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West Virginia Traditional Life

Goldenseal

Winter 2024 $5.95

50th Anniversary

Fasnacht in Helvetia



Goldenseal Winter 2024

Fasnacht • Inspiring Covers • Glen Cain • West Virginia Books • Pruneytown • Lenox Oyster Stew Dinner

Volume 50, Number 4

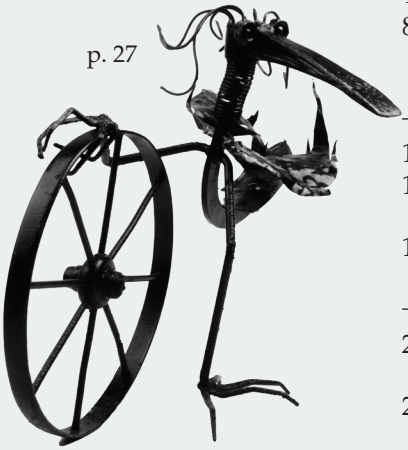


A great example of the time and effort put into some of the masks found at Fasnacht, 2024. Photo by Jennie Williams, West Virginia Folklife.

Volume 50, Number 4

Goldenseal

Winter 2024



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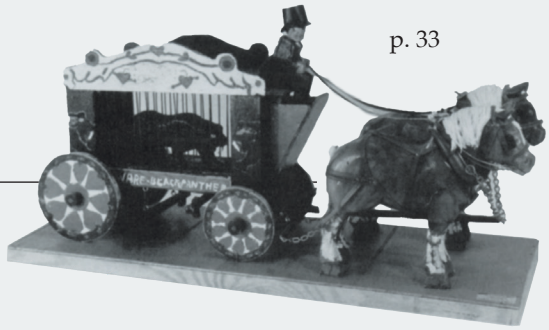

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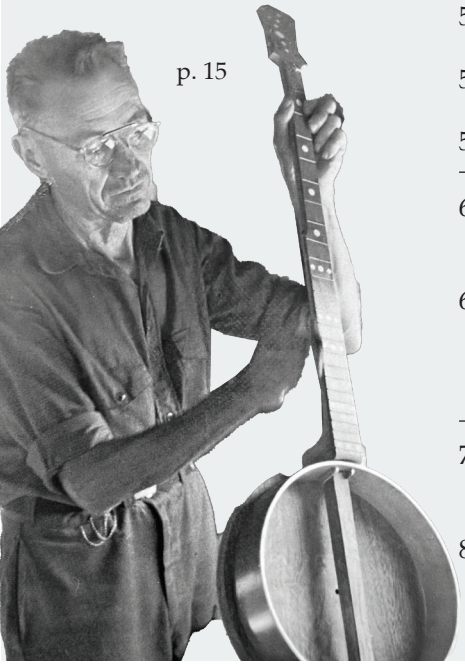

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On the cover: Fasnacht: Carmel Clavin wears a mask built by sculptor Jamie Lester of Morgantown, West Virginia, 2015. Photo by Pat Jarrett.

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From the Editor

As we approach the close of our fiftieth year, I find myself reflecting on just how much of a treasure this magazine is, and how lucky I am to be involved with helping to share the stories of our people, preserving them for years to come. When the magazine was founded in 1974 it was made with the intention of preserving the stories of our older generations, which is still happening to this day. I feel honored to be able to talk with so many of the wonderful folks that our state has to offer. You hear a lot of people today bring up how current younger generations don't appreciate a traditional way of life, but I see glimpses in the stories being shared among our pages that speak differently.

We've got talented artists, students, and everyday people who share their skills, recipes, and stories of loved ones with us as readers to enjoy. In this way, their memories and traditions are carried forward into future generations, and preserved for folks to enjoy and learn from. We get many inquiries from younger folks who are looking for more information on loved ones and historical events that have been featured in our magazine. Much like a quilt coming together from different scraps of fabric, GOLDENSEAL helps bring all of these story scraps together to make a patchwork quilt that tells the story of West Virginia.

In our final anniversary issue, we feature our last three then-and-now stories. A reprint from the Fall of 1989 about woodworker and banjo maker Jenes Cottrell followed by a recent interview with Chris Dean, who makes banjos in the Cottrell style; a reprint from the Summer of 1992 about woodcarver Marshall Fleming followed by a student article written by Daniel Linton, Marshall's great-grandson; and a reprint from Spring of 1993 regarding Fasnacht and Swiss traditions from Helvetia (Randolph County) followed up by a current look at these traditions in Helvetia by Becky Hill.

The Goldenseal Podcast is available for listening on both YouTube and Spotify, simply by searching "Goldenseal Podcast." We have been featuring clips from current interviews, as well as music, stories, and past interview clips on each episode. The podcast was created as a way to help celebrate our 50th year, with the commitment of four episodes—one for each issue of the magazine we released this year. Let us know if this is something folks would like to see continue in the future and what you would like to hear more of!

Letters to the Editor

I enjoyed the beekeeping articles in the fall issue of Goldenseal. I thought I would pass on some beekeeping folklore I have heard from several old-timers. When a beekeeper dies, it is said that it is important to go to each of the hives and "whisper" that the keeper has passed away. One man said that if that isn't done, the swarm will show up at the grave site during the burial. An old woman said she was able to capture swarms by banging on pots and pans to induce them to enter the hive. In Pendleton County, beekeepers who tended their bees without any protective clothing were said to "conjure the bees," inferring they had some magical power over the bees. When engaging the natural world, for many, science doesn't provide all the answers.

Gerald Milnes
Elkins, WV

Dear Folks at GOLDENSEAL,
Hello! Sending a news clipping from the August 1, 2024 Farm and Dairy Newspaper's "Around the Table" section. A recipe from First Lady Justice. Thought you may want to see it.
Thank you for all the great work you all do. I bought a book from the Chesapeake and Ohio Historical Society from Clifton Forge Virginia, Smokeless Coal Fields of West Virginia: A Brief History. A great book, small, and very good pictures. Something you would enjoy, I'm sure.

Thank you,
Jeff McQuistion and cat, Mr. Hemmingway
Chardon, OH

Folks may or may not be familiar with the recipe mentioned, so we have included it below for your baking enjoyment! –ed.

First Lady Cathy Justice's Blue Ribbon Cornbread
This recipe won a blue ribbon at the West Virginia State Fair.
1 cup yellow cornmeal
1 cup all-purpose flour
½ cup granulated sugar
½ tsp. baking soda
1 tsp. baking powder
1/16 tsp. Salt
1 cup buttermilk
1 egg, slightly beaten
¼ cup canola oil

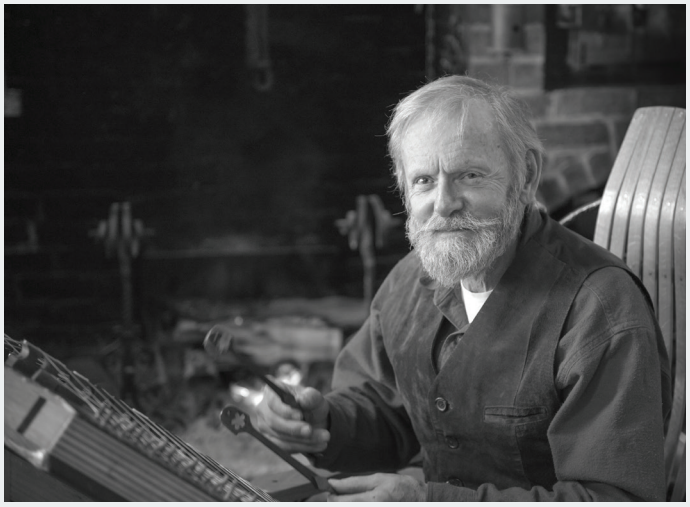
Preheat oven to 425 degrees Fahrenheit. Oil an 8x8-inch baking pan. Mix all dry ingredients. Add liquids. Stir just to mix. Bake 30 minutes until golden brown.

Lastly, GOLDENSEAL would like to apologize for a mistake in our Fall 2024 issue. Some of you may have noticed that there was a missing page in our reprint of, "Home to Swandale" by Cody A. Burdette. There should have been an additional page between pages 35 and 36. This was overlooked in our proofing process, and for that, we apologize. If anybody would like a copy of the missing page, please contact us by phone (304-558-0220) or email (ch-goldenseal@wv.gov) for a full copy of the article.

Laiken J. Blankenship

GOLDENSEAL Good-Byes

Garland "Jay" Hurley
(1941-2023)
by Carl Feather



Garland Jay Hurley

Beloved Shepherdstown native, versatile craftsman, musician, and shopkeeper Jay Hurley died the Saturday after Thanksgiving, November 25, 2023, in the bedroom in which he was born 82 years earlier.

A son of M.G. and Ruth Hurley, Jay was born April 15, 1941. He left Shepherdstown as a young man to pursue careers in broadcasting, electronics, and whatever else caught his fancy. The resulting peregrinations took Jay from trade school in Charleston to a radio engineer's position in Washington, D.C.; from the Alaskan Aleutian Chain to Turkey as he worked on radar installations. In his leisure time, Jay visited Europe and North African countries. His travels fostered a reverence for the ways and skills of the past—such as handling a team of oxen. Back in the United States, Jay trained a team, and, on July 4, 1976, they pulled his pilgrim's cart down Constitution Avenue in the nation's Bicentennial Parade.

His family's general store was already a Shepherdstown fixture when Jay reinvented it as "O'Hurley's General Store" (Goldenseal, "Really Fine People," Fall 2015) in 1979. Jay returned to Shepherdstown when his father became terminally ill in the mid-1970s and needed help running the store. After his father passed, Jay invested $10,000 of his $20,000 life savings revamping the store's interior to give it an authentic late-1800s appearance. A multi-talented craftsman, Jay used his meager funds to pay college students who helped with the transformation.

The other half of his life savings went for merchandise, about which Jay was as particular as the store's appearance. Plastic goods were taboo; even the packaging had to be cardboard, metal, or wood. "I will go the extra measure to get the detail I want," Jay told me back in 2014. That extra measure required dealing with up to 150 creators and distributors whose authentic merchandise fill the shelves of O'Hurleys, shelving that Jay himself built when he aligned the store with his personal vision of vintage retailing.

Jay's father was an accomplished carpenter and woodworker; Jay modestly claimed to have inherited nothing of those skills, but his workmanship on the store and workshop at the rear of the building indicated otherwise. Jay also learned blacksmithing, welding, and metalworking skills that he put to good use for the community. His shop was the birthing room for the clock tower restoration and weathervane at Shepherd University's McMurran Hall. The "Welcome to Shepherdstown" sign that stands next to the store was designed and forged in Jay's shop with help from volunteers.

The largest work to emerge from this shop was the half-scale replica of the James Rumsey Steamboat, demonstrated on the Potomac River in 1787. Jay's operating model was launched on the Potomac in 1987 and eventually found a permanent home in a museum near the former Entler Hotel, the preservation of which was one of several

such projects to benefit from Jay's skills and volunteerism.

O'Hurley's Great Room, a 28-by-32-foot room of post-and-beam construction, stands at the back of the store as Jay's personal monument to his many passions. It was designed and built by Jay using materials rescued from condemned 19th-century buildings and massive oak trees toppled by a storm. Providing additional merchandising space for O'Hurley's, the Great Room had a secondary purpose that slaked Jay's appetite for gathering with other musically talented friends to play traditional music.

The tradition began behind O'Hurley's counter more than four decades ago and grew into a Thursday evening jam that typically draws more than a dozen string musicians. Arranged in a circle under the soaring ceiling, the musicians perform for the delight of an audience seated around the ensemble and conforming to decorum established by Jay—no standing in the doorway, no talking during the performance. As with everything he tackled, the Great Room and its musical tradition were assembled with great attention to detail.

Jay's wish was for this gathering to continue and for his faithful employees to become the owners of O'Hurley's following his passing. Those wishes have been fulfilled, although the store, precariously sited on a sharp curve, had to close for several months of renovation earlier this year. According to the Shepherdstown Chronicle of July 19, 2024, a motorist lost control of his vehicle and caused extensive damage to the front of the building and its merchandise on June 28. The store, retaining Jay's attention to detail, has since re-opened.

Store hours and updates are available on the O'Hurley General Store's Facebook page. The jam sessions begin at 7:30 p.m. on Thursdays. A memorial service was held April 6, 2024, in the Great Room and courtyard. Approximately 200 paid their respects to Jay Hurley.

Billy Ed Wheeler
(1932-2024)

Billy Edd Wheeler was a native of Boone County, and a talented singer, songwriter, playwright, artist, humorist, and poet, widely recognized for writing songs like *Coal Tattoo, Jackson*, *Coward of the County*, and *Ode to the Little Brown Shack Out Back*. GOLDENSEAL had the honor of gracing our cover with his likeness in the Summer of 2016. He attended Warren Wilson College at both a high school and collegiate level, graduating with an associate degree in 1953 before going on to graduate from Berea College in 1955. After time in the Navy, he went on to attend Yale School of Drama where he studied playwriting. Wheeler wrote a total of 16 plays, his most popular probably being that of *Hatfields & McCoys* which is performed annually by Theater West Virginia.

Wheeler's poetry was first published in 1969 in his book, *Song of a Woods Colt*. That would be followed by another book of poetry in 1977, *Travis and Other Poems of the Swannanoa Valley*. He also authored several folk humor books *Outhouse Humor*, in 1988 and a series *Laughter in Appalachia* with Loyal Jones, of Berea College.



Billy Ed Wheeler

He was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2000 and the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame in 2007. In March 2010, Governor Joe Manchin named him a Distinguished West Virginian.

Wheeler was a proud West Virginian and frequently performed in the state, especially

during the 60s and 70s at festivals like the Mountain State Art & Craft Fair—but most recently on Mountain Stage where he performed several times. As noted in our 2016 GOLDENSEAL article, Wheeler was frequently quoted saying, "I may have left West Virginia, but West Virginia never left me!" Several of his songs were inspired by his childhood in Boone County. The songs he wrote had a way of evoking memory, as Michael Meador stated in his article, "His songs have an extraordinary way of doing that—whether they inspire us, bring tears to our eyes, or make us laugh." There is a common thread of Appalachia running through many of his songs that we as listeners often relate to. He will surely be missed, but through his songs and writings, he won't soon be forgotten.

For more on the life of Billy Edd Wheeler, see "You Write Songs Like People Breathe: Billy Edd Wheeler, Renaissance Man" by Michal M. Meador in our Summer 2016 issue. -ed.

Sherman "Nemo" Nearman

(1926-2024)

by Eric Douglas



Sherman "Nemo" Nearman

In Memoriam: Basketball plays prominent role in Charleston native's nearly 100 years

Sherman "Nemo" Nearman earned his nickname while serving on a U.S. Navy destroyer during World War II. It stuck with him the rest of his life. More importantly, so did his passion for basketball, his Jewish faith and his love of family.

Nemo's grandfather Julius emigrated to Charleston, West Virginia in the 1880s from eastern Europe. He started out as a backpacker, selling goods to the logging and coal camps. Eventually Julius started a small grocery store and saloon in town. He bought a house on Laidley Street near St. Francis Hospital and helped found the B'nai Jacob synagogue while raising his family.

Nemo Nearman remained a member at B'nai Jacob his entire life and served as the Men's Club President, Athletic Director, and President of the Chevra Kadisha.

Nemo was born in Charleston in 1926. At 17 he volunteered to join the Navy after graduation from Charleston High — two brothers and two cousins were already serving.

In an oral history interview, Nemo recalled delivering the ship's mail and encountering a Navy sonarman who had a lisp and couldn't pronounce Nearman. He pronounced it Nemo and the name stuck.

Nemo was on a destroyer, heading for a potential invasion of Japan, when they got word that President Harry Truman ordered two atomic bombs to be dropped. His ship went to China and then he was discharged without ever seeing combat.

After returning home, Nemo went to the University of North Carolina. He nearly went to West Virginia University as a walk-on for the basketball team, but he got a call from UNC Coach Tom Scott inviting him to head south for a tryout where he was offered a scholarship. He played there from 1946 to 1950 before graduating. He was a team captain in his final season.

While he was at UNC, Nemo ran into someone who served aboard his ship and his nickname spread again and into newspaper coverage. It stuck with him after that.

After graduation, Nemo didn't go to the newly created NBA, but instead played in the National Industrial Basketball League, representing Goodyear Tire and Rubber and later Santa Maria, California. He worked as a teacher at the time and was able to re-

turn to Charleston on his summer breaks.

Through his basketball connections, he was invited to travel to Chile and conduct training camps for coaches and referees. He was also an adviser to the Chilean Olympic basketball team. He stayed there two years before returning home again.

Nemo played basketball until he was 90, leading teams to win four gold medals in the National Senior Games, and scoring the first basket at the UNC Basketball 100th Anniversary Alumni Game at age 83. He served as president of the West Virginia Senior Sports Classic according to his obituary.

