his two sons, Jason and Matt.

Sid's earliest memories of pottery making come from "my father, when I was six or so years old." James had little interest in the more recent art pottery and much preferred making the classic utilitarian forms, like churns. "He loved doing the large pieces—he didn't care for turning a piece of clay that was under six pounds." When Sid was ten, James built an electric wheel and installed it in the basement of their house (their shop at that time had no electricity). "And at that

*Terry Zug, a longtime supporter of the North Carolina Folklore Society, is Professor Emeritus in the Curriculum in Folklore at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. His *Turners and Burners: The Folk Potters of North Carolina* (UNC Press, 1990) is the definitive study of traditional pottery in North Carolina.*

*Frame photo: Ware in Sid Luck's fire kiln, Seagrove, NC, 11 Dec. 2004.*



Sid Luck with a large jug, at his pottery, Seagrove, NC, 20 June 2007.

point,” Sid recalls, “that’s when I got interested in it, watching him. Plus, he pretty much said, ‘You know, you need to learn how to do this.’ So he sort of, I guess, forced me into it, and I liked it.”

For a while, Sid admits, “I was just sort of playing. Daddy wasn’t making anything except a few flowerpots we’d sell, that sort of thing.” But then in 1957 Waymon and Nell Cole offered Sid a job. They asked “if I wanted to turn some, come back there and turn. And so I was good enough that they said, ‘Here, make these little ashtrays and hot butter dispensers and that sort of thing.’ So I started at the age of 12, I was turning for them. And they paid me a little; I don’t think they probably paid me two dollars a day, or three or four.... By the time I was twelve, thirteen years old, I could turn 100 to 200 ashtrays in one day.” For a young man eager to learn the craft, Seagrove offered legendary teachers. In addition to his father and the Coles, Sid “studied” with “Philmore Graves and Ben Owen and Melvin Owens and all the older ones that were around here. We all sort of hung out together from time to time.”

Unfortunately, pottery sales were stagnant in North Carolina during the late 1950s and the 1960s. In fact, his father James told him that “you were crazier than hell to go, to try to do pottery, because you just can’t make a living at it. I knew that I had to go another direction.” So Sid did a stint in the Marines, went to college,



and taught chemistry and science in school for 18 years. But all that time he kept working part-time for the Coles. “Even after I got out of college and was teaching—lived in Winston-Salem for about five years—they’d ask me if I’d come up and turn pitchers for them. So I’d sometimes come down on the weekends and turn.” Moreover, “every school that I was in had an art department and kiln and wheels. I’d use that and carry on my...kept my skills honed, I guess.”

By the mid-1970s, Americans were planning their Bicentennial and reflecting on the history of the nation. This, in turn, spurred interest in antiques of all sorts, folk art, things “country,” and the handmade object. This produced an explosion of interest in face jugs and other traditional forms, and the work of North Carolina’s small, family-run pottery shops. Sid recognized that the climate for pottery had greatly improved and that “there was a large number of people moving into the Seagrove area doing pottery, which is what I had always really loved doing. And I thought, well, if they can do it, I think I can.” And so he built his own shop and in 1990 became a fulltime potter.

On his website, Sid declares that “it has been my goal, all my life, to carry on as much of the old traditional work as I can.” His credo is well reflected in the wares he and his sons make. He allows that he prefers to turn forms “like my family had made, just functional pieces. I like to make jugs; jugs still intrigue me. They’re a little more complicated.” Along with face, buggy, and ring jugs, Sid also maintains a steady supply of churns, jars, milk crocks, and pitchers, many of them coated in the old salt glaze or his “crawdad slip,” made from clay dug from the nearby creek. He also makes a wide array of tablewares—bowls, mugs, pie dishes, teapots, candlesticks—coated in colorful glazes made from “minerals that I mix together.” These forms and glazes are part of the “new” Seagrove tradition that the Coles and Owens and others pioneered starting in the 1920s.

Like most potters, Sid uses small electric kilns and a larger gas kiln, but in 2003 he added a traditional, wood-fired groundhog kiln. Ironically, it was sons Jason and Matt who made him do it. “I built the salt kiln,” he recalls, “because my two sons kept saying, ‘Dad, you need to pass that on to us.’ At the time I was again getting lazy, and I said, ‘That’s too much hard work.’ But I finally decided, yeah, we’ll give it a shot. Matthew and his buddies tore down the old kiln over at the old [grandfather Bud Luck’s] place, and we used those bricks.” The new kiln has proven to be “the best working wood kiln I’ve ever fired,” and the thick, flowing salt glazes from it have been extremely



popular. And that, too, was a surprise to Sid. “Another argument I gave them before we built the kiln was, nobody wants salt!” Sid admits he was totally wrong and is pleased that “there’s just been a lot of interest in historical things like churns. Like this Christmas, I sold every churn. I don’t have a churn down there.”

That Sid would respond to his sons and build a groundhog kiln for them is not surprising. As a traditional potter, one of his major responsibilities is to ensure that the next generation carries on, just as his father James insisted that he needed to learn. Both Jason and Matt have become skilled potters, to the point that Sid readily allows that “they have done me proud.” Jason works as a patent lawyer in Charleston, South Carolina, but continues to turn pots and sells his work in a local gallery. Sid fires most of Jason’s pots: “all the salt I fire for him. And that’s what this upscale gallery wanted.” Matt on the other hand runs a large chicken farm and works at home alongside his father. “He’s carrying on the family tradition in its purest form,” Sid explains, “because prior to me, all of my ancestors were farmers and potters.... No lawyers and no teachers before me.”

In addition to training his sons, Sid has nurtured many younger potters in the Seagrove area. He also frequently teaches in North Carolina schools and is director of TAPS (Traditional Arts Program for Students) in Seagrove. And he has often demonstrated at larger institutions across the state, such as the Mint Museum, the North Carolina Museum of Art, the North Carolina Museum of History, and the North Carolina Pottery Center. For his selfless work in maintaining the Seagrove pottery tradition and keeping this venerable folk art in the public eye, the North Carolina Folklore Society is proud to honor Sid Luck with the Brown-Hudson Award.



## 2009 Brown-Hudson Folklore Award

### Ruben Olmos: Lowrider

By Michael C. Taylor

The term “lowrider” refers to elaborately customized cars lowered to almost ground-scraping levels, and to those who build and drive them. Although the tradition of lowriding grew out of West Coast and Southwestern Latino communities in the late 1930s, lowriding is now widely recognized as a vibrant international movement. All lowrider vehicles must lay low; the most celebrated cars lay no more than an inch or two above the ground, and are frequently adorned with elaborate paint jobs and glimmering chrome accents on the engine, grill, trim, and door handles. Many lowriders also boast hydraulic suspensions, which allow drivers to raise or lower the car with the flip of a switch. The interior of a lowrider is often fastidiously upholstered in leather, tweed, or velvet, and equipped with one-of-a-kind steering wheels and specialized stereo systems. Lowriders choose their vehicles with a critical eye towards classic lines and vintage designs; Chevy Impalas, Caprices, and Bel Airs, Lincoln Town Cars, and Cadillac Fleetwoods are all favored in lowriding circles. Likewise, lowriders lean towards the cool and classic in their choice of music; a Sunday drive wouldn’t be complete without a loping jam by Thee Midneters, The Temptations, or Brenton Wood gently pumping out of the speakers.

*Michael C. Taylor is a folklorist and musician living in Pittsboro, NC with his wife, Abigail, and his son, Elijah. He is currently at work on a musical survey of Warren County, North Carolina.*

*Frame photo: Ruben Olmos and his father, Ruben, Sr., Semora, Caswell County, NC, Spring 2008. Photo by Michael Taylor.*





Ruben Olmos with his father's truck, Semora, Caswell County, NC, Spring 2008. Photo by Michael Taylor.

Ruben Olmos is a lowrider nonpareil. As the president of the Burlington, North Carolina-based Lowyalty Car Club, the 31-year-old Alamance County resident has played a critical role in raising the profile of lowriding throughout the South. Since founding Lowyalty in 2004, Ruben has led the club to international acclaim with a series of distinguished wins at a multitude of lowrider car shows. Along the way, his Burlington home has become a nexus for North Carolina's burgeoning lowrider scene, a place where lowriders young and old gather to exchange knowledge and anecdotes about what it means to ride low. Ruben's dedication to the craft and practice of lowriding is also unparalleled; he is eloquent and articulate in his understandings of the ways that lowriding works simultaneously as a rich expressive practice, a political statement of identity, a method of memory, a celebration of community and family, and a deeply personal aesthetic practice. Ruben asserts, "Lowriding has always been here, but not as big. We're getting there though. The cars here are looking better every year."

Ruben, a first-generation Mexican American born in Chapel Hill, is the oldest of six boys. During his adolescent years, the Olmos family survived by following the harvest, and spent significant amounts of time in Georgia and Florida—as well as North Carolina—picking



Ruben Olmos and members of the Lowyalty Car Club, Charlie's Transmissions, Durham, NC, Spring 2008. Photo by Michael Taylor.

fruit, vegetables, and tobacco. The Orange County town of Cedar Grove, however, always remained the homeplace to which the Olmos family returned, and Ruben has fond memories of his rural upbringing. "I grew up in the country," he explains. "My Dad believed in growing his own vegetables, growing his own chickens, cows, goats, pigs. When we'd go fishing, we'd clean them and my Dad would cook



them there.” It was also in Cedar Grove that Ruben informally apprenticed as a mechanic under his father, Ruben Sr., learning the basics of automobile repair and modification; these technical skills continue to serve him as one of the chief mechanics of Lowyalty.

Ruben was introduced to lowriding by a close family friend while he was a teenager. Fully absorbed by the artistic and technical outlets that the practice offered, he subsequently joined a number of lowrider organizations before striking out on his own with the hope of establishing a car club that would celebrate his Alamance County roots. “I heard in that old movie, ‘If you build it, they will come,’” he explains. “I had a ’67 convertible Impala, and I started hanging around at the car washes, restaurants, and taco stands, and people were coming and asking questions.” Over time, Ruben attracted a core group of local lowriders, and established the informal headquarters of the club in Alamance County. Through a democratic balloting process, the name “Lowyalty” was chosen for its nod towards the concept of loyalty, a core value within the group.

Although the popular media frequently presents lowriding as an aggressive, confrontational practice, nothing could be further from the truth in the case of the Lowyalty Car Club. The club is an all-inclusive, multiethnic group that remains fully engaged with their surrounding community, and champions ethical conduct and family values. Under Ruben’s leadership, Lowyalty hosts charity car washes, toy drives, and an annual lowrider show at the Greensboro Coliseum that draws upwards of 2,000 attendees from around the country. Ruben, a devoted father and husband, and a highly valued employee with Meadwestvaco, is unequivocal in his consideration of lowriding as a means towards community and as a method of fostering pride amongst club members.