Nemo worked in various roles in ad sales for radio and television as well as selling furniture. He also owned a mail sorting business and as the general manager of the Charleston Gunners, a semi-pro basketball team.

Later in his career, Nemo served the City of Charleston as the director of the one-man Office of Consumer Protection, and director of Rebuilding Together, a nonprofit tasked with helping homeowners make emergency repairs to their homes.

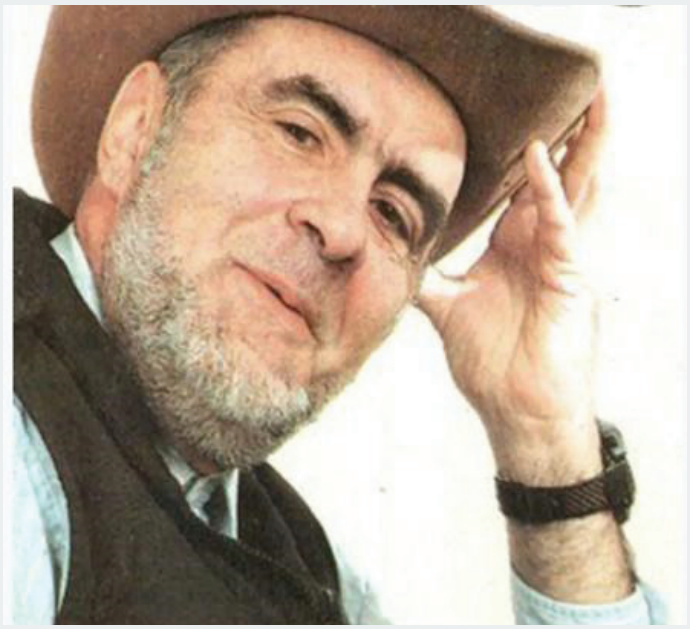
Nemo was also a founding member of the Charleston Distance Run, serving as the director for two years and introducing the 5K and walking portions of the event.

Sherman Yale "Nemo" Nearman died on July 15, 2024 and was preceded in death by his wife of 56 years, Rita Harvit Nearman. For more about Nemo see our 2018 GOLDENSEAL article "Growing Up Jewish in Charleston."

Norman Julian
(1939 - 2024)

GOLDENSEAL has lost another longtime contributor and paragon of knowledge. Norman Julian was the feature of a 2014 GOLDENSEAL article *"The Monongahela Valley's Woodsman Philosopher."* From 1980 on, Norman contributed 24 articles to our publication. His most recent being in the Summer of 2023 "Star City." A lot of research went into this last piece as you can plainly tell from the article which includes a timeline of the city's history spanning from 1,900 B.C. with the first Native settlement of the area, through 2020 accounting for major historical events. Norman authored several books about West Virginia, including Cheat, Snake Hill, and Legends—a state bestseller on the history of WVU basketball from 1938 to 1998.

In his lifetime, he had many opportunities in writing including time as a reporter for five different newspapers, city editor, editorial writer, magazine editor, and a multiple-award winning columnist. For many years he wrote a regular feature column in the *Morgantown Dominion-Post* covering West Virginia historical and folk life topics. In 1999 Governor Cecil Underwood named him a "History Hero" of West Virginia as Norman put intensive and careful research into his books. As noted in his obituary, "Norm treasured people! He maintained some friendships for over 50 years! As a man truly of the soil, it can be said of his evaluation of friendship: "Friends are the flowers in the Garden of Life." Norm's lifetime garden was well-tended and the harvest bountiful." GOLDENSEAL was proud to be one of those friendships. - ed.



Norman Julian

Meet the Participants of the 2024-25 West Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship Program

Text by Jennie Williams, Photos courtesy of artists

Ten pairs are participating in the 2024-25 West Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship Program. The program celebrates and supports traditional artists in passing on cultural knowledge, stories, and techniques to their apprentices. This time-tested model of one-to-one study allows dedicated apprentices to learn from recognized experts in their traditional art forms and better understand their communities and history. Hosted biennially since 2016, the program has increased in size over four rounds. These 10 pairs from across the Mountain State are carrying on important traditions in old-time music, fiber arts, storytelling, and more.

Tim Bing (Cabell County) of the Vandalia Award-winning Bing Brothers will teach clawhammer banjo playing to his apprentice **Edwin McCoy** (Monroe County). Tim learned from Sherman Hammons of Pocahontas County, and he will impart regional old-time tunes and techniques that have been passed down over generations. Edwin has won contests at the Appalachian String Band Music Festival, the Hammons Family Fiddle and Banjo Contests, and the West Virginia State Folk Festival in Glenville.

Margaret Bruning and her apprentice **Nevada Tribble** (both of Randolph County) will practice weaving and fiber art traditions. As a "farm to fiber" maker, Margaret weaves with black and gray wool from the Romanov sheep on her off-grid homestead in Elkins. Her mother, Elena, taught Margaret how important it is not just to weave but to know where your wool comes from. Margaret is president of the Mountain Weavers Guild and practices fiber arts in the guild community. Nevada is an interdisciplinary artist who engages in a range of traditional craft processes, from papermaking to quilting to weaving.

Richard Eddy will teach his apprentice **Katie McCoy** (both of Monongalia County) how to repair fiddles. Katie previously took fiddle-playing lessons from Richard, and they identified a need to carry on instrument repair to support the West Virginia old-time community, particularly in the Morgantown area. Richard and Katie have already begun working together, and Katie's primary instrument is a fiddle he taught her to restore.

Bill Hairston (Kanawha County) will teach storytelling techniques to his apprentice **Aristotle Jones** (Monongalia County). Bill is a Vandalia Award recipient, a founding member of the West Virginia Storytelling Guild, president of the Kentucky Storytelling Association, longtime coordinator of the Vandalia Gathering Liars Contest, and a member of the National Association of Black Storytellers (NABS) and the National Storytelling Network. "Appalachian Soul Man" Aristotle Jones is a performing musician and 2023 NABS Black Appalachian Storytellers Fellow.

Ginny Hawker (Randolph County) will teach traditional unaccompanied Primitive Baptist hymn singing to her apprentice **Mary Linscheid** (Monongalia County). The 2024 Vandalia Award recipient, Ginny has dedicated her life to singing and teaching this tradition in many workshops and festivals, including the West Virginia State Folk Festival, and at the Augusta Heritage Center. Mary is a singer and old-time fiddler who performs with her band The Shoats.

Dural Miller will teach urban farming to his apprentice **Linesha Frith** (both of Kanawha County). Dural is the founder of Keep Your Faith Corporation and manages Charleston's West Side Grown Project, which brings agriculture education to schools. While tending to community gardens and



Dural Miller (right) with his apprentice Linesha Frith at the Keep Your Faith Corporation farm on Charleston's West Side where they grow fresh produce for the community. Photo courtesy of Linesha Frith.

urban farming plots, Dural opened Miss Ruby's Corner Market to sell locally grown food on the city's West Side. Linesha currently helps Dural in their neighborhood gardens and wants to carry on the important traditional knowledge of growing her own food for their community.

Nancy Nelson will teach family recipes in traditional Appalachian candy making to her apprentice and nephew **Kenneth "KD" Jones** (both of Kanawha County). Candy making, from peanut butter Easter eggs to Thanksgiving pumpkin bread, has always been a way for Nancy and her mother to connect to their community and church congregation in Campbells Creek. A professional chef, KD Jones is the Executive Chef of the Governor's Mansion. He wants to learn his family's candy making recipes to carry on the tradition in his work and for his community.

Taylor Runner and his apprentice **Annick Odom** (both of Monongalia County) will practice square dance calling. With over four decades of experience, Taylor is a regular square dance caller for festivals throughout West Virginia. Influenced by Worley Gardner, he learned his dance calls by attending and recording Worley's dances in Morgantown. Taylor co-founded



Judy Van Gundy (right) with her apprentice Andrea Brandon-Hennig. Andrea is holding materials to make white oak baskets. Photo courtesy of Judy Van Gundy.

the Morgantown Friends of Oldtime Music. Trained in both classical and old-time music traditions, Annick is a multi-instrumentalist and composer, storyteller, and square dance caller.

Ben Townsend (Hampshire County) will teach old-time fiddle styles and repertoire to his apprentice **Bodhi Gibbons-Guinn** (Allegany County, Md.). Ben is an accomplished musician and teacher; his mentors include banjo players Riley Baugus, Ron Mullennex, Jimmy Costa and fiddlers Dave Bing, Joe Herrmann, Earl White, Israel Welch, and Paul Roomsburg. Ben's creative fusing of traditional music with contemporary genres can be found on his label Questionable Records. Bodhi is a young fiddler who frequently plays with Ben at an old-time music jam in Frostburg, Maryland.

Judy Van Gundy will teach traditional Appalachian white oak basketry to her apprentice **Andrea Brandon-Hennig** (both of Randolph County). Their apprenticeship will involve harvesting, preparing, and weaving white oak strips, called splints, into functional and beautiful baskets. Judy is a member of the Mountain Weavers Guild, the Log Cabin Quilter's Guild, and the Randolph County Community Arts Center. Judy began teaching Andrea in 2023, and they have since enjoyed preparing materials and weaving together, sometimes spending up to eight straight hours focused on their craft.

The West Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship Program is made possible with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and is managed by the West Virginia Folklife Program, a project of the West Virginia Humanities Council. Follow @wvfolklife on social media, and visit wvfolklife.org to learn more about the West Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship Program.

JENNIE WILLIAMS is our state folklorist with the West Virginia Folklife Program. She writes a regular column for GOLDENSEAL. You can contact her at williams@wvhumanities.org or 304-346-8500.

The Cottrell Banjos

50th Anniversary
Originally published
FALL 1989





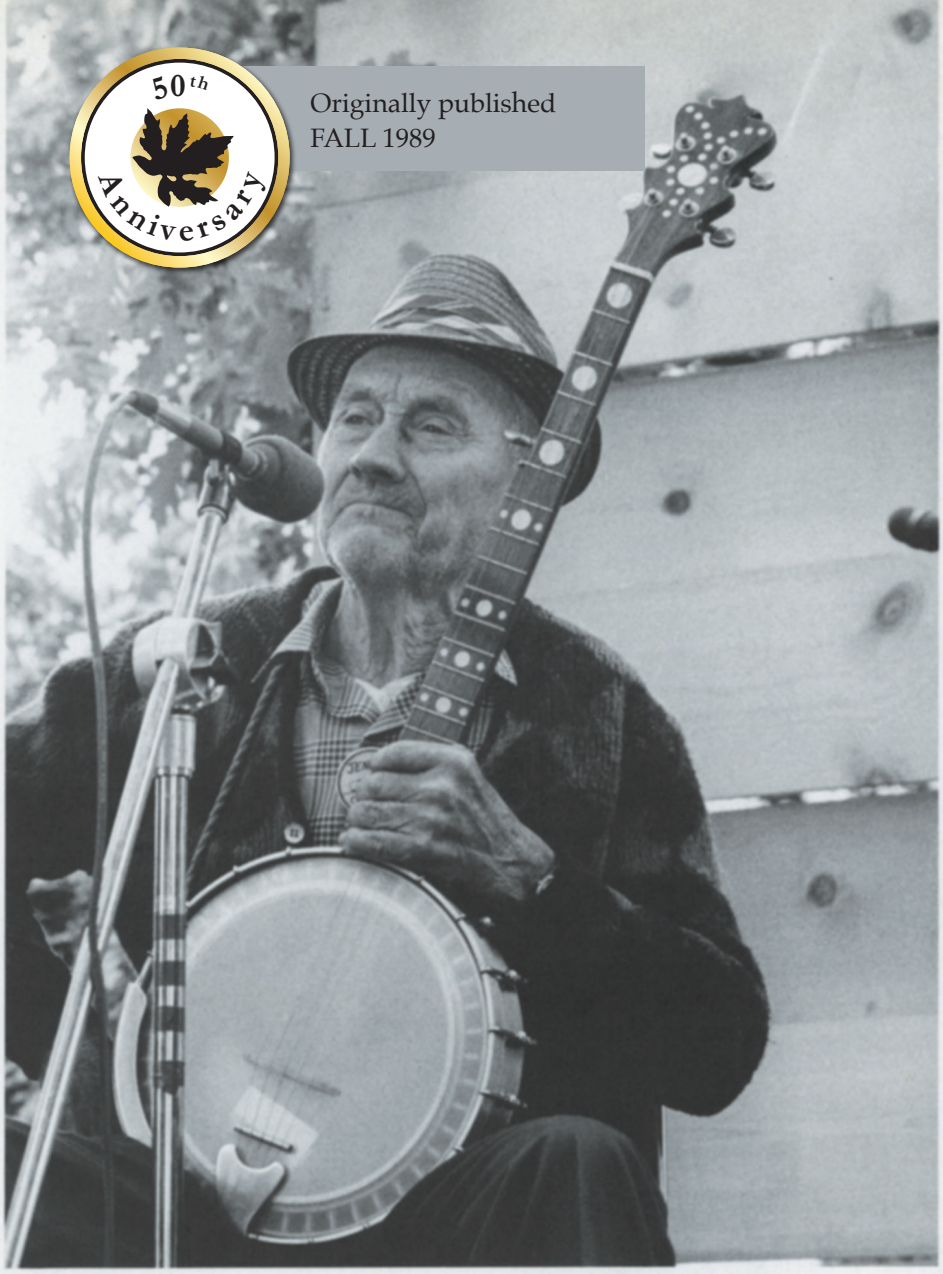


The banjo Sylvia O'Brien plays is one of many made by her late brother, Jenes Cottrell. The prized instruments represent an ironic blend of fine handicraft work and industrial technology, incorporating the aluminum torque converter ring from 1956 Buick transmissions as the banjo tone ring. This is the flanged ring under the head of the banjo, visible in the photographs here. The banjos, shown in the close-up against an antique swing crafted by Jenes as a young man, were made in the shop (above left) at the family homeplace. Banjo photos by Pam Lohan, Sylvia photo by Michael Keller.

50th Anniversary
Originally published
FALL 1989

Jenes Cottrell

By W. Murray Smith



Jenes Cottrell at the 1979 Vandalia Gathering. The instrument is one of his famous Buick banjos. Photo by Rick Lee.

Sylvia O'Brien's brother, Jenes (pronounced Gene-us) Cottrell was memorialized at the 1981 Vandalia Gathering in Charleston. The following account of Cottrell's life and ancestry is adapted from a speech on that occasion by the late Murray Smith of Clay. It has been edited for publication. — ed.

The ancestors of Jenes Cottrell, while not specifically known, seem likely to have come over the mountains with joy in their hearts at the ending of their enforced servitude to the rich tobacco planters along the eastern seaboard of Virginia.

These planters had made it possible for them to migrate from the Old Country in the first place. They came from jails, debtors' prisons, or the poor slums that existed in European cities. For payment of passage, these people agreed to work for their benefactor for a certain length of time in order to repay the passage money. They never made claim to have come from the rich or mighty. The planter aristocracy treated them as slaves and it took them from five to ten years to work out their indebtedness.

With the ending of this term of hard labor they left, and many started for the ''promised land'' which they had been told lay across the Blue Ridge Mountains. These pioneers had no mules, no ox team, and no cattle. They carried all their worldly possessions on their backs. A few of them were married, but for the most part they were men only. When they came to some land that suited them, they would ''tomahawk'' it, staking their claim by leaving marks with an ax or tomahawk on surrounding trees. This practice went on for many years.

Thomas Cottrell, the great-great-grandfather of Jenes, was among the first of these groups that came to this area. He came with others like himself, who were interested in the abundance of game, both for food and the value of the fur. Moving meant very little to them. In an hour's time, they could put up a lean-to or easily find a rock cliff or a cave.

With Thomas Cottrell came others with such names as McCune, Cogar, Turner, Parsons. Life was not easy for these people, and the settlers who followed them made it worse, as the game had to be shared. As a matter of self-preservation, Thomas Cottrell banded his followers together in a group known as the ''Hell-Fire Gang.'' They tomahawked thousands of acres of land in parts of what is now Braxton, Clay, Calhoun, Gilmer and Roane counties, claiming it as their own. They were successful for some

years in retaining this land, but with each passing year new settlers arrived.

The Hell-Fire Gang apparently accepted two Indian fighters and fur-hunters by the name of Adam O'Brien and Mike Fink. This Mike Fink is the legendary keelboat man, half man and half alligator as the story goes. He and Adam O'Brien were ambushed by Indians. Mike decided that he could hold them off for a while and he sent Adam O'Brien to find help. Today, a historical marker stands just north of the I-64 Big Otter interchange to mark the spot of the supposed ambush and Fink's nearby grave. Thomas Cottrell married a daughter of Adam O'Brien, as did Peter McCune, and both reared large families.

By the 1800's, increasing pressure was being put on the Hell-Fire Gang by the many new settlers coming to establish homes. The gang would at first go by and notify the newcomers to move on. If the settlers refused, the cabin would probably be destroyed, and if that wasn't enough in many instances they were murdered. But still they came, and with them came the strong arm of the law, all the way from Richmond.

One of these new settlers was a man by the name of Jonathan Nicholas. He was very obstinate, to the point that he was murdered. Charged with this murder was Daniel McCune, Joseph Parsons, Alexander Turner and young Jackson Cottrell, a lad of 17. The nearest court was at Lewisburg, Greenbrier County, and they were taken there for trial. They were convicted of this murder and sentenced to a term of 17 years in the Richmond penitentiary. One of the gang died in prison at Lewisburg. The others were taken on to Richmond, with the single exception of Jackson Cottrell, who was pardoned after serving five years. The others all died in the Richmond prison. Jackson Cottrell returned to the West Fork in Calhoun County where he spent the rest of his life. Jackson was the grandfather of Jenes Cottrell.

Jenes Cottrell himself was a quiet man with simple wants and a simple life. Jenes was very proud of his heritage and most proud to claim that he was part Indian. I have spent many hours visiting with Jenes on his memorable front porch, talking about his life and ancestors.

He always got a chuckle when we got around to discussing what an early West Virginia historian had said. For you, as he always did for me, I will quote: "Down on the West Fork of the Little Kanawha River, near the confluence of the counties of Clay, Calhoun, Roane, and Braxton, there lived a community of people composed mainly of the Cottrells, McCunes, Cogars, and Murphys, who were known for their native shrewdness and their repeated violations of the law."

Jenes liked the story of the sheriff who had a capias* for a man named Murphy and came to the West Fork to make the arrest. When the sheriff tried to make the arrest, Murphy ran around the dining room table and kept it between himself and the sheriff, keeping the sheriff from placing his hand on his person. Without touching him, there was, of course, no arrest. The table had plenty of food on it and finally the sheriff, being quite hungry, suggested that they sit down to eat. This they did, after which Murphy made his escape.

So far as I have been able to find out, very few of the Cottrell family lived by farming alone. They were tradesmen of one kind or another. Many of them worked with wood, as did both Jenes and his father. Simple as it was, they made many things with their spring-pole lathe. When I first met Jenes, as a very young man, he was traveling through the country with a pack of wood splints on his back, stopping at homes and putting new bottoms in people's chairs. Many of these chairs either he or his father had originally made. Then I began seeing him at cattle sales where he would be selling cattle canes to the farmers. He was always looking for something new to make, and so it was that he eventual-

* A "capias" is a legal document ordering the arrest of the person named.

Banker Murray Smith at work. The late Mr. Smith, our author, took an interest in local lore throughout his long career in Clay County. Photographer unknown, 1952; courtesy Charleston Newspapers.



ly made banjos from the transmission of a 1956 Buick automobile.

Norman Fagan, later West Virginia's Commissioner of Culture and History, discovered Jenes and brought him to the Grandview amphitheater near Beckley for a performance. I was ordered by Norman to fetch him there, and he was a great success.

This was the beginning of my very close association with Jenes and also the beginning of our treks all over the country to carry him to meet his public. If you will pardon me, I would like to say that he soon became a ''prima donna'' and he loved it. While Jenes lived 20 miles up in the country on Deadfall Run, with no telephone service, he would without any hesitancy give you his telephone number. It was really the number of the Clay County Bank and we at the bank were expected to deliver all his messages promptly. The delivering of these messages was a delight to both my wife and me. Jenes Cottrell was our friend.

I think often that Jenes and I had an affinity for like things and like places. One of the places that he always held uppermost in his mind and liked to talk about was Berea, Kentucky, and what the college there did for the underprivileged Appalachian mountain youth. He would never admit, however, that their craftwork was any better quality than his; only that they polished it more. Jenes made many visits to Berea College to their festivals, and always came home bubbling with enthusiasm. I, too, go there as often as I can. On my last visit to Berea I experienced a big surprise. Now, when you walk into their briefing room, before making the formal tour, you are favored with some of the most wonderful slides of Jenes, his home, and his shop.

Once, when Jenes came home from a trip to the Cumberland Gap area, he had some tall stories to tell. He had learned of the ''long hunters'' and he liked to think in his own mind that they were as he was, masters of the mountains. Like his ancestors of the Hell-Fire Gang, they too had traveled the mountains, having to be resourceful to keep alive.

Like Jenes, some were craftsmen. One, along with his hunting and trapping, had taken up the blacksmithing trade. He boasted that he feared no beast, he could shoe them all. One day a neighbor brought him a very vicious mule. The mule made contact with the blacksmith and he landed some 20 feet away in a brier patch. He was carried to his cabin and placed on a bed. He died three weeks later, insisting all along that he had had typhoid fever. Jenes was a man of such temperament, fearing nothing — with the exception that he believed in ''haints'' and sometimes broke out in a cold sweat when they were mentioned.

Jenes had some little aversion to buying food, as he had grown up in a self-sufficient home. Many years ago, when the first sales tax was enacted, it was called by many the ''Kump tax,'' after Governor H. Guy Kump. This was just too much for Jenes and he usually found a way to beat it. The following is as he told it to me: ''I go down to Ivydale on Saturday afternoons. If I am hungry, I go to Guy Boggs's store and buy just a nickel's worth of cheese. Then I go across the road to J. C. Cruickshank's store and buy me a nickel's worth of crackers. By gosh, I don't have to pay that Kump tax!''

Jenes drew people as flies swarm to sugar. They ranged from peons to the great and the near great. He loved them all and they loved him. I recall that once I had a call from the governor's office to inquire if I might be free that afternoon to drive the art director of a large university, in my pickup truck, up to Deadfall Run to visit with a man that he had heard a great deal about, Jenes Cottrell. I did have the time, of course, and I went. That scholar was still sitting on the front porch marveling at the beauty and grandeur of Pilot Mountain at 7:00 p.m., the very moment that he was supposed to have been speaking to a group of ladies at Sunrise Museum in Charleston.

In 1964 I got a call from *West Virginia Hillbilly* editor Jim Comstock and songwriter Billy Edd Wheeler asking that I bring forthwith to Charleston Jenes and his shop to be set up in a store window where Jim, who was a candidate for Congress, had his headquarters. I complied with their request, taking one of Jenes's neighbors with me to assist in setting up the operation. When we had finished, we drove over to one of Charleston's finer restaurants, the Sterling, to have dinner. Jenes looked the place over and said, ''No, sir, I won't eat in there. You know that I always eat over on Summers Street. They have the best hot dogs in town and they are only 25 cents for two.''

I didn't argue with Jenes and took him over to Summers Street. We stopped to have strawberry pie that night on our way home. When the bill came, I asked the waitress to give it to Jenes. He looked at it and asked me what it was for, and I explained to him that it was the bill for what we had eaten and that he should pay the amount on the paper to the young lady who was standing near the door. I then asked him if he had 50 cents in his pocket, and he said that he did. I said that he should leave it by his plate. ''What for?'' he asked, and I replied ''for this young lady who carried the food to us.'' He said, ''You don't pay twice,'' and I remarked to him that ''you do in this place.''

He shuffled the bill for a moment or two and then threw it to me, saying ''I am not going to pay this. I didn't call it up and the man that calls it up always pays for it!''

The drawknife was a precision tool in the hands of Jenes Cottrell. Photo by Gerald Ratliff, State Department of Commerce.





Jenes Cottrell at work in his shop. Photo provided by Christopher Dean.

Jenes Cottrell: Still Inspiring Makers

by Laiken Blankenship

Christopher Dean is a Berkeley Springs native and school teacher who builds banjos in the style of Clay County woodworker, musician, and banjo maker Jenes Cottrell. Though he currently resides out of state, West Virginia will always have his heart. Chris has dedicated a lot of time to learning as much as he can about Jenes. "I come from three generations of carpenters and so… 'making' has always been at the forefront of whatever I get into," Chris shares. "When I was doing reenacting it was making uniforms, or it's making furniture when I was a kid with my grandfather, or you know, cars or whatever it is—just figuring out how to do whatever the activity is on my own and just I think having that hands-on aspect but also for just the knowledge they [the skills] require. As a kid, I grew up hearing about Jenes as a cabinet maker and knew about him for his woodwork, but I didn't know he built ban-

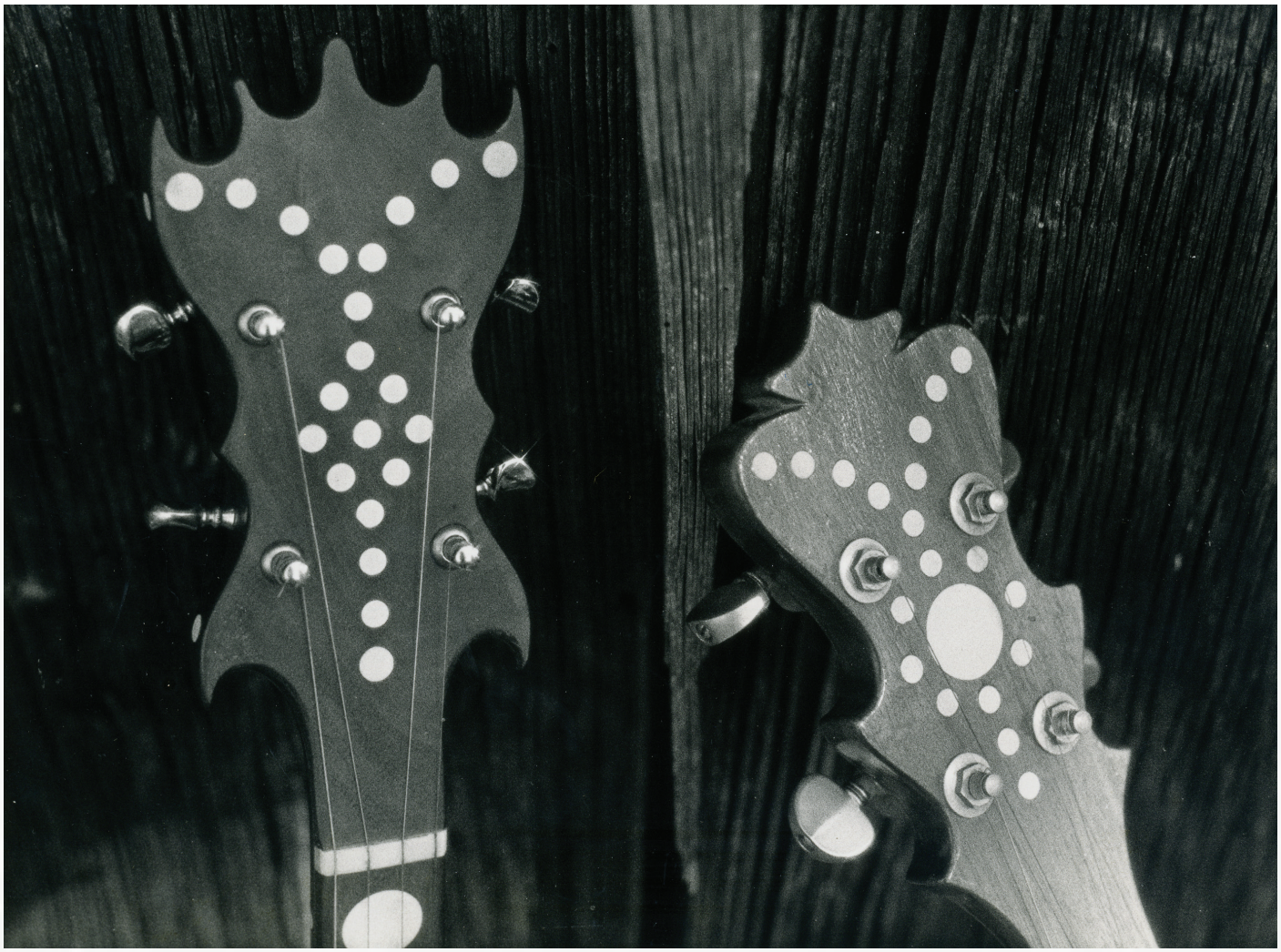


The Cottrell homeplace on Deadfall Run in Clay County. Photo provided by Christopher Dean.

jos until I started playing banjo and—just like everything else—I was like, 'well I'm getting into banjo playing, I need to learn how to make a banjo,'" Chris laughs. Early in his hunt to find out more about Jenes and old-time banjo, Chris had the opportunity to see one of Jenes' banjos in person, courtesy of Kim Johnson at the West Virginia State Folk Festival.

This stoked the fire that led him deeper into the art of making banjos. "It kind of became this obsession where I was like, I've got to document as many of these banjos as possible! Then figuring out all the variations that he had, all the different peghead designs, and all the different things he would deal with, like how many brackets he would put on some banjos and even with the dot inlays, the knitting needle dots." He continues, "It's interesting too, the dots and everything, the inlay that he would put on the banjo—and same with the tension hooks—that kind of depended on whether you wanted a fancy banjo or not, and it also depended on how much money you had, because if you didn't want to pay such and such a price for it, he'd be like, 'okay well, let's take off a couple brackets.' One banjo has 16 brackets on it, and some of them won't have as many of the inlay dots because of that. Because he worked with people and what they could afford."

Jenes was known for the unique materials he used to build his banjos. Of course, he is best known for using the torque converter out of a '56 Buick for the pot of the instrument. "I reached out to a bunch of wrecking yards throughout the United States and just about anyone that I'd heard had old cars, like pre-1980, to find the torque converter. I found a guy in California who had 20 or 30 of them at the time. So, I bought five or six torque converters from him. Then I just started going home to my parent's house and working with my dad and just gradually taking it step-by-step. I did a lot of research on the banjo hang-out forums on their builder forums, and I put up a post. There had been some banjo players on there who had heard of Jenes, so I figured I'd put something up just to



A close up of two headstocks made by Jenes Cottrell. Photo courtesy of the GOLDENSEAL archives.

see if I could get in contact with anyone that knew him, knew anything about his banjos, or had one that I could get measurements and everything from.

"That's when I heard from Dwayne Duffield. He had been apprenticed with Jenes in high school." Jerry Stover, who retired in 1997, was the art teacher at Clay County High School at that time and arranged the apprenticeship with Dwayne and Jenes [for more on the community work of Jerry and his students see *Hickory and Ladyslippers* from our special Clay County issue, spring 1977]. Through Dwayne, Chris was able to study some of Jenes' banjos firsthand and use that knowledge in building his own banjos. Though most well-known for his torque converter banjos, Jenes also made banjos out of pressure cookers, tree stumps, and even plywood. "I have two of his banjos that aren't torque converters and they aren't pressure cookers either," Chris says. "He glued a bunch of pieces of plywood on top of each other and then cut out the center and cut out the side and put that on the lathe and spun it. Then he would wrap the inside and outside of the wooden rim with an aluminum sheeting, and they sound super similar to his torque converters. One of them came from Crookshanks Store that was in Ivydale. He had one on the wall there and it has some really ornate details like a fancier pegheead and a lot more dots on it and a really pronounced heel carving. He would carve it so it almost came to a point, and he would call it a Hawksbill. Dwayne and I think he knew that that banjo wasn't go-



Jenes Cottrell on stage at the Vandalia Gathering, 1978. Photo courtesy of the GOLDENSEAL archives.

ing to be sold. It wasn't gonna be played, it was just gonna sit on the wall. So then the nicer it looks, the more people would inquire about it and more people would order banjos from him."

Talking with Chris, you can plainly tell how inspired he is by the work of Jenes, and his thought process in creating. "It's fascinating," he says, "like with the dynaflow transmission—it's the only torque converter that's like that, where that turbine can be used as a banjo rim. All the other ones are kind of like dish-shaped, almost concave. You can't use them to make anything from. As soon as I started dwindling down on my sources for those parts I started trying to find something similar. There has to be another car that's made the same way, right? Or at least with something similar even if it's smaller, and I haven't been able to find anything yet." He continues, "Jenes did make some out of pressure cookers. It's like everything before 1965 was a pressure cooker banjo, or he did some wood rim ones, too. His first banjo was out of a hollowed out stump. But, even thinking about the parts that he would use—like his armrest on the banjo and the same way with the tailpiece. They would be like the bottom of a cook pot. Ones that had that 90-degree edge, he would just cut out the shape of the bottom and the side of the cook pot. Then that would be the tailpiece or the armrest. It's just really cool. Everything that he could find that was scrap that he could turn into something, he would.