Growing up, I worked in the fields. Growing up, I lived in a little old trailer with two bedrooms and five brothers. All my friends had nice houses. Growing up, my Dad never had a nice car. Imagine your parents picking you up in an old car, and everybody’s looking at you. I know how that feels. There are people out there living like that. So it’s a big thing to wear that Lowyalty shirt. It makes you proud. I’ve got a member that works in the tobacco fields. You should have seen him when he found out that I used to do that. He was thinking, “My [car club] president pulled tobacco. My president worked in the fields. Look what he got. He made it.” I’m proud of what I’ve done. I know how it feels to be on the bottom.



Ruben Olmos's work as a gifted lowrider facilitates serious, deeply engaged cultural conversation that is both personal and political. At a time when the demographic and cultural makeup of North Carolina is changing in such rich and profound ways, Ruben's guiding contributions to the practice of lowriding are all the more critical for the ways that they add a vibrant voice to the current discourse on tradition and heritage in the South.





### 2009 Brown-Hudson Folklore Award

## Jim Vipperman: Traditional Musician and Teacher

By Tanya Jones

Jim Vipperman was born June 12, 1958 in Surry County. He started playing the violin in 1966 with classical lessons from Dr. Ralph Gabriel and Lilly Graham. His father, Johnny Vipperman (whose musical career included a time playing with Bill Monroe's band in 1951), and also his grandfather, John Will Vipperman, influenced the bluegrass heritage of this talented young man, who grew up on fiddler's convention stages throughout the region. Other influences came from Mount Airy's own Tommy Jarrell, Wayburn Johnson, and Buddy Pendleton. Jim Vipperman has also performed with the Doug Dillard Band in Mount Airy during Mayberry Days and has been invited to perform with them in gigs as far away as Alaska. He frequently performs alone and with various groups at local and area events.

To list all the awards and accolades Jim Vipperman has gathered over the years would be nearly impossible, but would include honors at nearly every major gathering of traditional musicians in the region. His most noted achievements would include memberships with a number of local bands, including the McPeak Brothers of Wytheville, Virginia, the Shenandoah Cut-Ups of Troutman, Virginia, and the

*Tanya Jones is the Executive Director of the Surry Arts Council in Mount Airy, North Carolina.*

*Frame photo: Jim Vipperman playing fiddle, Surry County, NC, 13 March 2009. Photo by Hobart Smith*



Jim Vipperman shows Devontae Smith a guitar chord, Surry County, NC, 15 November 2006. Photo by Hobart Smith.

Sons of Bluegrass of Westfield, North Carolina. By 1996 Jim had won more awards in the top ten than any other fiddle competitor in the history of the Galax Fiddler's Convention (13 times, with First Place in 1991). The Mount Airy Fiddler's Convention has bestowed him with first-place honors nine times, so many that he has finally stopped entering.

Jim carries on the tradition by teaching weekly Traditional Arts Program (TAPS) classes at the Surry Arts Council/Andy Griffith Playhouse in Mount Airy, North Carolina, and in-school traditional music classes for more than a hundred students each year. Jim helped to bring the TAPS program to the Surry Arts Council/Andy Griffith Playhouse. He is currently serving as a mentor in the TAPS program in addition to teaching the weekly group classes. He teaches free fiddle and guitar lessons each Thursday evening, year round, at the Andy Griffith Playhouse and has done so for over ten years. Jim leads the TAPS classes in performances in the lobby of the Andy Griffith Playhouse before selected events. Jim allows parents, grandparents, siblings, and visitors to attend and participate in his classes. Numerous local musicians who want their children and grandchildren to learn to play accompany their children in "Vip's" classes. One of the most noted of these was Clyde Johnson, a member of the Slate Mountain Ramblers and the long-time host of WPAQ's live weekly broad-



cast *The Merry-Go-Round*. Jim encourages his students to enter competitions, and to get on stage and perform. He has done so much not only for preservation of the music traditions but also for the self-esteem of hundreds of area youth. Jim accompanies his students to competitions and assists in the promotion of youth involvement in local traditional music events. He is currently teaching weekly guitar, banjo, and mandolin lessons to the Future Farmers of America in after school classes at the Andy Griffith Playhouse. Jim leads old-time and bluegrass workshops at the annual Mount Airy Fiddler's Convention each year for the Surry Arts Council. He also encourages Benton Flippen, Verien Clifton, and other local masters to share their stories and styles with both local youth and out of town guests who attend the convention.

Jim has the enviable and rare gifts of being both a talented performer and also a teacher. He can shift from genre to genre effortlessly and can play anything that he hears.

Jim has contributed immeasurably to the preservation, promotion, and protection of the musical heritage of Surry County with his tireless efforts to teach and pass on his knowledge to the next generation. He is filled with tales that accompany his teaching, which makes the music come alive for his students. He responds to their natural talents, whether they're leaning to old-time, bluegrass, jazz, blues, or other styles. We are grateful that he is in Mount Airy and Surry County helping us to pass on our music heritage. I know of no one who has spent more time in their life passing on these traditions to others.



## 2009 Brown-Hudson Folklore Award

### Kirsten Mullen: Folklorist

By Joy Salyers

Kirsten Mullen has been an active force in North Carolina folklife since moving to Durham in 1983. In 1998, as a graduate student in the Curriculum in Folklore at UNC-Chapel Hill, she was awarded the North Carolina Arts Council Folklife Fellowship and the Ackland Art Museum Graduate Student Internship. In 2000 she received an Archie Green Occupational Folklore Fellowship. Mullen served on the advisory committee for *The Rich Heritage of African Americans in North Carolina*, a guide to exploring the history of African American communities in the state, published in 2004 by the NC Department of Tourism. She is also the former literature director for the North Carolina Arts Council and member of a team of consultants who researched and created text for the North Carolina Museum of History's "North Carolina Legends" exhibition. She has written and lectured on North Carolina folklife topics from tobacco warehouses to the African American string band, The Carolina Chocolate Drops. As a member of the North Carolina folklore community, Kirsten Mullen has presented

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*Frame photo: Kirsten Mullen speaks at a public event, 3 December 2005.*





Kirsten Mullen reacts at a public event. 3 December 2005.

at American Folklore Society annual meetings, worked on the ceremony for North Carolina Folk Heritage Award winners, and conducted workshops for the Community Folklife Documentation Institute. She is currently president of the North Carolina Folklife Institute.

But what exemplifies Kirsten Mullen's body of work is not *what* she has done, but *how* she engages in folklore practice. Her wide-ranging skill set—writing, grant writing, project management, and interviewing, among many others—informs her work as a folklorist and cultural diplomat. Her true gifts lie in taking folklife beyond academic study and into the world. As I interviewed people about Kirsten Mullen, they confirmed that the qualities of translating, connecting diverse groups of knowledge and people, and placing folklife within a context of cultural capital and self-determination characterize how she “does folklore.”

Mullen has contributed to documenting and preserving North Carolina folklife and traditional communities in many ways, often from behind the scenes. Rather than an advocate, who speaks on behalf of communities, she prefers to function as a kind of midwife, helping communities discover and hone their own skills and project

plans. In 2002 she helped the Meherrin Indian tribe in eastern North Carolina write a grant to document the building of a traditional long house. She worked unofficially with the Sandhill Family Heritage Association, which won the North Carolina Folklore Society's Community Traditions Award in 2008, connecting members with people and resources who could help craft their desired presentation from the information they held. Kirsten Mullen helps communities navigate the space between traditional local culture and the institutional world of granting agencies; she helps them make connections between cultural assets and opportunities for economic development.

She also helps institutions understand and reach out to local cultures, whether through formal presentations to folklorists on topics like building trust in communities of color, or through guidance and suggestions to an agency in the midst of a project. When Mullen consulted with UNC-Chapel Hill's Ackland Art Museum on an exhibit of African American artists, she made sure the Ackland did not miss the opportunity to connect with local African American communities. When she began working with the Conservation Fund on a cultural asset mapping project in North Carolina's Tyrrell County, her keen sensitivity to the socio-political dynamics in the area led to a reshaping of the project's focus and methodology. When Mullen created her own project—Carolina Circuit Writers—that was founded on an ambitious partnership among 23 community organizations, she persuaded the North Carolina Arts Council that building those partner relationships and planning in a truly collaborative way had to be included in the budget. Wayne Martin, the Senior Program Director for Community Arts Development at the Arts Council, says that even Mullen's first fieldwork as the Council's folklife intern was influential. Martin told me that her fieldwork with African American musicians "planted the seeds for the African American music project the North Carolina Arts Council is now working on in eight counties in the central part of the state." According to Martin, her work helped the Arts Council "think more broadly" about African American music traditions, connected traditions to heritage tourism and sustainable economic development, and "influenced her colleagues about important resources of that area and in North Carolina."

One of the reasons Mullen is so effective is her wide-ranging knowledge of people and topics, and her ability to form connections among them. In Malcolm Gladwell's bestselling book, *The Tipping Point*, he describes a class of people he calls "connectors"—those who know

everyone and have a special gift for bringing the world together. When you speak to people about working with Kirsten Mullen, they mention this characteristic again and again. As the education director for the Ackland Art Museum, Ray Williams created the Five Faiths Project, an educational series using works of art, photographs, storytelling, and community events to help people explore the diverse religious communities in North Carolina. Calling Mullen a leader in public humanities, Williams remembers, “*Connector* is absolutely the right word for her role in this. She helped keep the communications flowing with a variety of individuals and faith communities. She was a key player in the grassroots aspect of that project.” Perhaps Wayne Martin says it best: “The thing about Kirsten that is such a strength is her wide-ranging knowledge—history, literature, jazz and other kinds of music—with folklife a theme that weaves through all of it. She not only knows other fields, but what’s going on in them currently and she makes it her poetry to connect these different types of knowledge.”

When people talk about working with Kirsten Mullen, they describe the experience as personally transformative. Sofia Quintero served as an artist-in-residence for Carolina Circuit Writers, a literary consortium Mullen founded in 2003 to build community using literature by writers of color as a bridge. When I asked Quintero to speak to her experience as artist-in-residence, I expected her to address the ways she saw the program affect local communities. Instead, she was moved to speak about how the experience changed her: “Why, even our car rides were tremendous learning experiences for me as Kirsten pointed out certain landmarks and developments and broke down their historical relevance and current significance. She’s truly a knowledgeable and devoted ambassador of not only the state’s history but a reflection of its current promise, both artistically and politically.”