"The larger dots on his banjos, not a lot of people know that they are the crisper tray out of old refrigerators. He would take the bottom trays out and then use a big hole punch and punch out those big dots, then all the smaller ones were just sliced up knitting needles." He continues, "For the tension hoops on his banjos, he would use state road signs, the aluminum. The state road, when they changed out signs, they would just drop [the old signs] by his house. On top of all the banjo work and work for their property, the Charleston Charlie's—the minor league team—the players would come up to the house and he'd get on the lathe and make them baseball bats for games. He would customize the baseball bats to their needs, like the weight they wanted or the thickness. So, either banjos, replacement parts for equipment for people in the area, or his cabinet-making—it's just amazing. How wide of a variety, and that he could do all that. Not just from the early part of his life to the late part of his life, just that he could make the amount of things that he was able to accomplish. And all the wood came off his property. For the banjos, he would chop down the trees before the sap was flowing and he would leave the trees up on the mountain for a few years so they completely dry out and then bring the trees down off the mountain to build with. Dwayne gave me the last log that was brought down off the mountain for Jenes. He had had that log



A look at the inside of one of Jenes' torque converter banjos. Photo provided by Christopher Dean.

since about 1980 or 1981 and he gave that to me before I moved out west. I have two necks that I'm making out of it, and then I've taken all the extras and I'm just saving as much of the wood as possible to be able to reuse. Whether it's inlay, or whether it's heel caps, or anything so that each banjo has a little piece of the tree that Jenes felled."

"Dwayne told me anything he [Jenes] thought he could add to the banjo to make it louder, he would. Like the arch on the top of his personal banjo. It's like a quarter-inch wide by a quarter-inch tall arch, that's just part of the casting. He got together with somebody that had a metal lathe and they lathed it down to an eighth of an inch and then on the bottom where the turbines are he had the turbines lathed down a little bit from the inside and that change made his banjo like almost twice as loud as his other banjos. I think he just thought the same way I do, that the banjo shouldn't really be hidden because a lot of times you just hear the rhythm of the banjo but you don't know what they're playing. You can always make a brighter banjo sound less bright, you can't take a plunky sounding banjo, you can't really take that and make it cut through."

Jenes' home and workshop were non-electric—an intentional choice for him; at one point when power came through Clay County and was offered to his property, he refused. Chris was inspired by this hands-on, handmade process. "I haven't seen Jenes' lathe in person, but I wanted to kind of go through some of the same process that he was doing and I actually started working on a lathe that was inspired by Roy Underhill's on The Woodwright's Shop. I just wanted to get the process down by working as much with hand tools as possible on my first couple of banjos. My second and third banjos, and one I made for Pete Kosky, were entirely out of hand work, I didn't use any electrical tools on it."



Christopher Dean. Photo by Kena James.

"One thing I would love to know is where he got his design inspiration for his pegheads," Chris shares. "Everyone I've talked to never thought to ask him that. They're such strange and unique shapes. There's only one that I do know. His personal banjo, the final one he made himself that had an osage orange neck—that peghead is a copy of one that Washburn and a few other banjo companies used in the late 60s and early 70s, but all the other ones are just his own design. I'd love to know, where did those ideas come from? Was there a butterfly that inspired him? Because some of the pegheads kind of looked like they could be inspired by a butterfly, but I don't know."

Chris has made 13 banjos so far, several of those modeled after Jenes' builds. He has made two for the West Virginia State Folk

Festival that were raffled off to raise funds for the festival. "At one point I had aspirations to kind of banjo build, to get into making full time and then after having a kid, I was like, you know there's not time for all the things that I want to do. So, I've kind of taken a break, especially after moving out here. I've only built three banjos since I've moved out west and that's been you know, eight years ago. As my daughter's growing up, I'm just really being intentional about the time that I take away from her to do these hobbies so that I'm not taking away time with my daughter's younger years. As she gets older, as she's going out and doing things on her own, that gives me time to invest more time into it. So now it's like the collecting of materials phase," he laughs, "but she does want to build a banjo with me, so that is something we will do together at some point."

Through conversations with West Virginia musicians and knowledge keepers like John Morris, Kim Johnson, Jimmy Costa, Dwayne Duffield, Jerry Stover, and others Chris has been able to discover more and more about the life of Jenes, and his banjo making. "I was just trying to learn as much about his build process as possible. I think, you know, the coolest thing for me in making these hasn't even been building the banjos…It's been the people that I've gotten to talk to along the way and the stories I've gotten. I just think it's the passing down of tradition and community. There's so much generational knowledge from folks of older generations that's being lost, not just in culture in West Virginia, but worldwide, you know, and I think these stories and I think the ability to learn this information is a great way to pass that knowledge down. This is knowledge that gets handed from person to person and it's all practical applicable stuff that directly impacts your life, and who knows what happens when that information is completely lost?

"I've already said it once but that has been the most amazing part of this, just the conversations that I've been able to have with people and the friendships that it's brought about. I think that's, you know, with anything in the old-time culture like our traditional culture in the state that's what it's about—it's about the community, it's about the people. That's what it is about. The gifts you're giving each other whether it's through knowledge or actual gifts–and the friendships, I mean that's a gift too. That's something I haven't experienced much outside of the state and I'm not saying it's necessarily unique to the state of West Virginia, but it's just, it's a bit deeper at home than it is in other places. I think that's another reason I continue researching Jenes, it's a way for me to feel connected to home."



Two of the torque converter banjos that Chris Dean has completed in the style of Jenes Cottrell. Photo by Christopher Dean.

LAIKEN BLANKENSHIP is the editor of GOLDENSEAL.

How The Roses Have Danced

by Lisa Shrewsberry

"Life is the dancer, and you are the dance"
— Eckhart Tolle.

Jerry Rose has danced with wife, Sherry Rose, for over 61 years. Choreographed movement was their primary shared interest well before he asked Sherry in words to become his partner in life. It was their touchstone, their matrix, their language. "What brought us together was dance," said Rose.

In the studio where he still instructs, he travels through time and memory to when he and Sherry were both students at Woodrow Wilson High School in Beckley, and at Ms. Beard's dance school, established in the early 1940s—the only extracurricular option for learning dance at the time in the area.

"My mother worked at a dry-cleaning plant and my father was a coal miner, but it was through him, if talent is transferable, that I got what I have," Rose reflected. Though a working man, his father was a fanatic for musicals, taking him to see *Oklahoma* and *Meet Me in St. Louis,* among many others. "Gene Nelson was my favorite childhood dancer," Rose said. Later, dancing professionally with the company known as Dance Caravan, he would have the good fortune to meet his idol on tour. "We became friends," he said.

Sherry and Jerry Rose taught together at Ms. Beard's school when their talent matured. "Sherry was 'pinned' though," he said. "You probably don't know anything about that." It meant you were promised to someone, a conquest he describes with unapologetic pride and a nod to fate — water under a bridge they were meant to cross together. The surprise was that the jilted "pinner" later became Rose's longtime friend and his lawyer. Another surprise was that the Roses would also later



A Young Jerry Rose. All photos courtesy of the Roses unless noted otherwise.

purchase the very dance studio once known as Ms. Beard's, and they would redefine it as Beckley Dance Theatre School. The school is the longest-standing dance school in the area and one distinguished by its professional, often demanding approach.

"I am so aware that some people in the theater are not kind, and I always take that into consideration when children are involved! Even for the ones who lack the passion to move on to auditions, they develop a thick skin," said Rose.

Their romance was storied; their rhyming names fit for carving inside of hearts on trees. After the pair met as teenagers and in dance school, where Sherry, admitted Rose, "was much more advanced… still is…", back before they owned a school, both desired to advance their status of students to would-be professionals in dance, and the only logical place to make it was New York City. At this declaration, the still unmarried couple would seek to perfect their skills at the Metropolitan Opera Ballet. Their families were concerned about



Jerry Rose instructing dance students. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

one thing—propriety. And so, they were escorted by Sherry's aunt, Louise, until she was satisfied that they were both secure in separate residences.

Once Sherry's aunt left, they experienced their share of rejection—together. Then, men auditioned separately from women, Rose explained. For Carnivale—a Broadway show with an air of the acrobatic—the director asked Rose, "What tricks can you do?" "A left-handed cartwheel," he responded with a sheepish half-smile, coming up empty for something extra to impress. On his way out, he remembers watching Sherry waiting with her number to perform. Like him, she had no tricks other than her dance skills. Neither got the job. They were disheartened but undaunted. Then an audition happened that would change the course of their lives forever.

"It was to be a part of a ballet company in New Jersey, just 45 minutes outside of New York," Rose said. Both got the gig. Their residence was in a very formal and restored old Victorian mansion. "It was as old as 1867," he said. "I remember it still had a carriage house that served as the garage." They danced there for a full year until the entire company decided to relocate to Hong Kong. "I thought that would be great, but Sherry said, 'no way'." While in New Jersey in 1961, the pair married.

The Roses danced professionally with multiple companies in New York and New Jersey, honing their skills in the most performance-saturated venues on the planet. Until they heard that, back home, Beard's School of Dance was for sale. They returned to Beckley and bought it. What followed was the beginning of their even longer careers, their most important ones, through the instruction of dance to generations, countless recitals and auditions, successes and failures, not so much leaving a legacy as imparting many. "We train each of our dancers with the same expectations," said Rose. "Whether they continue in dance or whether they do not."

While Beckley Dance Theatre School has turned out its share of top professional



Heather Rose Zickefoose instructs a ballet class with her father (middle right).

performers, with numerous students who work "in the business", those who do not pursue careers in dance use the training, according to Rose, "... in their journey through life to be healthier, happier and more cognizant of the beauty that surrounds them." Like a former student who wrote him a letter this year about how his training helped her to excel in a career in the military. She was so grateful, she sent money to establish a scholarship to pay for the cost of a deserving student's enrollment. She is not the first to do so, but Rose never ceases to be surprised, nor humbled, at this expression of thanks.

It is not too much of a stretch to apply the rigorous and principled discipline of dance to the high level of structure experienced in the military. The typical dancer day is very regimented, morning and class, afternoon rehearsals, performances or instruction at different schools, and teaching for extra money to survive. Jerry and Sherry Rose have done it all, including the expected rigorous routine, and this has translated into the excellence of the work produced by the studio. Rose points out



Jerry Rose standing with the honorary "Jerry Rose Lane" sign.

proudly that Sherry was never just a dancer, either—she is a mother, a watercolor artist, and a published author whose novel *Erased* still sells on Amazon. The most evident results of their combined creativity, however, are in the lauded performances of their students, built step by step through unrelenting hours of practice, all for one important night.

Their daughter was one such student. Call it nature or nurture, Heather Rose Zickefoose had the same passion as her parents. "They never pushed me into dance," said Zickefoose, "but it started out being fun because all of my friends danced, and then there came a point where I thought I had some talent." At only 11, Zickefoose won a scholarship to the North Carolina School of the Arts. She lived on campus for five weeks. "Being an only child, the umbilical cord didn't stretch very far," she recalled. Sherry stayed at a nearby hotel three out of the five weeks. After successive summers in North Carolina, she was invited to spend her 10th-grade year there studying dance. Passion aside, she explained, "I really just wanted to be a normal kid." Rose would wake Sherry up many Sunday mornings to say, "Let's go see Heather." They would make the drive to throw pebbles at her window to wake her up so that they could visit. She did come back to Beckley and graduated, like her parents, from Woodrow Wilson High School. She was the second person to complete a dance degree at West Virginia University. Today, she teaches alongside her father at Beckley Dance Theater.

At one of many awards ceremonies where her father and mother were honorees, Zick-



Jerry Rose (right) received a "Distinguished West Virginian" award at the 2019 West Virginia Dance Festival. Recognizing him for his contributions

efoose was asked to speak. She said, "They have been parents to thousands of people who love them, but I am so blessed that they belong to me."

The Roses' work ethic and personal dedication have earned Beckley Dance Theatre School a reputation for producing top dancers, and their shows as being Broadway-quality—especially the chorus lines. The Beckley community's most recent recognition of Jerry Rose's dedication is in the renaming of the street where their studio was built, from Raleigh Avenue to Jerry Rose Lane. In 2019, Jerry was recognized as a "Distinguished West Virginian" by Governor Justice, one of the highest honors the Governor can bestow. The award was presented by Curator Randall Reid-Smith during the evening concert at the West Virginia Dance Festival that year.

His unfailing indicator of who will be successful in life and dance is whoever has the most passion, for where it and discipline reside, talent emerges.

"There are tremendous mothers, teachers, administrative assistants, even doctors who could've been professional dancers, but they lacked that passion. You have to have it, and most times when it comes down to talent and passion, passion wins out," he said.

LISA SHREWSBERRY is a nature-loving, trail-running, West Virginian-born-and-raised mother, writer, editor, and 8th-grade English/language arts teacher at Beckley-Stratton Middle School. She owns a small business called Fine Lines, LLC, which specializes in developmental editing for privately-commissioned nonfiction projects. She has one foot on the mountains, the other in the sand—her happiness depends on spending time in both extremes. This is her third contribution to GOLDENSEAL, most recently appearing in our summer of 2023 issue.



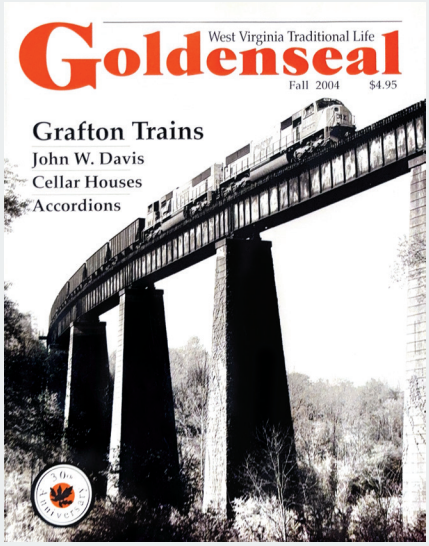


Inspiring Cover Photos of GOLDENSEAL

by Steve Brightwell

Before working for the West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture and History, I was very familiar with GOLDENSEAL Magazine. Around highschool-age, before I considered photography as a career, I was captivated by the cover photos of the magazine. Now that I have worked at the Department and with GOLDENSEAL for close to ten years, I wanted to share some of the previous cover photos from the magazine that are inspiring to me as a photographer and made me want to immerse myself in the stories that they told.









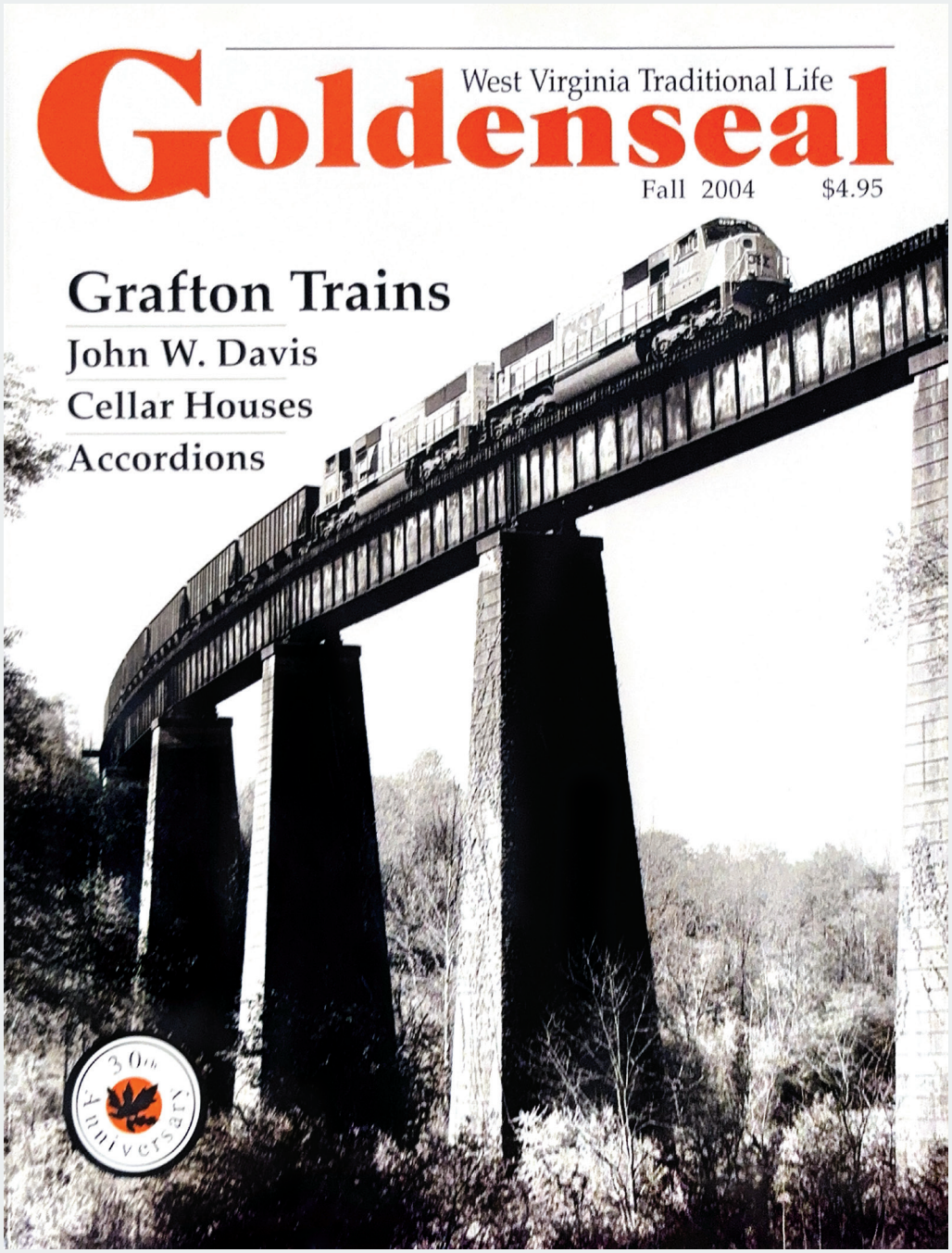
Spring of 1985 features "Fiesta" dishes, a product from Homer Laughlin China, made in Hancock County, and collected worldwide. The colorful china in this cover photo is eye-catching yet simplistic. West Virginia Culture & History photographer Michael Keller photographed this image, and many other sets of dishware, to highlight the opening of the new dinnerware exhibit "A Fiesta of American Dinnerware" that was on display from March 1985 through early 1987 at the Culture Center in Charleston.



Not many photos of the early days of the West Virginia Culture Center exist, especially on a magazine cover. GOLDENSEAL's ***Spring of 1986*** features West Virginia blacksmith Jeff Fetty demonstrating blacksmithing during the Vandalia Gathering in front of the Culture Center. Fetty, a Roane County native, hammers hot steel for a small crowd, "Between Hammer and Anvil" features both photos and cover story by Michael Keller.



The cover of GOLDENSEAL for ***Fall of 1990*** features artwork by Greenbrier Countian metal sculptor Mark Blumenstein, the photo itself looks like the metal creature pictured could jump, or roll in this case, right off the page. Mark's creations are created from his large scrap metal collections. Each piece is unique and most have some kind of movement to them. His art can be seen throughout his farm near the Greenbrier River, in galleries across the state, and at Tamarack Marketplace in Beckley, which has shown some of his larger works over the years.



My father was a third-generation railroad worker, so railroading is in my blood and I love all aspects of trains and the ever-changing history of the rails. The ***Fall of 2004*** cover is one of my favorites, and the stories are just grand. The photo from 1998 is of a loaded coal train heading for Grafton crossing the "65 Bridge." The issue has several railroad articles but the one I keep reading over and over is "Forever Trains," a story about photographer Jay Potter from Charleston, and his lifetime love of the railroad. Potter visited the Benwood Junction terminals at a young age, and over the years he would return often with his camera. He continued to document and interview railroad employees for years. When Benwood closed he shifted his focus to nearby Grafton which was a major railroad hub. His admiration for railroading eventually led him to write several articles with accompanying photos for several national magazines. Today, these photos Potter captured of CSX Transportation during that time are not only great examples of photojournalist photography, but are truly a work of art.



GOLDENSEAL's cover for ***Spring of 2010*** is my all-time favorite, the photo is of Pilot Steve Weaver from Barbour County. The portrait has a James Bond meets Richard Branson feel to it. A man and his plane, what could be cooler? It also happens to be one of sixty GOLDENSEAL covers photographed by state photographer and contributor Michael Keller who departed state government that same year to take a position with the West Virginia Humanities Council. The cover story is a recount of Steve Weaver's own words, one of his first solo flights that developed into a night flight, where he had to land for the first time in darkness unable to see his instrumentation or the unlit runway.

STEVE BRIGHTWELL is the staff photographer at the West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture & History.

Right: The smile alone would bring in visitors. Marshall Fleming at the door to his small folk art museum. Courtesy National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Far right: The Little Hidden Valley has several attractions. The display case at left holds train models, with the museum in the "barn" and the chapel beyond.



50th Anniversary

Originally published
SUMMER 1992

Stories in Wood and Metal

Marshall Fleming's Little Hidden Valley

Text and Photographs by Woodward S. Bousquet

Marshall Fleming's wood-frame house was once a sawmill shanty. It sits back from a side road off another side road on a Mineral County mountain.

Huge chestnut trees, victims of the blight, became construction timber just downhill from Fleming's front porch. He can tell the story in detail, because he helped his father saw those trunks into lumber back in the late 1920's. They used a sawmill rig powered by a Frick steam engine that a pair of strong horses moved from place to place as needed. Marshall was only 12 then. His main job was to stand beside the steam engine and stomp out flaming cinders that occasionally shot out of the steam engine's stack, threatening to set the woods afire.

Steam engines no longer belch smoke and hurl sparks into the sky. And the chestnut trees are gone. But Marshall Fleming remembers the sights, sounds, and smells. Other vignettes from his past linger as well — the circus coming to town, trains challenging the steep grade that takes them up and over the Allegheny Front, and the ripe red apples he picked with his mother.

Through his skill with a pocket knife, band saw, tin snips, and paint brushes, Fleming has found a way to capture these memories as folk art. He began two decades ago, after being disabled by a back injury. The wooden horses, brightly-painted circus wagons, models of farm equipment, and other miniatures he crafted crowded his house so much that he built a museum in his yard to hold his growing menagerie. "I had them in my shop and piling here on the bed and my wife was raising thunder about it. That's the truth. I had to do something."

The trip to Fleming's home and museum in New Creek bridges several intervals of time. As U.S. Route 50



descends steeply from Knobly Mountain, it passes rock layers that were tipped vertically as the Appalachians arose nearly a quarter-billion years ago. Then quarrying exposed these sturdy limestone strata in a time much more recent. A secondary road branches south towards Grayson Gap. Here the valley is narrow, the houses small. The forest of tulip poplar, red maple and oak is typical of cut-over land on lower mountain slopes across the state.

Fleming's family felled some of the trees here. "They used to have an old tannery in town," he recalls. "They would tan with bark. My daddy, he hauled bark in there. We cut trees all around here. Chestnut oaks. In the spring of the year when the sap was up, you could peel the bark then. We had our own truck and we hauled it all. And sometimes we'd peel bark and haul it to Indiantown, Pennsylvania.

"After I come home from the army in the late '40's, we peeled a lot of bark, hauled it, and put it in a boxcar in town. But the feller that took the bark never paid my dad for it. He said the money never came in. And I told my dad, 'You're my daddy but I'm going to tell you something. I've peeled my last bark.' He said, 'Marshall, I have too.'"

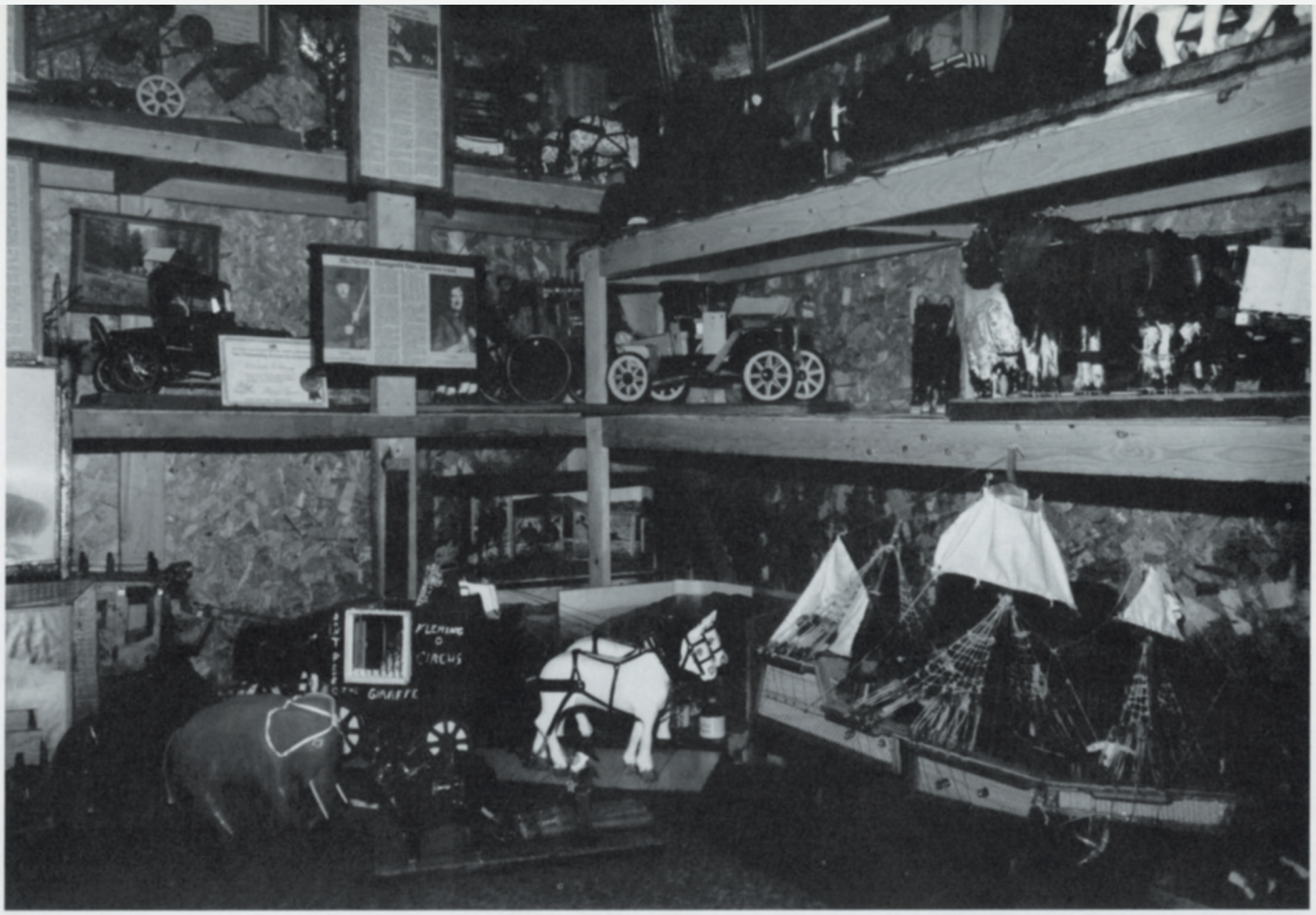
The road crosses from Knobly to the flanks of Saddle Mountain and then climbs gradually to Penneroil Road, named for the European plant brought by settlers and widely used in "spring tonics" to rid the body of winter-borne germs. Near the top of a hill, Fleming's hand-painted sign invites passers-by to turn down his gravel driveway to visit his Little Hidden Valley Prayer Chapel and Woodcarver's Museum. If the traveler has made arrangements beforehand, Marshall Fleming is waiting on his porch, ready to give a tour.

"I like to be out here where you don't hear everything," he explains. "Up here it's quiet."

But not always. In addition to the local families, school classes, and scout troops that drop by from time to time, folk art collectors have discovered Fleming and his work. From September 1990 through January 1991, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art in Washington featured "Made with Passion: The Hemphill Collection of Twentieth-Century American Folk Art." Included was Fleming's four-foot-long model of President Kennedy's funeral procession complete with flag-draped coffin, caisson, and eight horses.

The Smithsonian exhibit displayed nearly 200 other pieces from the well-known collection of Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr., co-founder and first curator of the Museum of American Folk Art. An illustrated catalog by Linda Roscoe Hartigan accompanied the exhibition, along with *A Fish that's a Box*, which showed objects from the Hemphill collection to challenge younger readers to use their imaginations and creativity as folk artists do. Fleming's Kennedy caisson is pictured in both books.

Another of Fleming's caissons had appeared earlier in Elinor Horwitz's *The Bird, the Banner, and Uncle Sam. Images of America in Folk and Popular*



The museum interior is a unique place of the artist's creation. Models vie for space with clippings and other items of interest.

Art, published in 1976. At about the same time, John Rice Irwin acquired three pieces from Fleming, including a caisson. They are exhibited at Irwin's Museum of Appalachia in Norris, Tennessee.

Unlike the Museum of Appalachia complex, which includes several dozen buildings, Marshall Fleming's museum is one of this nation's smallest. It measures only about eight by 11 feet. Shaped and painted like a barn, it sits on the edge of a wooded ravine that forms one of the boundaries of his property. The doorway is flanked by American, Confederate, and West Virginia flags. One outside wall sports a place mat showing Devil's Saddle, a prominent dip in Saddle Mountain's ridge that tourists can view from a nearby overlook on U.S. 50.

Inside the museum, shelves start at either side of the doorway and surround the visitor. Marshall's works take up virtually every available space. A model of a farm cart tips its load of cement blocks while the driver tries to regain control of the horses. Directly above sits a sheet-metal replica of an International Harvester threshing machine. Two carved Civil War soldiers in blue and gray uniforms stand at attention nearby. Teams of mules or horses pull a McCormick-Deering reaper, a load of logs, a Wells Fargo stage coach, and a farm wagon. Although it's his largest and best-known piece, the Kennedy caisson may not catch one's eye at first, because of everything else that vies for attention.

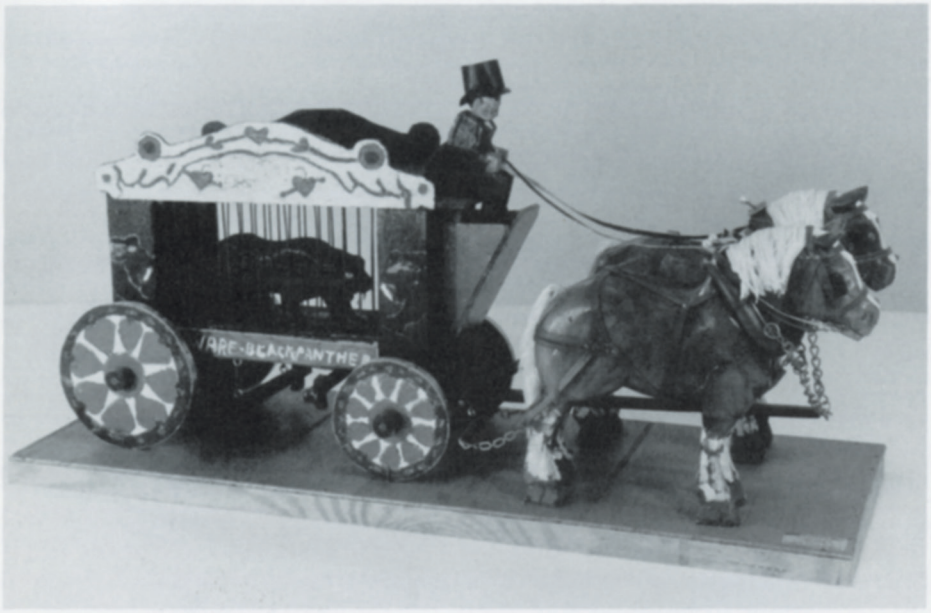
An eager visitor trying to get a closer look may stumble over a Brockway truck model on the floor. Fleming was inspired by a picture of an old Brockway ten-wheeler in a magazine. It presented a challenge when he tried to build it.

"My biggest problem was the wheels," he says. "Would you have any idea how I made them? It just happened to come to me. See, what I done was I sawed a round block off and I cut a groove around it. And I cut that real heavy electrical wire and I wired [the ends] together and pulled it in that groove so it couldn't get off. They look pretty well like tires."

Farther back on the floor, an elephant leads a procession of horse-drawn circus wagons that make up what Marshall has dubbed his "Flemingo Circus." They remind him of the circuses that once rolled through New Creek for performances in Keyser or further north to Cumberland, Maryland. What child hasn't dreamed of traveling with a circus, especially one bearing the family name?

Each wagon carries a different animal and has a message to onlookers painted on its sides: "Beware — Black Panther," "Please Don't Feed the Giraffe." The horses' rigging reflects Fleming's resourcefulness. Two Clydesdales, for instance, have collars made of strips of leather from an old pocketbook, copper wire, and two hat pins. These draft animals also sport vinyl reins and steel hitching chains.

Among the many problems Fleming had to solve in building circus wagons was fitting the driver's body to the contours of the seat. "What I do, I get a piece of wire that's soft. I set it down there on that seat and bend the wire, where his feet is, where the legs are, where he sits down, and the back. Then I bend the wire around and make a head. That gives me the pattern to cut. That's the reason the





One of the circus wagons from the "Flemingo circus," this one for the fearsome black panther. Fleming's attention to detail may be seen in the close-up of the Clydesdale horses. The harness is fabricated of leather, plastic, metal and tiny chains.

driver sets so good on that seat. I learnt that from my own, just experimenting."

Aside from the Kennedy caisson, perhaps the most striking model in the museum is a Victorian funeral wagon pulled by two coal-black Shire horses. Fleming estimates that he put at least 350 hours of work into the piece. The hearse's oblong windows and gold ornamentation were especially time-consuming. Its rear door opens so the coffin can slide out. When one half of the coffin is opened, a well-dressed corpse sits up slightly. Opening the other end reveals a mirror, a reminder to visitors of their own mortality.