It must be said, however, that working with Kirsten Mullen can also be uncomfortable. If you bring her on to your folklife project, she will not only point out all the items you need to add to your budget and suggest three additional people you should meet. She will also immediately deflate any romantic formulations in your plans. She will ask you to examine the ways that racism, classism, and elitism are holding back the project. She will push you to articulate just what the community is gaining from your work and wonder how the project could be framed more collaboratively. Mullen knows that not

all dynamics that form part of the fabric and heritage of a community are polite, pleasant, or pretty. She insists we honor and include the fullness of folk experience in our state. She wants us to focus not just on folklife as tradition, but also as resistance. Not just folklife as a source of pride, but also as a response to fear, loss, and betrayal. Mullen insists that we situate our study of folklife and traditional culture firmly within historical and social contexts and that we make it matter.

Just one example of Kirsten Mullen in action makes clear the impact of her presence on a project. Mikki Sager, a vice-president at the Conservation Fund who hired Mullen to work on the Tyrrell Places Matter project in eastern North Carolina, calls her work there “a cultural version of shuttle diplomacy.” In a socially divided and racially charged environment, Mullen is facilitating the transfer of stories, histories, and issues to people who otherwise might never have heard them.

Tyrrell County is the least populous county in North Carolina and one of the five poorest, with over 25% of residents living in poverty. Tyrrell Places Matter began as a cultural asset mapping project, interviewing local residents about their cultural connections to place and mapping those important locations for future heritage tourism possibilities. But Mullen quickly discovered that different communities within the county—white, black, Latino, Vietnamese—had very different stories to tell and different ideas of what made a place important. This caused her to advocate a rethinking of the project’s strategies and goals. Plans to make interviews publicly accessible shifted to creating ways to protect privacy while making important stories known. Plans for creating an internal cultural tour to help local people understand differing perspectives on place became a prelude to promoting external tours.

Mikki Sager shared with me that Mullen’s work is “not only helping to document and understand traditions, but also helping to break down barriers, some of which have been in place for 400 years. She is helping people to understand in a very quiet way the other sides of the story, particularly as it relates to place.” Sager adds, “She’s helping the community to organize themselves as well, within their own communities of color or interest as well as creating some bridges across where possible.” Mullen helped to organize a completely bilingual community meeting for Hispanic residents of the county to



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discuss the project (publicizing it with what was perhaps the first bilingual ad in the local newspaper). Mullen is currently reaching out to other area resources, such as the Center for Sustainable Tourism at Eastern Carolina University. She is also writing grants on behalf of the Conservation Fund, doing active fieldwork, and collaborating with the Arts Council on its eight-county folk music project. It is an honor to bestow the North Carolina Folklore Society's Brown-Hudson Award on a folklorist who sets the bar so high and accomplishes her goals again and again.





2009 Community Traditions Award

## Sappony Heritage Youth Camp: Saving the Sappony Tribe's Culture and Community

By Shelia Wilson

Before the establishment of the Sappony Heritage Youth Camp, many families from this American Indian community had what could be called mini-heritage camps every summer. People in the community started talking about the many children who were missing out on this great experience. Once the Sappony Heritage Youth Camp was formally established, more people got involved so that today it includes most of the youth in our community. The camp is operated totally by volunteers who have Sappony connections. Parents, grandparents, great-grandparent, aunts and uncles, and even people without children, work together to make the camp run smoothly. The elders in the community are right there sharing stories with the youth and the adult volunteers. Indeed, the main activity of the camp is to build bonds between the elder volunteers and the youth who attend the camp. Forging these bonds between generations, and within generations, is how the camp will save the Sappony culture and community. When you know where “home” is you can go anywhere in the world.

*Shelia Wilson is a folklife specialist and member of the Sappony tribe.*

*Frame photo: Two busy quilters at the 2009 Sappony Heritage Youth Camp, 22 June 2009.*



A group at the Sappony Heritage Youth Camp, 22 June 2009.

The Sappony Tribal Center is the focus of the camp's cultural activities. These include quilting, sharing stories about the farming heritage of the people, and maintaining the tribal fire-pit, made by campers and adult volunteer from foundation rocks from all seven family home places. During the evenings the campers attend Vacation Bible School at Calvary Baptist Church, the American Indian community church, which is a tradition in itself. The Sappony community at large sees the Sappony Heritage Camp as something so much more than a typical camp, and the camp committee works all year long to bring the best of Sappony culture, community, and heritage to the campers.



2009 Community Traditions Award

## Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center

By Monica McCann

Located in the small community of Stecoah in North Carolina's Graham County, Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center (SVCAC) vitally contributes to the preservation of the unique cultural traditions of the Southern Appalachian Mountains and carries on those traditions through education, celebration, and economic opportunities.

SVCAC is located in the now-renovated Stecoah Union School, which first opened in 1926 and served as the center of the community for sixty-eight years until it closed in 1994. A beautiful solid stone structure surrounded by ten acres of natural mountain land, the school was originally built using native rock and the labor and skill of local residents. SVCAC was started by a group of concerned citizens dedicated to restoring the historic school. In just a few short years, the renovated school is now a vibrant community center, offering over 20 programs to approximately 10,000 people annually. Through their programs, SVCAC has enabled the Southern Appalachian mountain culture to thrive in the small town of Stecoah and the greater area of Graham County and Western North Carolina.

*Monica McCann works for the The Conservation Fund's Resourceful Communities Program (RCP), which has worked for nearly 20 years in distressed communities throughout North Carolina to build successful working partnerships with more than 250 grassroots organizations.*

*Frame photo: Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center is located in a renovated 1920's school.*



All of SVCAC educational opportunities are rooted in promoting the Southern Appalachian mountain culture. These opportunities are available for people of all ages, from the youngest kindergarteners to the eldest in the community. A Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM) program teaches students to play the fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar, or upright bass. The Center provides the instruments and all lessons are free of charge, providing the students a chance to reclaim and help preserve the music of their heritage. JAM students often perform at local festivals and events and have an end-of-year recital. After school programs for students in grades K-8 offer not only academic assistance, but also provide social and cultural activities in music, arts, and crafts.

Particularly vital to the community are the life-long learning opportunities offered by SVCAC. Local artisan members of the Stecoah Valley Weavers provide both beginning and advanced weaving classes all year round. Other adult craft classes include jewelry making, soap making, gourd crafting, knitting, and quilting. Culinary classes include Appalachian jam-making, hearty bread baking, and campfire cooking. SVCAC has even begun developing a community garden and offers classes in basic gardening and vegetable planting.

SVCAC brings the Southern Appalachian mountain culture to life through the events and festivals they feature in the community. One of their most popular events is their summer performing art series, An Appalachian Evening, which hosts award-winning artists in bluegrass, folk, and old-time mountain music who perform in the renovated auditorium portion of the school. An Appalachian Dinner can be enjoyed prior to each show. Locals prepare the meals, which feature traditional Southern Appalachian mountain cuisine prepared using local produce.

The SVCAC Harvest Festival is held every fall on school grounds. Along with mountain music and dancing, attendees can learn about traditional agriculture by viewing antique tractors and exhibits like corn-grinding. An associated country fair offers competitions and exhibits of jams, jellies, pies, cakes, quilts, and needlework. A Civil War encampment area is also set up for history enthusiasts.

Equally important are the economic opportunities SVCAC provides. SVCAC renovated the old school cafeteria kitchen facility into a commercial kitchen available for public use (known as Stecoah Valley Food Ventures). The kitchen is a NC Department of Agriculture inspected and sanitation graded facility featuring modern kitchen equipment with cooler and dry storage space. For a small fee, the



Over 100 area artisans exhibit in the Stecoah Gallery.

kitchen can be used to help start or grow a small food industry business. In fact, the largest user is a non-profit organization—the Smoky Mountain Native Plants Association—which utilizes the commercial kitchen for their ramp project. Members sustainably harvest locally-grown ramps (a native and pungent onion-like plant) to then make, store, package, and market ramp value-added food products. This project is so successful it created 64 seasonal jobs this past year.

SVCAC has also set up an Artisans Gallery in the school that offers a wide variety of traditional and contemporary arts and crafts, including: paintings, pottery, weavings, wood-turned items, glass works, photography, note cards, jewelry, soaps, quilts, books, and other crafts. The Gallery also features the works of many talented Cherokee Indian artists whose beadwork, pottery, masks, and other artworks are produced today in the traditional ways of their ancestors. The Gallery showcases the work of more than 100 artisans, including more than 50 members of the Stecoah Artisans Guild. The collaboration of the Gallery and the Guild plays a vital role in preserving mountain crafts and creating an opportunity to strengthen and sustain the arts community.

The opportunities and services SVCAC provides are especially important given the region in which they are located. Graham County



is a small and relatively isolated place. Bordering Tennessee, Stecoah is far from the larger urban centers of Raleigh or even Asheville. The county has a population of less than 8,000 people and much of the land is uninhabitable. Approximately 65-70% of the county's land is in public holdings (mostly National Forest) that are scattered throughout the county, leading to the relative isolation of the residents. Although so much public land provides some economic opportunity through tourism, the county is economically distressed with a high poverty rate of 19.5%.

This makes the contributions of Stecoah Valley Center even more meaningful and significant. They serve as an exemplary model for communities who want to keep their cultural traditions alive. Whereas other communities are struggling to simply preserve their culture, Stecoah is a community where their traditions are thriving. Traditions are not only being preserved for visitors and future generations to learn about, but the community is living their traditions every day. The music, food, dancing, crafts, and other traditions are woven into the everyday lives of community members because SVCAC has so effectively provided a community center where residents can celebrate, learn, and gain from their traditions.

If you would like to visit the Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center or learn more about the organization, please visit their website at <http://www.stecoahvalleycenter.com/>.



## A History of Bluegrass Guitar in Western North Carolina

By John Martin

When folklorists like Cecil Sharp came to the mountains of North Carolina they found an enduring musical culture of Scotch-Irish fiddle tunes and ballad singers as well as some of the only black banjo and fiddle players in the country. In the 1940s western North Carolinians helped produce a new form of music: bluegrass. Earl Scruggs popularized the regional three-finger banjo style that in many ways defined bluegrass, and the state also made many contributions to guitar playing. While the acoustic guitar began as a rhythm instrument, North Carolinians Don Reno, Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson, and George Shuffler all pioneered the use of the guitar as a lead instrument in the 1950s and early 1960s. This paper identifies the region as one that is important to the development of lead guitar and traces musical antecedents in the region to see why lead guitar emerged from that area as an important instrument in bluegrass. At the same time, this article provides the first ever biographical sketch of Stanley Brothers guitar player George Shuffler (based on interviews conducted from April 2009 through Dec. 2009), who came out of a “traditional” background and drew on the experiences and traditions of his community to create his lead guitar style, called crosspicking.

*John Martin was born and raised in Shelby, North Carolina, and earned his B.A. degree from Appalachian State University in 2008. Now a graduate student at Appalachian State, his main research interest is Southern musical traditions.*

*Frame photo: Close up of George Shuffler's guitar chording.*



Shuffler's influence on bluegrass music and guitar playing has been discussed by a number of writers. In his seminal work, *Bluegrass: A History*, Neil Rosenberg mentioned Shuffler's work with the Stanley Brothers and connected him to early lead guitar styles. Robert Cantwell's *Bluegrass Breakdown* discussed Shuffler in some detail, and in fact lists Shuffler, Scruggs, Reno, and Watson as the four best examples of early bluegrass lead players, without attributing any significance to the fact that they are all from western North Carolina (169). In Goldsmith's *The Bluegrass Reader*, a collection of articles about bluegrass from writers as diverse as Hunter S. Thomson and Mike Seeger, David Gates covered Shuffler's musical innovations. Only John Wright's *Traveling the High Way Home* devoted a full chapter to Shuffler, which, like the rest of the chapters in the book, consisted of the transcript of a phone interview he conducted with Shuffler in 1985. In it he described his own life for a few paragraphs and then focused on stories about Ralph and Carter Stanley. Shuffler was mentioned tangentially or directly in a number of other articles, books, and instruction books, but these three are among the most important books in bluegrass writing and all three mentioned him as an early lead player. The books often explored shallowly or not at all the development of his style, and none featured much information on his life. The *Mel Bay's Guitar Sessions* online magazine featured a six part series on the birth of lead guitar in 2007, which admirably covered Shuffler's style and development as an artist. None of these publications looked at North Carolina as a region which produced lead guitarists, and none of them traced the musical forerunners of the region.

The town of Valdese, North Carolina, just ten miles from Morganton, sits on the easternmost edge of the Appalachian Mountains. Settled by members of the Waldensian evangelical sect in 1893, the town incorporated in 1920 (Valdese, NC, "Town History"). The 15<sup>th</sup> of April, 1925 saw the birth of George Shuffler, the second of nine children (Menconi 2). Shuffler's early life in Valdese echoes the stories of many southern musicians, almost to the point of cliché. His first experience with music came from the church, specifically the local shape-note singing school. Shape-note singing is a popular form of southern religious singing now closely identified with its most popular hymnal, the *Sacred Harp*. Shuffler excelled at meetings; he said that he could "really tear up some shape notes" (Shuffler 2 April 2009). Soon the teachers began to direct students who needed help to Shuffler, who could always show them the harmony or lead part



George Shuffler on his farm in Valdese, NC, with his signature George Shuffler model Huss and Dalton and “George” strap, a gift from James Allen Shelton. Photo courtesy of North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

that they needed. Shuffler’s affinity for music grew and at age twelve his father traded an old broken down car for a Gibson Kalamazoo guitar (Shuffler 2 April 2009). The guitar, still an unusual instrument for the area, had only become widely available in the South at the turn of the century. These mass produced guitars entered the mountains with the railroads and home order catalogs such as *Mont-*



*gomery Ward* and *Sears and Roebuck*. As a result, although he could hear guitar music on the radio, no one he knew could tune a guitar. Finally Shuffler found out that one of his neighbors, Jack Smith, knew a little bit about the guitar, and tracked him down. Smith tuned his guitar and showed him three basic chords, G, C, and D. Shuffler remembered that Smith played the guitar with a pick broken off of a comb (Shuffler 23 Nov 2009). Shuffler walked home that night practicing the three chords over and over, afraid that he would forget them. When he got home his mother was singing an old song called “Down in the Valley,” (which Shuffler and others also called “Birmingham Jail”) and Shuffler started accompanying her with two of his new chords. He asked her to sing the song so many times that she ended up hoarse (Shuffler 2 April 2009).

Shuffler practiced his three chords over the next few months, and made up new ones whenever he needed them. Another of Shuffler’s neighbors heard that he had a guitar and invited him to come pick. At first, Shuffler feared that his homemade chords would make him look foolish or unprepared; so he started out playing with his right hand hidden to the side, but he soon discovered that his chord shapes matched those of his more experienced neighbor. Emboldened by this experience, Shuffler practiced in his spare time, until his father traded the guitar for a new pistol. Shuffler’s mother, a talented seamstress, did some work for a local woman who owned a guitar, which became George’s second; he played this guitar with local bands over the next five years (Shuffler 23 Nov 2009). At this point he was playing mainly in the “scratch” style of Mother Maybelle Carter. This consisted of playing the melody to the song on the bass strings while rhythmically strumming the top strings during the rests of the melody, the very first country lead guitar technique.

Then, in 1942, a seventeen year old Shuffler and some friends traveled to nearby Granite Falls, NC to see the popular country group the Bailey Brothers. When their backup band failed to show up, Shuffler offered to play bass for them, even though he had only a passing familiarity with the instrument. His playing so impressed Danny and Charlie Bailey that they offered him sixty dollars a week to come with them to Nashville to play on the Grand Ole Opry radio show.

“It was \$60 a week,” Shuffler says, “and I was making \$30 at the bakery. So I could send more home than my dad was making at the mill. I asked my dad what to do and he asked me if this was what I wanted.



'Yeah,' I said, 'it's the only thing I've ever wanted to do.' 'OK, then, be careful and keep in contact.' We pulled into Nashville at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and were onstage that night, playing in front of 3,000 people and on WSM. I was scared to death, knew my mom and dad would be listening. But we got an encore. I was ready to pick all night." (Menconi 2)

Over the next few years Shuffler played with the Baileys and other groups in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, and met his wife Pam at a radio show in Hickory. Then in December of 1950 Carter Stanley of the Stanley Brothers asked him if he wanted to play bass as a member of their backup band the Clinch Mountain Boys.<sup>1</sup> The Stanley Brothers came out of Dickenson County, Virginia, and along with "Bill Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs...they made up the ruling triumvirate of early bluegrass music" (Goldsmith 51). Ralph Stanley recalled discovering Shuffler at Salem School in Morganton, where George and all nine of his brothers came out to see the group. George managed to get backstage and play with them, impressing Carter enough that when bass player Ernie Newton left the band, he remembered Shuffler and called him (Wright 60). For the next twenty years Shuffler played bass on and off with the Stanley Brothers; he quit the band on several occasions only to be lured back by raises of fifteen or twenty dollars. Shuffler mostly played bass with the band until the late 1950s, what he called the "lean years of bluegrass" (Shuffler 28 July 2009). With the emergence in the 1954-55 period of rock and roll, bluegrass lost many of its young followers, and even popular groups like Jim and Jesse lost their record contracts (Goldsmith 165). Ralph Stanley sold off his whole herd of cattle one year to keep the band going, and for much of the 1955 to 1965 period the band consisted only of Ralph, Carter, and George. While the Stanley's had often carried a full band early on, the declining popularity of bluegrass in the mid 1950s through the early 1960s forced them to cut back. From 1950 to 1960 Shuffler played bass (though he did fill in a mandolin part for the 1957 recording of "The Flood") and rose to fame as a great bass player. His own style focused not on the typical two-four bass playing of the time, what he called "boom-boom," but on a four-four bass technique. In the *Bluegrass Unlimited* "Worldwide Readers Poll" in 1967 Shuffler received more votes for the bass than Bill Monroe on the mandolin, Doc Watson on the flattop, or Earl Scruggs on the banjo (Wright 92).

For the first ten years Shuffler played only bass until 1960, when he took a lead guitar break on several songs from the July 11, 1960





session for King Records (Reid 16). The Stanley Brothers had been using lead guitarists since as early as 1954 when the Bluegrass Boy's fiddler Charlie Cline took a break on several songs (Reid 7). Cline's style resembled the fingerstyle picking of Merle Travis on "Calling from Heaven," but his solo for the instrumental "Hard Times" was a true flatpicking solo, in which he imitated his own fiddle playing. The earliest southern lead guitar styles in country music were those of Merle Travis, Maybelle Carter, and the Delmore Brothers. Merle Travis played fingerstyle, meaning that he used his "thumb to maintain a bass rhythm while the forefinger" played a "syncopated melody on the treble strings" (Malone 202). His style was based on black guitar styles, specifically Durham, NC based blues guitarist Blind Blake. Maybelle Carter adapted "scratch" or Carter-style from earlier clawhammer banjo playing techniques she had learned as a child. She played the melody "on the bass strings while placing rhythmic strums in-between melody notes" with her forefinger. Finally the Delmore Brothers played in a tremolo mandolin style, which George Shuffler called the "quick wrist mandolin style." In this style the player used a flatpick to rapidly pick the notes of a melody, often playing the same note numerous times before moving to the next. All three of these had limitations and advantages, and all attempted to "play lead lines without allowing the rhythm to drop out," a challenge unique to acoustic music (Miller "The Pioneers of Flatpicking" 8). Electric instruments could simply play a melody note for note as a singer sang it, but on an acoustic guitar simply repeating the melody seemed empty, so the guitarist needed to develop a fuller sound. Southern musicians turned to older instruments to solve this problem, imitating the fiddle, the mandolin, and the banjo. Because these styles were adapted, they each had limitations when applied to the guitar. Travis style allowed a player to maintain the rhythm, but the available melody notes were limited because the player had to maintain a chord form for the alternating bass. Carter's scratch let the guitarist play a melody, but the rhythmic strums could not so much keep a beat as demonstrate it. The mandolin style came closest to allowing both, and when the Stanleys signed with Syd Nathan at King Records in 1958, he told them that he considered the mandolin overplayed and that they should use the Delmore Brothers guitar style (Wright 59). So their mandolin player Bill Napier switched over to guitar and played lead at the King Studio in Cincinnati on September 14, 1959 (Reid 14). His solo on "Mountain Dew" from that session sounds exactly like a mandolin player on guitar: rapid strumming

which plays the same note in tremolo before moving to the next (*The Early Starday/King Years; 1958-1961*). His solo on some songs from this period actually feature some early crosspicking based on Jesse McReynolds' mandolin playing. The difference between the two styles, discussed in Barry Willis' *America's Music, Bluegrass*, is in the rhythm. Shuffler described Napier's playing as having a "lope in it." Napier played with the Stanleys for another year, and the lead guitar became associated with their act, so when he left the band in 1961 George Shuffler took over as full time lead guitarist.

When Shuffler left the Bailey Brothers in 1942 he played with a number of other groups until signing on with the Stanleys in 1950; one of these was a brother duo called Jim and Jesse. Jesse McReynolds had been developing a way to imitate the Scruggs style banjo on the mandolin, and he was "working it out" when Shuffler joined the band. During this period Shuffler began "creating some things on the guitar" which he "never did get a chance to use" (Wright 91). While "people like to pretend that we worked on it together," Shuffler insists that each developed their style separately. Shuffler's style, now called crosspicking, imitates the three finger banjo playing popularized by Earl Scruggs. The player uses a flatpick and plays in a specific directional pattern, in Shuffler's case a constant repeat of down-down-up, down-down-up, down-down-up, across three adjacent strings. This pattern, he claims, is the only way to properly crosspick, because doing it any other way can "really get you in a hole or a rut," while this method will produce a constant stream of eighth-notes. Another important part of Shuffler's crosspicking style was his focus on melody. He claimed that crosspicking "weren't worth a damn without a melody." He based his playing in part on Scruggs style banjo, the pattern of threes over fours, but also on Maybelle Carter's style. Like Carter, Shuffler played the melody on the bass strings only instead of strumming with his forefinger, he picked on the two adjacent strings with a flatpick.