The funeral wagon driver's black suit and top hat contrast with his flowing white beard. "I remember that old man, Little Dave Rotruck," Marshall recalls. "He wore a beard just like I put on there." Rotruck was a mortuary jack-of-all-trades: He made coffins, arranged funerals, and drove the hearse to the cemetery. The business remains in the hands of the Rotruck family today, and another of Fleming's funeral wagons is on display in their parlor.

The museum contains far too much to appreciate in a single visit, and more of Fleming's handiwork is elsewhere in his yard. To one side are three outdoor display cases that house larger carvings. Replicas of a log cabin and a Civil War cannon sit nearby. On the museum's other side stands a miniature church, which Fleming calls the Little Hidden Valley Prayer Chapel. The exhibit case closest to the museum holds a steam-powered sawmill — and all those memories of engines, chestnut logs, and his father.

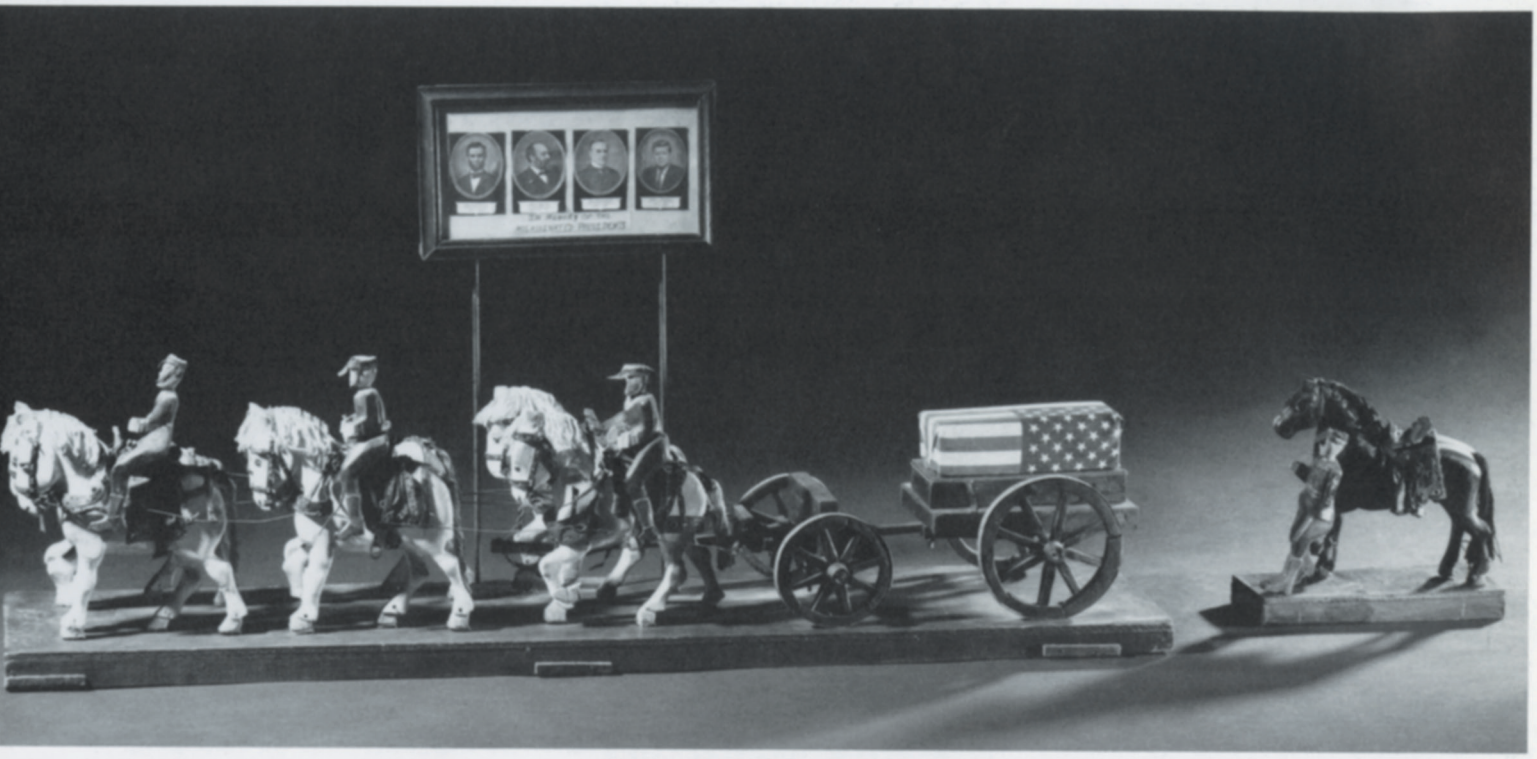
"The engine we had was an old Frick," Fleming recalls. "It wasn't no tractor. It was a portable that you had to hook horses to. When we were sawing, us kids had to watch the smoke stack because it was fired with chestnut slabs. Them engines would put out fire, out of the stack. We'd have to fight fire around there to keep it from getting the woods.

"My dad, he was the sawman. Our friend Earnest Blackburn fired and I off-beared, what time I wasn't fighting fires. Them logs was so big that you had to turn them over [on the log carriage and run them through a second time] to get the slab off.

"The big problem with the steam engines was water," he continues. "It wouldn't inject the water itself, so we'd have to carry it from a sump over there in the field. As a kid, about half a five-gallon bucket was all I could carry at a time. We'd store it in a 55-gallon drum. That was hard work to fill up them. Then we had to carry the water up to the boiler.

"Later, after the Second World War, we got to using regular old car motors. We had a big old Buick motor. They'd do sawing if you hooked 'em up right. You didn't have all that watering stuff to fool with."

Fleming made his model with a Peerless steam engine, and a log carriage, sawman, and off-bearer. He remarked how difficult it was to remember exactly the way the machinery looked a half-century ago, but the intricacy in his work sometimes belies the intervening years. A



Fleming's Kennedy funeral caisson procession belongs to the Smithsonian Institution. The caisson was exhibited for several months in 1990 and 1991 at the National Museum of American Art. Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution.

projection on the top of the model steam engine's boiler — made of a bolt, several nuts, and a washer — is especially detailed, and so are the stories that go with it. It is the engine's governor, Fleming explained. "When you was sawing, you didn't have a throttle, but it was the governor [that kept the speed constant]. Whenever you've got too much pressure, that there valve would open and let steam off. That kept the engine from blowing up."

Marshall Fleming was the second of Charles and Lula Harrison Fleming's ten children. He was born in 1916 when the family lived and farmed in Cameron Orchard, a Mineral County community adjacent to New Creek. The Flemings soon moved to New Creek, where Marshall, two brothers, and their families live now. In 1923, he started elementary school. "We had eight classes in one room," Fleming remembers, "and when it come your time you'd go up and set on the recitation bench. When that class was over you'd take your seats and another class would come up."

School and chores often left little time for other activities, but Marshall found ways to combine his manual skills with his imagination. Then as now, the objects he made reflected his personal experiences and interests. As he puts it, "When I was a kid, I was just making stuff to fool with. Cut out paper chickens or cows or something, put 'em out in the field. Get grass and put it for haystacks and all that kind of stuff. Made me an old truck sometimes. Maybe cut a spool in two, find an old cigar box and make wheels to put on it. That's what I played with.

"These milkweed pods, they look like chickens. I'd break farmer's matches off and put them up there for legs and play with them as chickens. I always was crazy about chickens.

"I made all kinds of things like that. I made the mistake of building an airplane once. I tore up [my father's] tool box to make it, and I put his tools in a cardboard box. He found it, and he grabbed the wings off that thing and wore 'em out on me. I'll tell you, that's what he done."

Marshall's reading ability allowed him to skip the 7th- and 8th-grade readers, so he went from New Creek's sixth grade class to his first year of high school in Keyser, the county seat. "I only went through the sophomore year and I had to quit to go to work. It was during the Depression and my dad was trying to put four of us in the high school. It was just impossible."

His father worked for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad then, a job he held for 32 years. Each day Marshall could hear puffing engines and blowing whistles as trains struggled along the 17-mile grade up the Allegheny Front just west of New Creek. "In 1927 my daddy got a pass," he recalls. "He could ride any railroad and he took me and my oldest sister to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, down to the battlefield. President Coolidge was there that day and made a speech. I was only about 11 years old, and I'll never forget."

In his largest display case, Marshall commemorated his father and the railroads with two ten-car model trains he made out of scrap wood and wire. They represent the B&O and C&O lines. Marshall painted the Allegheny Front on the metal flashing below the shelves that hold the trains.

Fleming was drafted in 1941 and discharged in 1946. Trained as a rocketeer, he served with the Army in Luzon during World War II. After the war, Marshall returned home and worked for the Moorefield Plywood Company for five years until the firm "took a bankrupt law, and they went



Entirely self-taught, Fleming figures things out as he goes along. Truck wheels, such as the one under way here, are a good example of his experimentation.

and laid us off." His manual skills landed him a job making furniture for the Raygolds Company, another area business.

Fleming worked for Raygolds for about a year and then, in the early 1950's, he took a job with the State Road Commission. "In the winter time it was bad," he says, "and I'd be gone three, four days before I could get back." The snow would blow off the mountains and pile up 15 feet deep, sometimes leaving his car covered with snow at the end of a long day. He would shovel it off and head home, only to discover that the back roads leading to his house hadn't yet been cleared.

His last job was with the maintenance staff of the Mineral County Board of Education. A back injury during Fleming's teenage years, "from bending saplings down, jumping to the ground," caught up with him, forcing him onto partial disability in 1973. He took early retirement a short time later. Marshall had been carving off and on for about a dozen years, but the increased free time provided many more opportunities to reminisce, tinker, and create.

It had been around 1960 when Fleming, inspired by television shows of the "Wagon Train" genre, attempted his first wood carving, a model of a covered wagon. "I made the horses first," he says. "Didn't want to make a wagon and not have no horses with it. I throwed that [first] horse in the box. I thought I'll never [be able to] make a horse. One day I went in there and picked it up and got a-looking at it and done a little cutting on it. Made a pretty good horse. So I made another one like it.

"I think the first ones I made I carved the manes and the tails. But then I got to thinking about it. Looked more natural with thread, and I got to gluing the thread on. The first thread I got wasn't mouse proof. Mice got in and ate all the manes, tails off."

Fleming built his first Kennedy funeral caisson about six months after the president was assassinated in 1963. One found its way into the hands of collector Herbert W. Hemphill. In September 1989, Andrew Connors, Curatorial Associate at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art, informed Fleming that the Hemphill collection had been donated to the museum. The caisson was among the items considered the collection's "crown jewels" and selected for the first exhibit.

Word spread quickly, and Fleming was interviewed by a local reporter. With both modesty and pride, the artist remarked, "I never dreamt of something like that a-going into the Smithsonian. They always told me the stuff had to be pretty good to get in there." Additional newspaper articles followed when Connors came to New Creek to videotape Fleming and his work and when the Fleming family went to Washington for the black-tie reception that accompanied the exhibit's opening. Marshall, his caisson, and his stories attracted a sizable crowd at that event.

"I never had so many pictures took of me in my life," he exclaimed. "They was tickled to death 'cause I was down there." Fleming and Hemphill autographed each other's exhibit catalogs at the reception. Afterwards, Marshall was philosophical. "I have to thank him [Hemphill] for giving me credit for being down here. It just ain't every feller, a poor man, has a chance in this lifetime like that."

Fleming's largest work is his Little Hidden Prayer Chapel, a small church he built in his yard adjacent to the museum. If it were full-sized, the chapel would fit comfortably into the



Marshall Fleming at the door to the Little Hidden Valley Prayer Chapel. It is a place for quiet meditation, he says. Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution.

rural landscape almost anywhere in the Appalachian Mountains. Years ago, he and his mother had been picking apples beneath the trees in front of where the chapel stands now. She had remarked that this particular corner of the property would be a lovely place for a small building.

As Marshall tells the story, "I kept a-dreaming about building a little church for seven years. I'd get to singing about it, and so I went and built it. And when I was working in here it just felt to me like there was somebody watching me, every move."

Relatives, friends, and community members donated many of the materials Fleming needed for constructing the building and furnishing its interior. Their names appear on an honor roll of donors. Completed in 1975, the chapel remains unlocked 24 hours a day. "I'll defy any man to come in here by hisself and set down and just meditate a little bit," Fleming says. "Before you leave here, you feel like somebody's been with you. I never come in here by myself; it just seems like whatever watched me build it is still with me." Many visitors come and go quietly; Marshall later finds new names in his guest register or an offering on the altar.

Each of Fleming's buildings, models, and miniatures can be viewed as an individual work of craftsmanship and ingenuity. But they add up to something more. Together in the Little Hidden Valley they create what folklorists call a folk art "environment," a handmade personal place. They tell the story of a man's life and values, the story of his family and community. To best understand their meanings, talk to Marshall Fleming.

"You can't see anything 'til you get off these highways," he will tell you. "It's a pretty place up here. I'd like everybody to come here and enjoy theirselves. Anything I got don't cost them half a penny. When I come into this world I didn't have nothing. When I leave all I'll have is my name. It will all be disposed of whenever the Man upstairs blows his horn."

A Country Man's Creation

by Daniel Linton

On a small farmhouse hill in Hedgesville, Berkeley County, along Welltown Road, sits a small green and white church. It's not a grand cathedral or a place that gets visited every Sunday morning, but there it sits, isolated and alone. On the front side of the church is a distinct sign that reads, "Little Hidden Valley Church." What we can't see, though, are all the years of stories it holds and the cunning hands that built it from the ground up. The magnificent mind behind this lovely, peaceful chapel's name is Marshall Baker Fleming. The story of Marshall stretches from the halls of the Smithsonian to an Appalachian folk museum to wood carvings in my home and all the way to a family symbol sitting in the middle of the Eastern Panhandle on humble farmland.

Marshall Baker Fleming was born on December 27, 1916, in Cameron Orchards, Mineral. County, West Virginia. Marshall was the oldest child of L.D. Fleming, who worked on the railroads, and Lulu Fleming, who was a stay-at-home mom. Marshall grew up with four sisters and three brothers. Growing up, Marshall had a knack for art. Most of this was made through wood carving. When he was little, he even broke apart his father's toolbox and made a wooden airplane! Around his New Creek, WV home, he would find little pieces of wood and carve them into steam engines because of his father's job on the railroad. He also carved animals, most notably, horses, which were his favorite animal. When it was really cold in Mineral County and Marshall had to go to school, he'd throw on ice skates and skate to the corner store for breakfast, following the creek behind his home headed into town. School was not interesting to him and Marshall eventually dropped out of high school as a Junior.

When he was 25, Marshall enlisted in the Army at the arrival of World War II. He was then trained as a rocketeer and served from 1941 to 1946, the exact years of World War II. In 1946, Marshall had a terrible leg injury and had to go home. When he came back to the States at the age of 30, he returned to New Creek. Six months after his return home, Marshall met a woman by the name of Janet, and they both moved to Moorefield for two years. Marshall and Janet married and returned to New Creek to live with Marshall's mother. Eventually, Marshall and Janet had three daughters, Dorothy "Dottie", Alice Jean, and Nancy Lee, who is my grandmother.

Marshall resumed his knack for wood carving once home. As an adult, Marshall's pieces became more detailed and beautiful. This period was when he created the "Little Hidden Valley Prayer Church." This miniature chapel is eight feet by nine feet in length and width. It stands fifteen feet tall from steeple to base but on the inside is barely six feet tall. Marshall built the chapel by hand with materials he gathered. After his chapel was completed it took the title formerly held by a church in Preston County of "Smallest Church in 48 States" [see "Smaller Than the Smallest," Spring 2000 by Carl E. Feather].

This church was a gift to his mother and future grandchildren, and it sat in the front yard of her Antioch home under a distinct apple tree. Marshall said that the church could fit 12 people (two people each in six pews). Hymnals sat in each pew for the grandchildren to sing prayer songs. The chapel housed two unique features—a mini electric organ that sat in the far left corner of the chapel, and roses in little jars

that sat in the windows. Once the church was completed, the community around Marshall pitched in to bless the small church. A church choir from Sunnyside Church of Brethren, where Marshall and his family worshiped, came and sang and the preacher came and blessed the small church. The church even hosted a wedding when Dottie married her second husband in the Little Hidden Valley Prayer church. In 2008, Marshall's son-in-law and grandchildren moved the church from its original home in New Creek, Mineral County, to where it stands today in Hedgesville, Berkeley County, where Nancy lives.



Daniel Linton stands in front of the 8x9-ft chapel, built by his great-grandfather Marshall Fleming. Photo courtesy of the Linton Family.