Mathematically crosspicking seems problematic, since it is a nine-note pattern played in the space for eight notes, so the guitarist must use one of two tricks Shuffler used to make it "come out right" (Shuffler 9 August 2009). The first is to simply let the ninth note of the series bleed over as the first note of the new bar; a process that works out every four bars. Most instructional books and sources either use this, or teach an improper crosspicking pattern of "down, down, up, down, down, up, down, up" (Carr 37). While this technique ensures that chord transitions will be easier since the first note



will fall on the first note of the chord, the last down-up interrupts the flow of notes. More often Shuffler used the crosspick on only the rests in his solos, and played rapidly picked melodies throughout, or as he put it, “you got to make up your own little runs and things for it to come out” (Wright 91). Shuffler developed and began implementing the technique “out of necessity” during the early 1960s (Shuffler 2 April 2009). In an interview with John Wright, Ralph Stanley related the circumstances of the band during this period:

But after '61 or '62 we didn't carry a full band. The reason was that maybe we'd play two weeks and off two or something and not keep anyone on a regular salary except George, of course. We'd pay George a regular salary whether he'd play or not and if we'd play two weeks out of the month why he'd draw his money, see. We couldn't afford to do a full band that way. But we could take George and just about serve as a full band, you know. (Wright 60)

In bluegrass, as in jazz, each member of the band takes a musical break or solo on their respective instrument. When the band consisted of only Ralph, Carter, and George, their instruments were Ralph's banjo, Carter's guitar, and George's guitar and bass. Since Shuffler played both guitar and bass, he would often play bass with the guitar slung across his back for easy access, which can be seen in one of the band's rare taped performances on Pete Seeger's *Rainbow Request*. At this point most musicians saw the acoustic guitar as a rhythm instrument, and most people viewed lead guitar playing as a novelty. So at first Ralph simply took all of the breaks, and then when that sound quickly grew tiresome, Shuffler remembered the crosspicking techniques he had worked on in the late 1940s. The three styles he had to work with—mandolin, Carter, and Travis—were insufficient as far as he was concerned. Carter and Travis were limited in different ways: Travis did not allow for much in the way of melody playing, and Carter could not keep a beat. Shuffler had always disliked the mandolin style, as he felt “it didn't fit the guitar” (Shuffler 2 April 2009). Shuffler used his new technique on a few recordings in July of 1961, for an intro on “There is a Trap,” and for a few fills on “Thy Burden Is Greater than Mine,” but his first full crosspicking solo came on The Stanleys' September recording of “I'm Only Human” (*The King Years; 1961-1965*). Here Shuffler's fairly bluesy style is featured in the intro, in the background throughout the song, and in a solo. Guitarist Bryan Sutton remembered Shuffler as the first player to “incorporate the concept that when a fiddle player takes his part, and a banjo player takes his part, the guitar



player could also take his part” (Hasley 5). This was because of the sparse arrangement within the band, where Shuffler needed a fuller sounding guitar style that could keep the rhythm and also play melody.

Shuffler based his crosspicking on a combination of the three finger Scruggs style banjo and Carter scratch guitar. This interplay between the banjo and the guitar has been central to North Carolina lead techniques. The combination of traditional musical styles with new technologies and ideas led western North Carolina to become the birthplace of lead guitar.

Deep Gap, NC born Arthel “Doc” Watson began to play the guitar in a fingerpicking approach based on Merle Travis and in the scratch technique of Maybelle Carter, but when he heard that Jimmie Rodgers, one of his musical heroes, played the guitar with a flatpick he began to use one as well.

I figured, “Hey, he must be doing that with one of them straight picks.” So I got me one and began to work at it. Then I began to learn the Jimmie Rodgers licks on the guitar. Then all at once I began to figure out, “Hey, I could play that Carter stuff a lot better with a flat pick.” (Miller)

Later, when he joined up with a local country-western swing band called The Country Gentlemen, he traded his acoustic guitar for a Gibson Les Paul electric. Since the band lacked a fiddler, he began working out fiddle tunes on the electric guitar using this new flatpicking technique. When Ralph Rinzler discovered him in 1961, he had come down to record a local musician named Clarence “Tom” Ashley (Hill 20). Ashley arranged for a number of local musicians to accompany him on the records, with Doc Watson playing the guitar. When he first met Watson he was shocked to see a blind mountain folk musician holding an electric guitar. He forbade him to use the instrument despite Watson’s protests that at a lower volume it would be indistinguishable from an acoustic guitar (Hill 20). Depressed by the incident, Rinzler, Ashley, and Watson set out to find banjo player Jack Johnson as an accompanist.

Rinzler ended up setting in the bed of the truck and decided to spend the time practicing his banjo playing. According to Rinzler, not long into the ride the truck stopped. Watson jumped out of the front to join him in the back saying “Let me see that banjo, son.” Watson began playing his version of “Tom Dooley” and “proceeded to play the hell out of it,” deeply impressing Rinzler with his command of the instrument and strong baritone voice. (Hill 21)



Now desperate to record Watson, Rinzler encouraged him to borrow an acoustic guitar from a neighbor and began marketing him on the folk circuit. When he transposed his electric fiddle tunes to the acoustic guitar he created a new style called flatpicking combining “up and down picking and cross-picking” (Hill 33). Don Reno, “probably the first guitar player in bluegrass music to flatpick fiddle tunes,” also reported learning the electric guitar while playing with Arthur “Guitar Boogie” Smith, and then using that foundation for flatpicking on the acoustic guitar (Miller).

Reno grew up in Haywood County outside of Waynesville, NC, and began playing banjo and guitar at age five. He recorded two of the most famous instrumental hits of all time, “Guitar Boogie” and “Feuding Banjos” with Arthur Smith. “Feuding Banjos” was covered in the movie *Deliverance* as “Dueling Banjos” and launched a mini-bluegrass revival in the early 1970s. Carolina banjo player Snuffy Jenkins heavily influenced his development. When he turned twelve he “went into the business professionally at WSPA radio in Spartanburg, SC, with a group known as the Morris Brothers” (Wernick 55). His son Don Wayne Reno described the development of his guitar playing to Rob Bulkley in 2007.

I think that came more or less just from playing electric guitar. When he was thirteen he took a bus to Atlanta and played on Jack Guthrie’s Oklahoma Hills. I think he evolved that flatpicking style that he does from picking the electric guitar, and then playing the fiddle tunes with Tommy Magness (one of Bill Monroe’s early fiddle players), trying to figure out the notes on the guitar. (Miller)

Reno’s guitar style incorporated “a strong melodic sense, flashy runs, jazzy chord solos, harmonized scales, and effects such as sliding down the fingerboard, ‘zooming’ from a high note to a low” (Miller). When he developed his banjo playing Don Reno described “taking stuff from the guitar and transplanting it onto the neck of the five-string banjo” (Wernick 55). He developed his banjo playing, called single-string, after World War Two. When he returned from service and began playing around Columbia, his son Don Wayne related that “people told him that ‘You sound just like Earl Scruggs.’ He said that really bothered him considering he never played a banjo while he was in the service and when he returned to the U.S. he continued to play in the style he had always played before” (Reno). Though Earl Scruggs made the three finger technique popular, it has been widely established to have been a North Carolina piedmont style.

Descended from a combination of the “classical” parlor banjo playing of Fred Van Eps when the instrument became a fad at the turn of the century, and African-American blues and ragtime musical influence, Charlie Poole of the North Carolina Ramblers first transformed it into a “raggy, percussive style whose prominent upbeat, expressed by tight stiff chords snatched often from positions high on the banjo neck, echoed the rhythmic pulse of the older mountain clawhammer or frailing styles” (Cantwell 54).<sup>2</sup> Carolina natives Smith Hammet, Mack Woolbright, Rex Brooks, and Johnny Whisnant all played in a three finger style and, while playing guitar in a band with Brooks and Hammet, Snuffy Jenkins learned the style (Artis 43). Jenkins, “a product of Harris, North Carolina, had taken the technique to the largest audience through his performances on WBT in Charlotte in 1934 and on WIS in Columbia, South Carolina, after 1937” (Malone 327). Ralph Stanley, Don Reno, Earl Scruggs, and a host of lesser-known banjo players acknowledge learning three-finger banjo from Jenkins (Rosenburg 284). So Reno developed a new banjo style called single string that focused less on the arpeggio technique of Poole, Jenkins, and Scruggs, and instead he took the fiddle tunes he played on the electric guitar and played them on the banjo.

Shelby, North Carolina has produced a number of important musicians like Don Gibson, the author of “I Can’t Stop Loving You.” The best known of these is Earl Scruggs, whose three-finger banjo style drove the music of Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys. He and Lester Flatt provided the soundtrack to the TV show *The Beverly Hillbillies* and the movie *Bonnie and Clyde*. Scruggs also played one of the earliest lead guitars in bluegrass, based on a combination of Carter scratch and three-finger banjo.

When I would play with my older brother, he wanted me to play guitar with him because he wanted to play the banjo. So anyway, I started playing guitar back as far as I can remember. My idol at the time—the main person I loved the most—was Momma Maybelle Carter, so that’s who I copied. (Willis)

Scruggs played the melody with his thumb and picked two accompanying notes on adjacent strings with his fingers, essentially his banjo style on the guitar.

A few common threads run through the playing and lives of each of the four musicians, but none affected all four. Don Reno and Doc Watson both developed their styles playing fiddle tunes on the electric guitar, but neither George Shuffler nor Earl Scruggs played elec-



tric. Earl Scruggs and George Shuffler both worked in piedmont mills, but Watson and Reno did not. Scruggs, Watson, and Shuffler first played guitar in the Carter scratch method, but Reno never did. Scruggs, Reno, and Shuffler acknowledged Snuffy Jenkins as an early influence, but Watson did not. Many western Carolina musicians gave similar responses when asked why they began playing with a flatpick instead of in the thumb-and-one fingerstyle common in the piedmont. George Shuffler responded that “it just seemed like the thing to do,” and another local bluegrass musician responded that “that’s what you do with one” (Shuffler 23 Nov. 2009 and Martin 23 Nov. 2009). Only Shuffler, Reno, and Watson played with a flatpick. Shuffler, Reno, and Scruggs all developed their styles as part of the commercial bluegrass industry, but Watson claimed to have never played bluegrass. Scruggs, Reno, and Watson all played the banjo, but Shuffler did not. Of all these factors, none of them accounts for the playing of all four, but by concentrating on two of them, the banjo and bluegrass itself, we can gain a clearer understanding of why the acoustic lead guitar emerged out of North Carolina.

The simple fact that bluegrass emerged as all four of these musicians came of age may be one of the most significant factors. Bob Artis pointed out in *Bluegrass* that “the Carolinas have often been called the true cradle of bluegrass music because of their wealth of great musicians” (Artis 61). The other reason that North Carolina was the cradle of bluegrass was because in many ways, bluegrass began in the region. Bob Carlin in *String Bands of the North Carolina Piedmont*, and Patrick Huber in *Linthead Stomp* have both traced the development of the guitar/banjo/fiddle combos commonly called strings bands or old-time bands. Both authors argued that North Carolina piedmont musicians had been influential during the early days of country music, at the time called hillbilly, and that the region had been overlooked because of a focus on the Carolina Mountains. These string bands were the musical predecessors of bluegrass bands, and many string bands transitioned to bluegrass when Bill Monroe’s music became popular.

Another reason for the music’s popularity in the Tar Heel State was the fact that both the Monroe Brothers and the Blue Grass Boys music was “tremendously popular...in the Carolinas, enhancing the already enviable reputation the Monroes had established on some of the major country radio stations” (Artis 16). With both bands Monroe had forged his reputation in North Carolina, playing on radio stations out of Raleigh, Charlotte, Hickory, and Asheville. Bill and

his brother Charlie both moved to North Carolina in the 1930s, and the music spread quickly throughout the region. When bands made the transition from string bands to bluegrass bands, the main changes were the inclusion of a Scruggs-style banjo player over a mountain or clawhammer player, the addition of a mandolin player, and the fact that the banjo, fiddle, and mandolin all took breaks, instead of just the fiddle. Only the bass and the guitar remained rhythm instruments.

The guitar had usurped the place of the banjo in the South because of its greater bass range and versatility; it gave bands a harmonic center and made chord forms more exact. Listening to the early string band recordings of Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers, it becomes clear the guitarist Riley Puckett often does not know which chords go with which parts of the melody. As the guitar became more commonplace the chords became more important, while in earlier banjo and fiddle duets the banjoist often played the melody of the entire song over the (I) chord, and unresolved dissonances abounded. By the time Bill and Charlie Monroe formed the Monroe Brothers, the guitar had become central to the band, maintaining both a constant rhythm and a harmonic center, as well as filling in bass lines in the absence of a bass player.<sup>3</sup> When bluegrass with its alternating solos came along, guitar players wanted to be able to play lead along with the other members of the band. Framming, what most people called early guitar playing, only allowed these musicians to keep a rhythm, so it seems natural that bluegrass music would produce lead guitar players, and since bluegrass began in North Carolina it makes sense that the first lead guitar players would come from that area.

Wayne Erbsen claimed that “it was in North Carolina where the banjo became a deeply ingrained part of everyday life. Both blacks and whites frequently played the banjo along with the fiddle for rural dances and frolics” (Erbsen 15). C. P. Heaton put it more simply when he stated, “North Carolina is banjo country.” Banjos have always been extraordinarily popular in the state, and no region has maintained or produced more playing styles. North Carolinians kept their banjos much longer than other regions; Heaton notes that by the early 1940s most companies had stopped making five-string banjos altogether. Yet in North Carolina they remained popular, and would soon be rescued from obscurity by Earl Scruggs. Still, many musicians, both black and white, gave up their banjos for the versatile new guitars. When they did this, they often transferred their banjo methods directly to the guitar, something already discussed in the formation of Carter scratch. In *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*,





Cece Conway argued briefly that many of the black players she researched had used banjo techniques on their new guitars. One, Thomas Burt of Durham, described a Saturday night dance:

They'd kick up and dance. They'd kick up more dust, I declare! We used to sit and play all night long some nights and they'd dance all night. We'd play some sort of fast music for them to dance by—never played no blues or nothing. I used to tune my guitar in the tune of a banjo and play. They'd kick up and cut up just like it was a banjo. (Conway 5)

Elizabeth Cotten, the famous black banjo player best known for her guitar song “Freight Train,” played the banjo in her youth (upside down because she was left-handed). When she switched to guitar (also upside down) she “used a banjo stroke and thumbed the highest pitched string as a drone” (Conway 6). All four of the musicians in this study based their lead guitar playing on earlier banjo music, though often this connection was indirect or second generation. George Shuffler claimed that there were few guitar or banjo players in the very religious town of Valdese in his youth, but said that he did listen to Snuffy Jenkins on the radio in his youth (Shuffler 4 Dec 2009). He based his crosspicking on Scruggs and Jenkins’ banjo rolls, and the bass lead of Mother Maybelle Carter, who had in turn created her guitar playing out of the clawhammer style she played as a child. Doc Watson played banjo in a distinctive “two-finger technique with a consistent index finger lead,” which he learned from his family (Heaton). When he also began imitating Maybelle Carter’s guitar playing, he was really just transferring his banjo playing to the guitar. Then when he began playing scratch with a flatpick, he laid the foundations for his later flatpicking. Don Reno played both the guitar and banjo from age five. His first banjo was a fretless home-made affair, and throughout his career he spoke openly about playing guitar leads on the banjo, and banjo and fiddle rhythms on the guitar. Like Shuffler, he learned banjo from Snuffy Jenkins. Earl Scruggs began playing guitar in the Maybelle Carter style, and added in the finger rolls he had learned from Jenkins and a host of other players in and around Shelby and Rutherfordton. With all four musicians the point was to find a way to play rhythm and lead at the same time, a problem banjo players solved generations before the guitar. Again it seems only logical that North Carolina musicians would take the banjo traditions of their respective regions and add them to the new guitar playing.

In fact, the specific regional influences of the banjo can be seen in the later guitar styles. Doc Watson played in the up-picking style, in which “the melody is plucked by the ‘up-pick’ of the index finger, then the nail brush and thumb ‘kick-off’ follow as in frailing. A variant used by Bascom Lamar Lunsford and other North Carolina players involves an upward index finger brush rather than the brush downward with the nails” (Heaton). Doc claims that the first person he ever heard flatpick fiddle tunes was Don Reno, and says that he heard George Shuffler crosspick with the Stanley Brothers. Doc combined crosspicking and flatpicking into a style all his own, but whereas Shuffler was influenced by the forward three finger rolls of Snuffy Jenkins and Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson based his crosspicking on his own up-picking banjo playing. Thus while Shuffler always played a down-down-up pattern and played the melody in the bass, Shuffler used varying patterns of down-down-up and down-up-up as well as the alternating down-up-down. As a result Watson often carried his melodies in the high strings and the rhythm in the bass, heard in the crosspicking section of “Beaumont Rag” among other places. Similarly Earl Scruggs played the forward banjo rolls of Cleveland and Rutherford County in his lead playing. These musicians drew on their traditional influences and used them in innovative approaches to a new instrument.

Four of the earliest and most important lead guitarists in bluegrass all came from within one hundred miles of each other in western North Carolina: Earl Scruggs from Shelby, Don Reno from Waynesville, Doc Watson from Deep Gap, and George Shuffler from Valdese. North Carolina was uniquely situated to produce flatpickers in this period. The two most important factors in the development of North Carolina lead guitar were earlier banjo traditions and the fact that all four musicians were born between 1923 and 1927, and all entered the music world about the time that bluegrass emerged in the state. Early guitarists imitated more established instruments when they created their new styles; the Delmore Brothers played the guitar like a mandolin, and Charlie Cline and others played in a fiddle style. North Carolina emerged as the birthplace of bluegrass lead guitar because the musicians had a number of older banjo techniques on which they could base their playing.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Here there is some disagreement. In Dan Miller's "The History of Flatpicking Guitar in the U.S.A.," Miller claims that Shuffler was contacted in "December of 1950" about playing with the Stanley Brothers. Shuffler himself recalls being contacted as early as late 1949, while Goldsmith in *The Bluegrass Reader* claims that Shuffler joined the band in 1952 (Goldsmith 52). In his discography Gary Reid shows that Shuffler did not record with the Stanley Brothers until April 11, 1952, when he played bass on "A Life of Sorrow," "Sweetest Love," "The Wandering Boy," and "Let's Part the Best of Friends (the band's last recording session for Columbia)." The liner notes to The Stanley Brothers, *The Complete Columbia Stanley Brothers*, also back up this claim. In John Wright's *Traveling the High Way Home* Ralph Stanley recalls discovering Shuffler when the band "hadn't got Lester Woodie" (61). Woodie, also from Valdese and a childhood friend of Shuffler, played fiddle with the Stanley Brothers on their November 1949 session. Therefore it seems clear that Shuffler played with the Stanley Brothers in early 1949 at their above Morganton concert, and joined the band in December 1950, but he did not record with them until April of 1952. This is because the Stanley Brothers briefly disbanded in 1951 (Ralph left music while Carter became lead singer with Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys), and did not record between their Castle Studio session in Nashville on November 3, 1950 and the final session with Shuffler and Columbia in 1952. It seems fair to say that Shuffler met the Stanleys in 1949, likely joined right after the November 1950 session (backing up Miller's claim), and played with the band on and off for two years until the 1952 session; so all three claims are true.

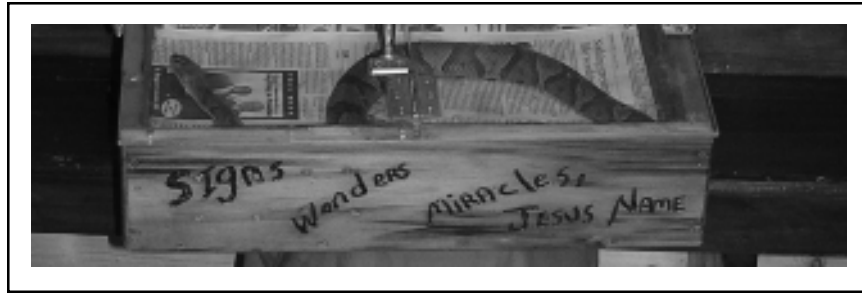
<sup>2</sup> While Hammet, Woolbright, Brooks, Whisnant, Jenkins, and Scruggs all came from Cleveland and Rutherford counties, where it appears that many banjo players played in a three finger style, it should be noted that Poole only played in a three finger style because an injury to his hand prevented him from playing in any of the other styles (frailing, clawhammer, etc.).

<sup>3</sup> Many early string bands and bluegrass bands lacked a bass player because of the size and expense of the instrument, making it difficult to transport. As a result many of the early guitar players—Jimmie Rodgers, Riley Puckett, Ed Mayfield—all played bass runs in-between chords, creating the distinctive guitar style still used in bluegrass today.