In addition to the church, Marshall made many other exotic creations. One of which was a 20-foot-long wood sculpture depicting a circus and all of its circus cars. This also sat in his front yard at Antioch where different zoo animals were dancing in their respective circus cars like giraffes, elephants, tigers, lions, and bears. When he was around 50 years old in the years 1963-1964 he made his most famous piece called "Kennedy's Caisson." It depicts President John F. Kennedy's funeral caisson. This piece was a 20%, 54 1⁄2, 15-inch sculpture made out of wood. There were two parts of the sculpture. The first was a 42-inch-long funeral service with a total of six horses and a wagon carrying a coffin. Then the second part is a riderless black horse that is being walked by an officer dressed in baby blue. Starting from the front of the sculpture, six white horses are seen with reins, saddles, and stirrups. Three officers are riding each horse on each right-side horse. Behind them is a wagon, which is being pulled by a team of horses, and features two big wheels. On the wagon, however, is a coffin covered and dressed by the American flag.

Lastly, on top of the sculpture, there is a plaque on which Marshall placed the pictures of all four presidents who have been assassinated. On the far left of the plaque is Abraham Lincoln, then James Garfield, followed by William McKinley, then on the far right is John F. Kennedy. Kennedy's funeral was broadcast to the whole nation, so many artists were inspired to honor him, exactly like Marshall. Currently, the piece is in the care of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington D.C. Marshall's piece is in the "Folk Art" section of the

museum and is on display from Monday to Sunday from 11:30 to 7:00 p.m. if you ever want to go see this amazing piece. I visited the Smithsonian and saw his piece when I was younger.

All of these creations and sculptures were made right in his front yard in Antioch, Mineral County. Since he had made so many creations, he decided to make a little "museum" as he called it, to house all of his creations. When you walked into this museum, there were shelves of old-timey cars, boats, newspaper articles, and the most common thing you'd find in there—horses and carriages.

Like the chapel, this "museum" wasn't very large either. It measured eight by eleven feet. On the outside, its paint job was that of a red barn. Next to Marshall's museum was a display case for his self-made sawmill. Marshall said that the saw mill was powered by a steam engine which was one of his favorite pieces because it took so long to make. In the middle of Marshall's walk of art was an accurate Civil War cannon. It seemed to be resting on a simple wooden platform and a metal cannon on top. But, on the platform, there's a sign commemorating his own experience in war. It was dedicated to a friend he made there, D. Battery who lived in Fort Still, Oklahoma. Then, to the far left was a railroad display case. It was two shelved and filled with various steam engines, pieces of wood, then the steam-powered saw-mill.

Marshall lived in Antioch for many years. He still was making creations in different shapes, sizes, and colors but, gradually his beloved creations began to be awarded and put in important museums, like his "Kennedy's Caisson." The "Kennedy's Caisson" was put into the Smithsonian in 1990 and some of his other carvings were put in the Museum of Appalachia in Norris, Tennessee. Through the 90s, Marshall slowed down a bit and stopped making carvings every day and putting them in the "museum" shed in his front yard.

It was during this same time that he was featured in GOLDENSEAL. The first was an article by Woodward S. Bousquet, "Stories in Wood and Metal: Marshall Fleming's Little Hidden Valley" [see Summer 1992] It was a more comprehensive account of his life and wood carvings. Next was the Spring 2000 Carl E. Feather article entitled "Smaller than the Smallest" which features the Little Hidden Valley Prayer Chapel.

In 1998, Marshall was diagnosed with lung cancer and unfortunately, on August 13, 1998, he passed away. Marshall was born and raised in New Creek, Mineral County, and died in New Creek, Mineral County living to be the age of 81. At his service, his wife, children, grandchildren, and friends were all present to mourn the death of the man they called Dad, Pap-Pap, and Marshall. Marshall's grave can be found at Thrush Cemetery in Mineral County and he is now buried next to his beloved wife, Janet. Janet passed away on March 24, 2004 in Allegheny County, Maryland.

In Hedgesville, West Virginia located in Berkeley County, sits a little church. Sure it's got some holes and scuffs and chipping in the paint, but it is still standing and it holds memories of family, tradition, and happiness which embodies what Marshall stood for in life. He knew how to create both art and also the love of a family. This church now sits on private property on Welltown Road overlooking the family farm where work is done from sun up to sun down. From the day he was born to the day he died, Marshall was always inspired to be someone his family could rely on and continues to carve his way in the hearts of his family and me. I am Marshall's great-grandson and I am told I possess many of his personality traits and artistic abilities. I can only hope to inspire others with my art the way Pap-Pap Fleming did for the world.

DANIEL LINTON is a student at Charleston Catholic High School. This article was written as part of a class assignment for his 8th-grade West Virginia history class.

A Tribute to my Friend Glen Cain; A Very Successful Country Music Singer

In Glen's own words—"Not too bad for a farm boy from Manila Ridge, West Virginia."

by Don Coleman

I was shocked the morning of September 2nd, 2023 when I received word that my friend Glen Cain had passed soon after his heart surgery. I met Glen in 1957 when I was teaching the 5th grade class at Buffalo Elementary School in Putnam County. Glen was a teacher's dream student—at least for me. At that young age, he was knowledgeable, anxious to share information, and to participate fully in the class. By the end of the school year, it was also clear to me that he was a multi-talented person and would succeed in any area he would choose. The sky was the limit for him. When the school year ended in 1957, I became a pastor and moved out of the area. Glen continued his life in the Buffalo school system. Fortunately, we touched base with each other again through Facebook. We were both friends with country singer Sandy Vallis. He had indeed branched out in many directions with his many talents; country singer and songwriter, and even part-owner of a trucking company.

Glen was born in West Virginia and grew up on a farm. He was influenced early in his life by an uncle who played guitar for several country music artists, including Jimmy Dickens and Red Sovine. While attending West Virginia University, he became a vocalist for a country music band.

After time in the U.S. Army as an officer and Green Beret, he returned to civilian life and country music. He was a regular on the Mountaineer Opry and a semi-regular on the WWVA Wheeling Jamboree. He opened shows for Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, Faron Young, and Ferlin Husky, among others. Eventually, he met Conway Twitty and traveled with him for three years. Glen left music for some time but



Glen Cain. Photo by Michelle Cain.

with the help of Paula Nelson, daughter of Willie Nelson, he returned to it in 2018 recording a five-song EP in Austin, Texas. All five songs charted in the top 10 of New Music Weekly. In September 2019, according to charts compiled in the Netherlands, he was the 11th most popular country artist on European radio. Glen was the 2022 North American Country Music Association International Male Vocalist and the Rising Star Entertainer of the Year. His band was Band of the Year in 2022 and 2023.

Glen and his band, Real Country, toured and entertained, up to the time of his death on September 2nd, 2023. He was also the president of the Country Music Division of Big Records and a member of the Executive Board of the North American Country Music Association International. In light of Glen's vast experience in singing and songwriting, it is clear why he is on the mas-

ter list of nominees to be inducted into the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame.

I reached out to his fellow bandmates for this tribute, and they shared the following. Luke Gitchel said, "I am so thankful for having had Glen in my life. He was a gentleman, a man who loved his family and his friends, and always had a good word for everyone. If we were in a tough situation, as a band, he would make light of it while taking the issue head-on. He was kind and always took the lead in promoting young musicians interested in entering the country music business. I will miss the great stories, the long bus rides and laughs, and mostly, the man. I'm a better person for having crossed paths with Glen. May he rest in peace."

Tyler Gitchel shared, "Glen was always there to encourage me as I started entering the entertainment world. He gave me words of wisdom and always made sure I did at least one song a set. I never saw him put himself above anyone else. He showed me the good side of being a musician and I pray that I can be that same kind of musician as I move forward.

Clint Gitchel said, "Glen was a kind-hearted man. Do no harm but take no sh-t was the motto that we went by on the road. He lived it. I remember one time in particular when we returned home from a short tour. We had just pulled into my driveway and my five-year-old son ran out to greet us. Glen had three chocolate bars in the truck and my son wanted one so he asked and, of course, Glen gave him one. After a few minutes, my son returned to Glen and said his grandma would also like a chocolate bar. "Could I have another one please Mr. Glen?" Of course, Mr. Glen gave him another king-size chocolate bar. A few more minutes went by and my son came back asking for another chocolate bar because his dad would like one as well. So of course Mr. Glen ended up giving my son three king-size Hershey bars. That made a rowdy afternoon at the Gitchel home. Glen Cain was a gentle soul. Wise and experienced in life. He knew how to have a good time but he sure knew where to draw the line as well. I know I can speak for my fellow bandmates when I say we are blessed to have known him and sure appreciate the hard work he put into his music career. His dedication to helping others pursue their musical goals speaks volumes of the man's integrity. He was a great friend, a great musician, and a great man. He will be missed."



Buffalo Elementary School 5th grade class -1957. Reading left to right, Glen is in the front row, third from the left, with his hand on the ground. Photo courtesy of the author.

Lastly, Jerry Carter, Glen's drummer shared, "Glen was a great guy, huge heart and the last of a dying breed for sure. When you heard the phrase "old school," you thought of Glen. Had a story for every occasion and was generous to a fault. I loved him and will always miss him."

During his career, Glen shared that his 5th grade class at Buffalo Elementary in Putnam County, West Virginia helped inspire him to always pursue his dreams, follow his goals, and reach for the stars. Glen's Album of five songs—all of which he wrote and performs—*Raising Cain in the Country*, is available from amazon.com. Glen was multi-talented with many gifts; however, singing and songwriting were the ones he expressed most in his work and life. I will always miss our friendship of 60 years.

DON COLEMAN is with the West Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church-Retired. This is his second contribution to GOLDENSEAL.

Johnny Wesley Fullen, Mayor, Matewan:
A Love Story

by Edwina Pendarvis

Years ago, when Sue Fullen, one of my graduate students at Marshall University, told me she was married to an African-American man who was Matewan's mayor, I was surprised to learn that Matewan's citizens elected a member of a minority group as mayor. My surprise was based on stereotypical thinking. Really, I knew only four things about Matewan: it was small; its population was mostly White; it was in Hatfield-McCoy territory; and it was the site of the "Matewan massacre."

Years later, I learned that Sue's husband, Johnny Wesley Fullen, was elected mayor in 1984 and re-elected for consecutive terms until 1998, when he decided not to seek office again. I wanted to learn more about this man my student had loved and more about the town that elected him mayor four times in a row. Unfortunately, one of the first things I learned was that he and Sue had died. I never got to see Sue again or meet the man who won her love and the respect of a townful of people; but thanks to Rebecca Bailey's 1990 interview with Johnny Fullen; MacKenzie New-Walker's 2022 interview of Johnny's brother, Steven Fullen; and thanks to the willingness of Steven Fullen and Maury Taylor to talk to me about growing up in Matewan, I was able to learn about Johnny, Sue, and the town they lived in.

***The Town*:** Founded in 1895, Matewan, Mingo County, is in West Virginia's southwestern coalfields. According to both Steven Fullen and Maury Taylor, whose father, Glenn Taylor, was Matewan's mayor in the 1960s—there were only 12 to 15 families of color living in the town when they were youngsters. When Johnny Fullen was mayor, there may have been even fewer. The Black population dropped from a peak of 989 in 1950 to 822 in 1980.

Johnny Fullen saw race relations around Matewan as different from many other places. In his interview with Rebecca Bailey, he said he believed the difference was because 90% of the people worked in the mines and Black and White miners were paid on the same wage scale. He also attributed it to the early twentieth-century diversity of Matewan's population, which "mixed and mingled together." As Steven Fullen pointed out in the interview for the West Virginia Mine War Museum forum, the Italians came from a country where race wasn't a big issue. He identified the miners' hazardous work as a factor, too. An Italian miner told Steven once that, "In the coal mines, everybody had to depend on each other because, literally, your life depended on your brother [fellow miner]"

One of the first things Maury Taylor, retired U.S. Magistrate Judge, said about his Matewan childhood was complimentary of Johnny and Steven Fullen's grandfather, John Brown; and when I talked to Steven Fullen, the first thing he said when I mentioned having talked to Taylor was complimentary of Maury's father. Maury told me one of his most vivid childhood memories is of John Brown's helping him and his sister get down off a hillside. The two Taylor children, aged nine and ten, had climbed up the hill and couldn't get back down. Maury remembers John Brown climbing up the hill to them and getting them safely off the steep hill. Steven told me he thought the world of Maury's father, who was one of his high school teachers.

In the interview with Bailey, Johnny Fullen said, "My grandfather came to Red Jacket in 1896—what we call Red Jacket now—back then I'm pretty sure it was called Hunters. He was probably about sixteen years old." A little later, Brown left West Virginia to attend Lynchburg Baptist Seminary Academy in Virginia. He moved to Matewan in 1906, accord-

ing to Steven Fullen. John Brown was smart, personable, educated, and a good businessman. He won many friends and customers, partly because he picked up foreign languages readily. According to Steven, his grandfather's fluent Italian was due to his having had a boyhood friend who was Italian. Brown was less fluent in Hungarian but could communicate with those miners and their families, too.

By about 1911, Brown had opened the Matewan Dry Cleaners. Johnny Fullen said his grandfather "would go up the creeks in a horse and buggy and pick up dry cleaning" in Mingo and Logan counties, and in Pike County, Kentucky. About 1917, he opened the Dew Drop In restaurant, which is mentioned in *Thunder in the Mountains*, a history of the 1920 -1921 mine wars. Through hard work, integrity, and caring treatment of their customers, he and his wife, Mary Brown née Helton—seventeen years younger than her husband—made a place for themselves in the community.

Both John and Mary Brown were in town on May 19, 1920, the day of the Matewan massacre. Because reactions to the shooting took the form of reckless violence in Matewan and throughout Mingo County on both union and anti-union sides—the Browns left Matewan for a couple of years. Many whose relatives lived through that period say it was so bad their relatives wouldn't even talk about it. Johnny Fullen said the Browns didn't. Maury Taylor told me his second mother—a niece of Reece Chambers, one of the men charged with taking part in the shoot-out (but found not guilty)—didn't talk about it either.

The Browns returned to Matewan and, in 1927, opened a new dry cleaning business. Their ability to vault racial hurdles is suggested both by that business success and, in the 1930s, their opening of another business, the Matewan Curtis Club, a restaurant/club that was integrated from the start. Their hard-won success enabled them to build the handsome fourteen-room home in which Johnny, Steven, and their sisters grew up.

Johnny Fullen, along with his siblings, was raised by the Browns. They sent him to an elementary school for Black students, but the closest Black high school was in Williamson, so they sent him to Matewan High School. He enjoyed both schools and said he had an advantage in both: "We knew everybody. Back then all the teachers basically lived around here." He continued, showing awareness that his situation was different from those of many Black youngsters of the time: "A lot of prominent Blacks say that integration probably set Blacks back because a lot of your outstanding Black students never get to be valedictorian or salutatorian, they never get prom court, homecoming queen, and stuff like that, but me personally, a lot of the teachers knew me from a little kid, and they were tough on all of us. I mean, if we [he or any of his siblings] acted up in school, they didn't only get onto us, they stopped by the cleaners and told on us!"

Steven Fullen says that the Fullen brothers and sisters were "raised in a bubble" because of the positive relations between their grandparents and the town and because of the somewhat milder racial climate there than in many other places. He referred to them as "raised in a bubble" because that's how his cousin, Gayletha Brown, put it. Gayletha Brown served as ambassador to the Republic of Benin in Africa during the George W. Bush administration; ambassador to Burkina Faso during the Barack Obama administration; U.S. Consul General at the American Consulate General; and U.S. Deputy Permanent Observer to the Council of Europe, in France. Her childhood in Matewan and her career in the U.S. and abroad gave her a perspective that Steven holds in high regard. Recognizing that their experience was atypical in many ways and that the Matewan of his childhood was not necessarily the Matewan of other children, Black or White, nor even the Matewan of today, he sums up his and Johnny's feelings toward their hometown in three words: "We loved Matewan."