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## “It’s an Easy Life”: Women Serpent-Handlers in Contemporary Appalachia

By Patricia Gaitely

Much has been written about the tradition in Holiness or Jesus’ Name churches, especially those in the Appalachians, of serpent-handling. Some researchers and authors have focused on families, and others have tended to be more area-specific, such as David Kimbrough’s *Taking Up Serpents*, which focuses on the handlers of eastern Kentucky. Certainly, as part of these studies, women have been included. However, very little research has focused specifically and solely on the experiences of the women who practice this tradition, and rarely has a woman researcher collected the experiences and stories of these women in their own words. Thomas Burton’s *Serpent-Handling Believers* includes an extensive interview with Anna Price, but she is identified as “A Snake-Handler’s Daughter” (108), rather than an independent bearer of the Holiness tradition. Other folklorists, like Elaine Lawless in *Handmaidens of the Lord* and *God’s Peculiar People*, have researched women’s religious practices within a specific tradition, that of the Pentecostal or Holiness tradition, but they have not focused on the serpent-handlers.

While some generalizations could be made about women in serpent-handling churches, specific interviews will demonstrate that

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*Frame photo: Copperhead in box at a service. Photo by Patricia Gaitely.*



experiences, actual roles in church life, and accounts will vary from person to person, from church to church, and even from state to state. As Lawless states about folk churches in general, and the churches where she conducted her research specifically, “Each church shares certain tenets of belief and religious experience from other similar denominational religious groups in the geographic area but develops from its own tradition its own order of service, protocol, male/female participation, and group identity” (*God’s Peculiar People* 5). Certainly this statement rings true of the churches involved in this research, since they are all loosely in the area known as “Appalachia,” but each has its own distinct ways of doing things.

Many other accounts of serpent-handling have gone into the background of the tradition in the United States, most crediting George Went Hensley with its founding, so it does not need repeating. What is interesting to note about its foundation is that serpent-handling pastor Jimmy Morrow, who authored an oral history on the subject, suggests that Hensley might have been influenced by a woman handler. Morrow and Ralph Hood, co-authors of *Handling Serpents*, state that Hensley was probably influenced by a woman named Nancy Kleinieck. Morrow was given a picture of an elderly woman whom he had previously seen pictured in *Life* magazine, together with a young pregnant woman, both of whom were handling serpents. As Hood states, “Morrow traced the picture back to the Kleiniecks of Appalachia and found that the heretofore unknown woman shown in *Life* magazine was Nancy Younger Kleinieck, a prophetess in the Jesus’ Name tradition, to which Morrow also belongs” (Morrow and Hood 19). According to Morrow and Hood’s account, Hensley would likely have seen Kleinieck handle serpents at coal camp revivals in the 1890s, twenty years before Hensley is reported to have begun handling serpents himself (19). It could also be argued that the role of women in the serpent-handling churches throughout its history has been unofficially, but nevertheless significantly, influential. When writing about the Saylor family in Kentucky, David Kimbrough includes an account of a time when Sarah Saylor handled a serpent that no one else in the congregation, male or female, would handle (53).

A common misconception about women who attend serpent-handling churches is that they were born into the tradition, raised within in, and have not questioned the practice. In conducting interviews with several women, I found many preconceptions to be at best flawed. One sentence, though, that I did not expect to hear when interviewing a woman who is married to the pastor of a serpent-handling



Pastor Jimmy Morrow and Pam Morrow at a service. Photo by Rhonda McDaniel.

church, and who handles them herself when moved to do so, is that “It’s an easy life.” For the most part, the assumption would be that, for a woman to choose this expression of worship, it would reflect a hard life of poverty, lack of education, and limited choices. However, the more I talked with and observed the women, the more I learned that the way in which they express their faith demonstrates their in-





dependence, their autonomy, and the way of life that many have chosen. They have not simply accepted or tolerated it by default. While the number of interviews I have obtained is somewhat limited, I have been involved with three congregations in three different states and have interviewed women from four different congregations. I have also spent time in their services and shared homecoming meals with them. I have had the opportunity to not only record their words but to observe the way in which they interact with each other and with their families. What I have seen contradicts some of my own expectations, and some of the commonly held ideas regarding women in serpent-handling churches. While the interviews collected have been from women in congregations in east Tennessee, north Alabama, and southeast Kentucky, the tradition is strong among many regions of Appalachia and certainly there are parts of North Carolina where the tradition and practice are strong. Many of the services I have attended have been homecoming services, and people from congregations from a wide area have come to attend, including many from North Carolina. In fact, one family prominent in the tradition, the Browns, was one of the families featured in Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald's book *The Serpent Handlers: Three Families and Their Faith*. The patriarch of the family currently pastors a very active church in North Carolina, and he and his family have often been both present and active in homecomings I have attended. The tradition remains strong in North Carolina, and practices there share much with those of congregations in adjoining states.

This article will address three main areas with regard to the experiences of the women I interviewed: How they perceive their role within the church; what is appropriate concerning dress and attire in worship; and how their expression of faith fits in with their roles as wives and mothers. Since the practice of serpent-handling is illegal in all states where it is practiced with the exception of West Virginia, all names have been changed and locations kept deliberately vague.

Of all the women I have interviewed to this point, only one was raised in the serpent-handling tradition. Unlike the other women interviewed, she has never actually handled a serpent. Sally identifies herself as a fourth generation member of a serpent-handling family. She also identifies her mother as someone for whom the church had a great deal of respect, and recalls a time when a member of the congregation had been bitten by a snake. "I mean one man, [...] he got snake bit and they were all praying for him, and Mom said when she pulled up he stopped them praying for him and



Pastor Jimmy Morrow and Pam Morrow with musician. Photo by Rhonda McDaniel.

said, ‘Shirley, come pray for me; I got snake bit.’ So he had faith in my mother’s prayers.” On this occasion, it seems as if the snake bite sufferer had greater faith in the prayers of Sally’s mother than in the men who were also praying for him. Serpent-handling churches are often seen as strongly patriarchal, with the men holding the spiritual authority. Certainly, none of the serpent-handling churches I have visited have a female pastor, but in some, women have a degree of authority within the church, even if it is unofficial.

Also, historically there is a tradition of strong women in the churches. When asked about what, specifically, women can do in the church, and what they cannot do, Sally remarked, “We’re supposed to be equal...they (the women) can testify, strongly testify.” She acknowledges that women cannot officially preach, but states that “We had women preachers at our church when I was growing up.” She stated that they tended to come from other churches and were allowed to preach at her church but not at others in the area. Sally added, “Sometimes my Mom preached. She didn’t mean to, but she did. Strongly testified!” When asked about who can usually pray for



Pam Morrow being photographed by the author. Photo by Rhonda McDaniel.

whom during a church service, she advised, “It’s not proper for a woman to pray for a man, only a man can pray for a man.” She added, though, that one time she felt led to pray for a man right in front of the church and said that “the man recognized it was God.” In spite of this apparent confirmation that she was being obedient to the Lord, it is clear that Sally would have preferred that someone else pray for the man because she knew her actions might seem inappropriate.

The idea of women having a prominent role in the church seems to contradict the alleged order of fundamentalist Holiness churches.

Kimbrough, when writing about the frontier churches in Kentucky, states, “The frontier churches reinforced the dominant male order. Women could not speak from the pulpit or lead services. They had to sit on opposite sides of the church from the men and listen to male preachers remind them of their place in the social order” (67). However, even amongst men within the Holiness tradition, a few expressed a surprising flexibility with regard to what a woman can do, as Thomas Burton’s interview with Pastor Liston Pack demonstrates.

The woman is the helpmate, but the same spirit of God that is in a man is in a woman. They are the weaker vessel, but they got a right to do a lot of things in the church and I don’t think they should be put down. [...] Women can do many things in the church. They can prophecy and do basically everything a pastor can do. (95)

Lisa attends a congregation in Georgia, and is the one interviewee whom I have not met personally. I interviewed her over the telephone, but only after I had explained to her husband the purpose of my call and the type of research I was conducting. It also probably helped that she was recommended to me by Sally. As Lisa put it:

Well, for the main part women are allowed to get up and testify, and handle serpents, and praise the Lord, run the aisles, speak in tongues, whatever the Lord moves on them to do they’re at liberty to do. The only thing the Holiness movement in Jesus’ name don’t believe in is women preachers, and as far as anything else, they’re allowed to get up and testify, and obey the Lord, and if the Lord moves on them to handle, they’re allowed to do so, you know, and there’s nothing in their way.

Lisa was raised in the Baptist faith, but feels more freedom of worship and more opportunity to participate in the services in the Holiness churches, despite the apparent rules against women preaching. It should be added, though, that many mainstream Protestant denominations, especially in the “Bible Belt,” would probably also hold a similar view regarding women preachers, and participation by women in these congregations might even be more limited that it is in the Holiness churches. This has certainly been Lisa’s experience.

Lydia, a pastor’s wife from Kentucky, had a clear insight into what was permitted for women in the Holiness church. In spite of certain limitations, though, she, like Lisa, has chosen this expression of worship. She explained the role of women in the church thus: “You can do anything in the church house except for preach. But you can

have no authority whatsoever over a man.” She added, “You know the Bible talks about women keeping silent in the church; that’s referring to church matters and to church business,” meaning that women can be involved in many aspects of the church service and in the life of the church in general. Lydia continued, “The Word of God said that the elder women should teach the younger women and my job right now as an elder woman, I’m the head teacher of the younger women.”

However, even if women cannot have authority over men, the women in this particular congregation still have a sense of spiritual autonomy in that they study the Scriptures for themselves and can, therefore, tell if a preacher is preaching scripturally. As Lydia explains it:

Now I will tell you something about the [Kentucky] women. We have ladies prayer meeting. We back up everything we study, that we do, that we’ll say to you, with the Word of God...And we have preachers that come here and they will preach and they are so uncomfortable, some of them have slowed down from coming because when they get up to quote a word, or quote the Scripture, and it’s wrong, not knowing it, we repeat the Scripture after they do because we know the truth. If they do it wrong...it comes to mind, you know.

Then Lydia added, “And not that we know more than them, but they’re uncomfortable ... because the women know and study like the men.” So, in their own way, the women are able to determine for themselves whether or not the man preaching has the knowledge of the Scriptures that they have determined to gain for themselves. In this way, they surely grant themselves a degree of spiritual autonomy. And it seems that this is not done so much to undermine the authority of the men, but rather to assert their own spiritual authority in their own lives. Lydia added, “The role of the women [in the church] is strong; we back our husbands, we back our church, and I won’t say we’re the backbone but I will say that we may be one of the arms, because we do help.” She explained that this is typical of women in the Holiness churches, and certainly this would be reinforced by the churches being a product of the kind of frontier mentality that has marked the serpent-handling practice, especially where traditional communities are confronted by modern communities. This helps to create a strong bond between the women of each congregation, and between the women of different congregations. Lydia went on to say, “The women are strong because we have to be. We’re our own friend

because you know outside, the rest of the world, they don't want nothing to do with us so it makes our bond a little bit closer."

One aspect that tends to define Holiness women of all different traditions, particularly to those outside the denomination, but also to those within it, is the style of dress chosen by the women. Elaine Lawless, in her work with Pentecostal women, described the dress and appearance of the women as part of the perpetuation of "group identity" (*God's Peculiar People* 36) and this idea can certainly be ascribed to the women I interviewed, too. As Lawless states, this can sometimes lead to misunderstanding by those not part of the tradition:

From the outsider's point of view, the Pentecostal manner of dressing is the mark of the lower class. Pentecostals are associated with poor people everywhere who wear old or plain clothes out of necessity and who do not sport fashionable hairdos because of a lack of opportunity or sophistication. (36)

Lawless explains, though, that for those who adhere to the Pentecostal faith, "dress embodies an entire complex of notions about 'holiness' and displays what a Pentecostal man or woman represents to the rest of the world and to fellow Pentecostals" (36).

While all the women I interviewed seemed content with their role within the church, when it comes to the issue of modesty, and what might be considered appropriate dress, there were some differences of opinion. For the most part, it was agreed that most of the body should be covered and treated in a modest way, in accordance with the Scriptures that describe the way in which a woman should dress. However, there was some degree of variation with regard to what that means in actuality. From Lisa's perspective, "The inappropriate to me is wearing short sleeves with low cut shirts, skirts that come above your knee. I just totally think that's not modest in the house of God. I believe that when you go to church, as well as out of church, you should dress appropriately, modest." But she added, "I'm not much up on the long sleeve, you know, and those real, real long dresses." For her, there appears to be a balance between genuine modesty and unnecessary measures in order to appear modest. Lydia, for the most part, would agree, but believes that the standard for a congregation should be set by the elder woman in the church. She stated, "If they say, 'That split's too high when you bend and we can see something,' if that dress is a little bit low, it's the elder lady's job to teach the younger." In this way, the responsibility falls to one per-



son in the congregation which would discourage other women from giving their opinion. She also added that it is not necessarily that woman's responsibility to correct women in other congregations. She explained it this way: "Like if somebody from Marshall comes in and they trim their hair, well, that's their business. We don't do it in Kentucky." Her friend, Sharon, added, "That's right. They may not have been taught the way we have." And Lydia continued, "I'm not going to their church and I'm not going to fight and quarrel; they're my sisters and I love 'em...because this stuff is not pertaining to soul salvation," meaning that dress and customs pertaining to whether or not they trim their hair are not deal-breakers when it comes to salvation. Clearly, in this area, there is some degree of latitude. For Lydia, though, it is part of a tradition to pass on what she has been taught with regard to modesty. She said, "I'm holding up the standard that my elders, God rest their souls, left for me and that's what I'm passing down." For her, this is more than just a temporal issue, but one that is part of the tradition entrusted to her.

While all of the women seem aware of the tradition that is a part of the serpent-handling practice, they don't necessarily all see eye to eye on the issue of what constitutes modesty. Sally, the woman who is the fourth generation of the tradition in her family, recalled, "Growing up we were supposed to keep anything covered. I wore a dress until I was eight years old. And long hair; our hair had to be long. And no make-up." Today, however, she believes, "Anything below the knee is appropriate; I believe short sleeves is appropriate. I have gone sleeveless, but only on certain occasions when I know where I'm going, because some churches are more liberal than others." Unlike the women in Kentucky, though, Sally wears her hair in a much shorter style. She addressed the Biblical admonition that "a woman's hair is her glory" by saying, "I believe that the first thing you look at when you look at a woman is her hair, and you know if she keeps her hair prepared that she takes care of the rest of herself." For her, wearing long hair is "a punishment" because "hair is heavy, and very hot." She referred to the long skirt and long sleeves and the long hair as "the look," the "I'm holy" look. And she added, "If I have to look that way to fit in, then they have no discernment," meaning that others should be able to discern her holiness by other aspects than merely her attire. She also states that her mother always insisted that they wear their best to church, and that some of the women she sees at Holiness churches seem to want to advertise the fact that they are poor, or at least appear that way, and wished that some of them would



put a little more effort and thought into what they wear. She said, “Nowadays we have thrift stores, we have yard sales, so you know, I would say put a little quality in what you’re going to wear,” but she added, “even today if our Momma thinks that our dress is too short, she’ll let us know.” So the family and church tradition are still important to her, even as the quality of the way the women present themselves also plays a part. For Sally, the important thing is a person’s relationship with the Lord, not necessarily the length of her hair or skirt which she believes can, in some cases, get in the way of the really important issues.

Many of the women I interviewed have families, including children, and I wondered how their choice of this expression of faith fits in with their role as wife and mother. Lisa became involved with the Holiness church when she married her husband, the son of a prominent Holiness church leader in Georgia. She believes that her children will follow in the tradition because “we have a twenty year old and he was raised in this and he wouldn’t take anything for it. He absolutely can’t be satisfied unless he’s in a Jesus’ name church.” She sees it as something for the “younger generation to take on,” and believes that they will continue in the tradition. She would also love to see her father-in-law’s church back open, since it has been closed since his death. Family and faith are interlinked for Lisa when it comes to the future of their congregation and the traditions practiced there.

Sally is married to a man who does not share her enthusiasm for serpent-handling. He is Baptist and does not accompany her to the services where serpents are handled, although neither does he resent her going, even if he might be concerned for her safety. She is one of the few that I have spoken to whose husband attends a different denomination, but she admits, “I don’t tell him I went to snake-handling churches until I come back....and I don’t worry about asking him if he wants to go with me.” When asked if he worries about her, she said, “That’s why I don’t tell him until I get back.” When asked if she can see her daughter carrying on the tradition she said, “Well, the way I look at that Scripture, ‘Ye shall take up serpents,’ I believe not only is He talking naturally, in the natural, but I believe He was talking in the spiritual aspect that you’re fighting with the devil, so I would like to see my daughter take it from a spiritual aspect.”

Both Sharon and Lydia, from the Kentucky congregation, believe that their children will one day continue the tradition, although at present it seems that they believe this as much by faith as by evidence. Lydia acknowledged that, while her daughter is actively in-





volved in the church and emulates her mother's style of dress, hair, etc., her son has, at present, chosen a different path. But she wanted not so much to see him follow in his father's footsteps (as pastor) but to see him "know the truth," whatever that means for his life. Certainly her son is still involved in the music at the church and still attends the homecomings. Sharon, at the time of this interview, predicted that her son would definitely follow in the church's traditions and states that the pastor "is his hero. He wants to dress like the pastor, he talks like the pastor...I've heard him up in his room preaching like the pastor." She also believed, by faith, that her daughters would be involved. A few months after this interview was conducted, I learned that Sharon and her family were no longer attending this church.

For Lydia, her role as a woman, pastor's wife, and mother is one that causes her a great deal of contentment. She told me, "I love living this way. Nobody makes me live this way. But I absolutely love it, and it's such an easy way to live. I love it; I love my life, I love not having to work." When I asked her to elaborate, she said, "It's easy because I can be a housewife, I can be a mother, I can have friends that are closer than family." Certainly at the homecomings and other services I've been privileged to attend, the closeness and family-like atmosphere, especially between the women, has been notable, almost tangible. The children seem to be taken care of by all of the women, to the point that it is often hard to determine which child belongs to which family. Lydia continued, "anything you need, I mean if you need clothes, you need groceries, you need help on a bill, you just need somebody to talk to, you've got a number of people that will help you." She added, importantly, "They won't run off and tell the people down the road, they won't run you down, they won't talk about you..." And she added, "My husband is good to me. If he's not, he's still gonna answer to somebody. We're supposed to love each other and be good to each other. And my children have not been raised with quarreling and fighting and going on; they see a loving, kind environment." For Lydia, she has the option of being a stay-at-home mother, even if this means financial challenges. She mentioned that times are not always easy, and sometimes people need help, but she is able to live the life she chooses, with the family she loves, and express her faith in a way that is expressive, meaningful, and satisfying to her.

Ultimately, these women represent a small but, I would argue, fairly representative number of women in contemporary, twenty-first

century serpent-handling congregations in Appalachia. They appear to have as much autonomy within the church as many women in Southern Protestant congregations, and possibly more than some since they can speak, lead the singing, and minister in prayer during the services as well as, of course, taking up serpents if they feel so led. Certainly they don't seem to feel hindered or restricted during services, other than by the responsibility of tending to the children. As far as modesty and dress are concerned, there seems to be some latitude with regard to what is acceptable from congregation to congregation. Certainly there seem to be fewer restrictions on these women than one might anticipate at just a cursory glance. And, for the most part, they seem to find it easy to reconcile their faith with their roles within the family. Of course there are challenges. Children sometimes go astray, people lose jobs, and the area where many of them live is one of the most economically depressed in the United States. Still, the way of life they have chosen, and the way these women have chosen to express their faith, grants them a degree of freedom, autonomy, and self-expression that some with more material resources might find enviable. Ultimately, with all its challenges, Lydia can say with satisfaction, "It's an easy life;" it's also a way of life that she would like to see her children take up, and pass on to subsequent generations.

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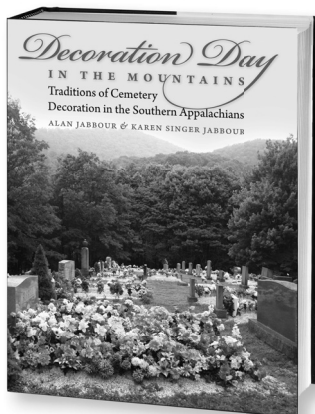
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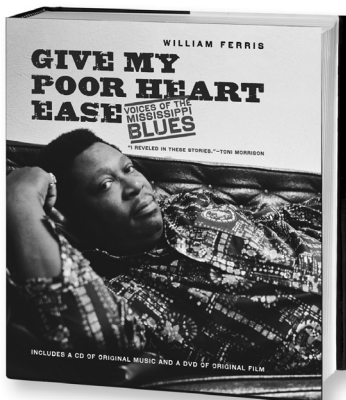
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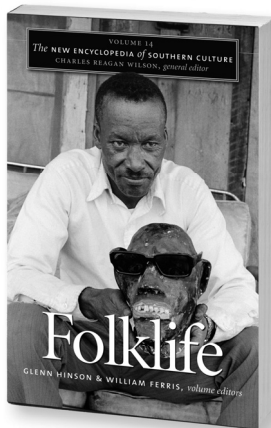
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