***Johnny and Sue*:** Johnny Fullen did well in school. He was an avid reader—as is his brother Steven—and excelled at sports, becoming a

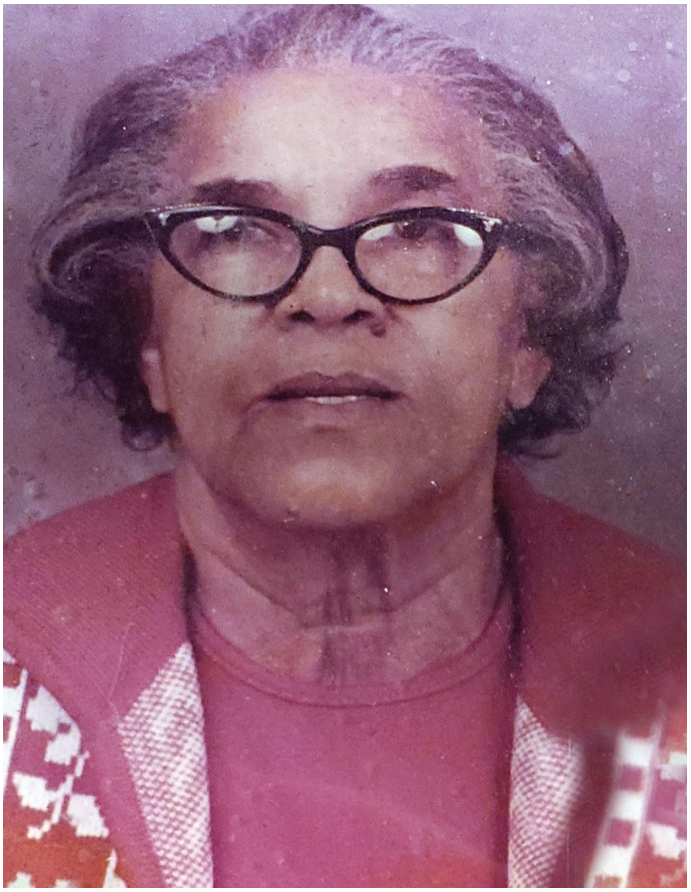


Johnny Wesley Fullen, all photos provided by the family.

star basketball player in high school. It's likely he and his brother would've been identified as gifted students if West Virginia had had gifted programs at the time. However, gifted programs weren't mandated by state legislation until the mid-1970s.

Gifted education is how I came to know Loreka Sue Fullen. After her marriage to Johnny Fullen on September 5, 1977, she sought a teaching position in Mingo County, which, after some well-placed support from her grandmother-in-law, she obtained. When she came to Marshall University to earn an additional certificate in order to teach gifted students, I found her to be an excellent student and a good colleague to her classmates. She taught in Mingo County's gifted education program for several years, working hard to identify students who were capable of learning much more than the curriculum offered students their age. Later, she headed the special education program for Mingo County, seeking to ensure appropriate instruction for all students whose educational needs were substantially different than those of other students, whether those needs included advanced subjects or more educational support to succeed academically.

She and Johnny met in college not long after his military service. In 1965, two years after his high school graduation, Fullen was drafted into the Army, where he served as a medic until his superiors found out what an outstanding basketball player he was and transferred him to Japan to play Army basketball. After his discharge in 1968, he accepted an athletic scholarship from Pikeville College (now Pikeville University). He and Sue's paths crossed there, and they began dating. However, in keeping with Shakespeare's observation that "the course of true love never did run smooth," things didn't go well. In telling about the situation, Johnny said, "I was there on a basketball scholarship, and I met her [Sue] early in the year . . . before the basketball season started. And the coach—I've always felt he held that against me. Two or three teachers over there held that against me. So, I transferred the next year to Marshall." At Marshall, he earned a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and certification to teach social studies. His first teaching position was in Red Jacket, where his grandfather had once lived.



Mary Brown, grandmother of Johnny Wesley Fullen.

Like John and Mary Brown, Johnny and Sue made a good team, contributing significantly to the community they lived in. As with Pikeville College, however, things didn't start off as smoothly as they might've hoped. Johnny said there were a few raised eyebrows because of their mixed-race marriage at first, but friends and family helped put an end to trouble in that direction.

Johnny Fullen's junior high and high school students came from Matewan, Beech Creek, Varney, Thacker, Pigeon Creek, and other places nearby. In getting to know students and their parents, his interest in community issues grew. He was a member of the Matewan Town Council from 1979 until his election as mayor.

In his interview with New-Walker, Steven said Johnny was successful as a mayor because all the Fullen children were taught by their grandparents to care about people. John-

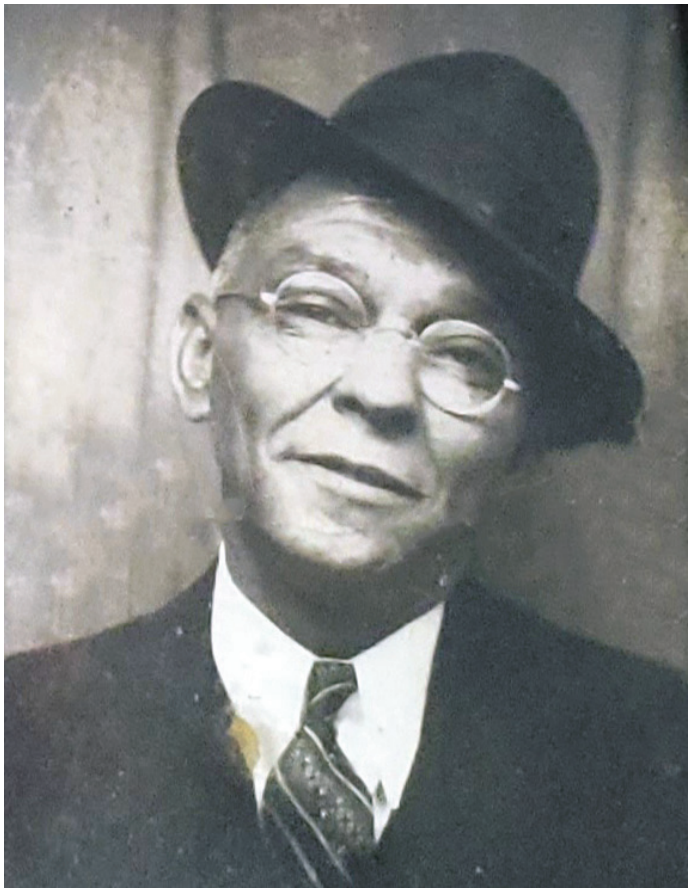
ny showed everyone who helped in some way how important their job was to the city. He respected everyone's contribution. Steven—a West Virginia University alumnus, taught school for 38 years and served on the Matewan Town Council for thirteen years. Both clearly share the family trait of caring about people and wanting to make the community better.

Johnny Fullen's enthusiasm for improving his community shows in his comments to Bailey about a donation given the city when he was mayor: "Why, the bank gave us ten thousand dollars about three months ago and went and bought a dump truck just to help this community. I mean, well, you can't beat the help I've had, really . . . It thrills me to know that we got it and what we're trying to do. I love it."

After his term as mayor, he served with the school system—as president of the school board, interim superintendent, and assistant superintendent until he retired from the system in 2000. After ending his educational career, he was Human Resource Director for Williamson Memorial Hospital and later served as Human Relations Director for Universal Coal Company.

The Dream : Johnny Wesley Fullen's sense of community went beyond Matewan and Mingo County. A long-time member of the NAACP, he recognized the problems Blacks across the nation faced in terms of human rights and personal opportunities. He served as president of the Williamson NAACP from 1993 to 1999 and again from 2005 to 2008. In 2009, when he was serving as Human Relations Director for the NAACP in West Virginia, he was given the Harmony and Peace Award from Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College for his work as president of the Williamson Branch of NAACP and Youth Council.

According to Steven, their grandfather told them time and again to "never let any one part of you define all of you," not race, not gender, not class. Both men took that advice to heart; and so, it's not surprising that in his acceptance speech for the NAACP award, Johnny Fullen described the continuing struggle against injustice in inclusive terms, saying, "This is a battle for equality for all, not just for Blacks." They recognize that no one part of themselves or of any person defines that person.



John Brown, grandfather of Johnny Wesley Fullen.

Sue died, at age 59, a year before Fullen made that speech. Johnny died in 2018, at age 73. Husband and wife lie side by side in a cemetery in Maher, West Virginia, about 30 miles from Matewan. The way they lived their lives showed their love for each other, for their family, friends, and community, and for the ideal of a fair, nurturing environment for all. Their legacy is their lived example of the power of a loving commitment to community, from the intimate community of marriage partners, to the wide community of humans of every race and geography.

EDWINA PENDARVIS is retired from Marshall University where she taught for 30 years. Eddy lives in Huntington, where she continues researching and writing. She currently serves as book review editor for Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel, journal of the Southern Appalachian Writers Cooperative. This is her fourth article for GOLDENSEAL, her most recent being Spring of 2024.

You're Going to Pruneytown!

by Laura Treacy Bentley

echoed from the principal's office
where we were told an electric paddle lived
beside a large wooden one
with one-inch holes drilled into it.
Pruneytown,

we whispered to our friends,
as an airborne paperweight zeroed
in on a skinny boy racing down the hall.
Our eyes widened with fear,
never knowing what Pruneytown was,

but it had to be bad like burning in hell.
Or, slow dancing with Satan to The Lord's Prayer
that Kate Smith belted over the intercom
in homeroom until our teeth rattled.
I worried that everyone in Pruneytown

had tiny shriveled heads because they
were fed only prunes. Nothing else.
When we ran out of food on Thursdays
before payday, Mother told us to eat a prune
and suck on the pit to kill our appetite.

Decades later, I discovered that Pruneytown
really existed, but it was *Pruntytown* with a "**t**,"
a reformatory for bad boys near Grafton, West Virginia.
Rich hoodlum thugs went to fancy military schools.
Poor hoodlum thugs were hauled off to Pruneytown.



Also known as the West Virginia Industrial School for Boys, or the West Virginia Reform School located in Taylor County, Pruntytown has been featured a couple of times in the pages of GOLDENSEAL. The Reform School operated from 1891-1983 before it closed and was repurposed as a prison—Pruntytown Correctional Center—in 1985.To learn more see Pruntytown: "A Good Place To Do Time?" and The Reverend Reneau: 33 Years as a Pruntytown Chaplain in Fall 1982, and My Boys: Teaching at Pruntytown from Spring 1990. As someone who grew up hearing Pruneytown being threatened—especially to my older brother—I can attest, the threat still lingers over many a head! – ed.

It was supposed to teach respect, discipline,
and some sort of trade like leatherwork or farming.
All I know is that vengeance of the unseen,
the unknown, and the unimaginable like hell
or purgatory or poltergeists or *Pruneytown*

was hurled from pulpits each Sunday
and sometimes from the principal's office.
It scared us straight for years.

LAURA TREACY BENTLEY is a poet and novelist from Huntington, West Virginia. Laura's work has been internationally published in *The New York Quarterly*, *Art Times*, T*he Southern Poetry Anthology*, *Poetry Ireland*, *The Stinging Fly*, and *Crannóg*, among others, and was featured on *A Prairie Home Companion*, *Poetry Daily*, *O Magazine*, and *Publishers Weekly*. Her second novel, *Glass Mountain*, will be published in February 2025.

The McDonald Sisters

by Susan L. Feller

How many times has GOLDENSEAL told the story of an object? Readers know in nearly every issue over the past 50 years. This article tells the story of a rug hanging in the State Museum in Discovery Room 25, Legacy of Crafts. The label reads "McDonald Sisters, 1970, applique' and hooked, Gilmer County." Part of the description on the entire display reads "Old Skills, New Markets .... Arts-and-crafts festivals have created another market for West Virginia artisans, craftspeople and musicians. This hooked rug, made by Otha and Blanche McDonald of Gilmer County was purchased in 1970 at the West Virginia State Folk Festival, the state's longest-running folk festival." I too use rug hooking in my artwork, and was intrigued by the craftsmanship of the McDonald Sisters. This was the start of my investigative journey.

Over a decade later, after following these first clues, some answers to questions about who were the McDonald sisters—what materials and techniques they used in making work and why; what influenced them; and who purchased their rugs—have been revealed. In 2011, The State Archives folder had their births and parents' names in Gilmer County. Otha McDonald, 2, Sept. 1892, and Blanche McDonald, 7, Sept. 1895, were born to Minnie Furr and John A. McDonald. PERIOD. Thanks to Glenville State University Library archivist Jason Gum; lead researcher at the time, Ginny Yeager; and the material donated by Fern Rollyson, founder of the WV State Folk Festival held in Glenville, we have images of the sisters at home, articles with interviews and awards.

Otha Lee was born on September 2, 1892 and died in Weston Hospital on December 23, 1975. Blanche McDonald was the third sister, born on September 7, 1895 she lived for her last year in the Worthington Manor Care Center in Parkersburg until her death December 29, 1976. Their sister Susan married and lived in Akron, OH. Susan's sons inherited the family property in Letter Gap, Gilmer County which was handed down to relatives until finally sold out of the Furr family in the early 2000s.



Hooked Rug by Otha and Blanche McDonald of Gilmer County, as it hangs in the West Virginia State Museum.



The McDonald sisters, Otha (left) and Blanche, pictured in their home displaying some of their rugs. Courtesy of Glenville State University Robert F. Kidd Library Archives.

In one article, the looped border around trapunto flowers in the sisters' work was described as "faux hooking." This was the first reference I had seen to the method the sisters used to fill wide sections of their work! I needed to examine an actual rug to understand what this meant. Knowing the State Museum also had a rug in storage which received a purchase award in 1968 at the first Appalachian Corridors Exhibition, I asked to see it. By turning this rug over, haphazard stitching was revealed through the muslin backing where I expected to see wide fabric loops. The sisters hand stitched each loop to the backing along with the layers of flowers and leaves. That is time consuming beyond my method of pulling loops one at a time through a loose weave fabric like burlap, called rug hooking.

I have been able to examine the actual construction of a couple of the McDonald sister's rugs while restoring and mounting them to hang on the wall. Burlap feed sacks are the base for initial construction so hooking could have been used. Why didn't they use both techniques, as I do in my work? What inspired them to fill the borders with stitched loops like hooked



Front and back of the McDonald sister's rug in the WV State Museum collections.

rugs. Researchers suggest they saw magazines in the early 1960s featuring the revival of colonial crafts and liked the texture of repetitive loops? Perhaps someone sold hooked rugs at the Glenville festival. Sadly, no interviewer asked them to discuss their process.

These two women were prolific, creating dozens of pieces sold at the festivals in Glenville at the West Virginia State Folk Festival, at Ripley at the Mountain State Art and Craft Fair, and under the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act with marketing assistance by the WV Department of Commerce—lead by director Donald Page and first crafts representative, Florette Angel. Records indicate their work was displayed at the Smithsonian in DC, but I have not been able to find dates for this. A photo of Blanche and a quilt with huge appliquéd sycamore leaves is the cover of the 1973 first edition of Hearth and Fair. The article inside describes Appalachian crafts people and their work selected to be exhibited at the Norton Art Museum in Los Angeles. The title of the exhibit was "Islands in the Land".

Although none of the footstools or rugs I have seen are signed or labeled, the McDonald's unique collage of motifs are easily identifiable. Several even have the same fabric and many include shiny copper threads, which I discovered were from Brillo pads!

The juror of Crafts for the 1968 Appalachian Corridors Exhibition was Paul Smith, director of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, NYC. He wrote in the catalog:





The McDonald Sisters hold up a work in progress. Courtesy of Glenville State University Robert F. Kidd Library Archives. In the top photo you see the finished rug, in color, which now belongs to Mrs. Page of West Virginia.



The McDonald sisters stand on the porch of their home, displaying one of their rugs. Courtesy of Glenville State University Robert F. Kidd Library Archives



The McDonald Sisters proudly hold up a rug of their making. Courtesy of Glenville State University Robert F. Kidd Library Archives.

"The Appalachian region has a long tradition of activity of crafts. It is hoped that this collection is the beginning of an expanding program to foster creative effort in the crafts on a level of high quality, and to encourage the important "softening" influence in our increasingly mechanized and dehumanized environment." Thanks to the West Virginia Biennial Juried Exhibitions held over four decades, fine craft and fine art have been equally awarded.

All of my research impressed upon me the importance of documenting not just your work, but your creative processes as well. I encourage you to document with photos your work in process, showing tools and materials. Record journal entries on inspiration, learning resources, mentors. Use social media to share these steps along with the final product. Prepare and update statements for quick press interviews. Sign your work. Generations from now collectors, researchers, even your family will know about the making and the person when they see and use the object.

SUSAN FELLER resides in Hampshire County and is an advocate for the arts community in Appalachia, artist with work in public and private collections, author, and curator. Follow on social media using @ArtWools and web SusanFeller.com This is her first contribution to GOLDENSEAL. Susan welcomes folks to contact her through GOLDENSEAL if you own or have knowledge of a work by the McDonald sisters.



Blanche McDonald poses with one of her footstools. Courtesy of Glenville State University Robert F. Kidd Library Archives



Susan Feller stands with her own footstool, made in the same fashion as the McDonald Sisters'.

I have mentioned footstools in this article. They are made with six cans of equal size forming a circle and one in the center as the base. Fabric is wrapped around the sides and a decorated top added. These are fun to make using all recycled materials. When I teach workshops we hook and applique' often using a stash of upholstery samples donated by the local furniture store. The closest I have gotten to actually meeting Blanche McDonald is by making a footstool. This link takes you to a supply list and instructions to make your own footstool or maybe trivet. https://artwools.com/2016/08/06/inspiration-explored-50-years-later/

For much more about the McDonald's story see SusanFeller.com/McDonalds

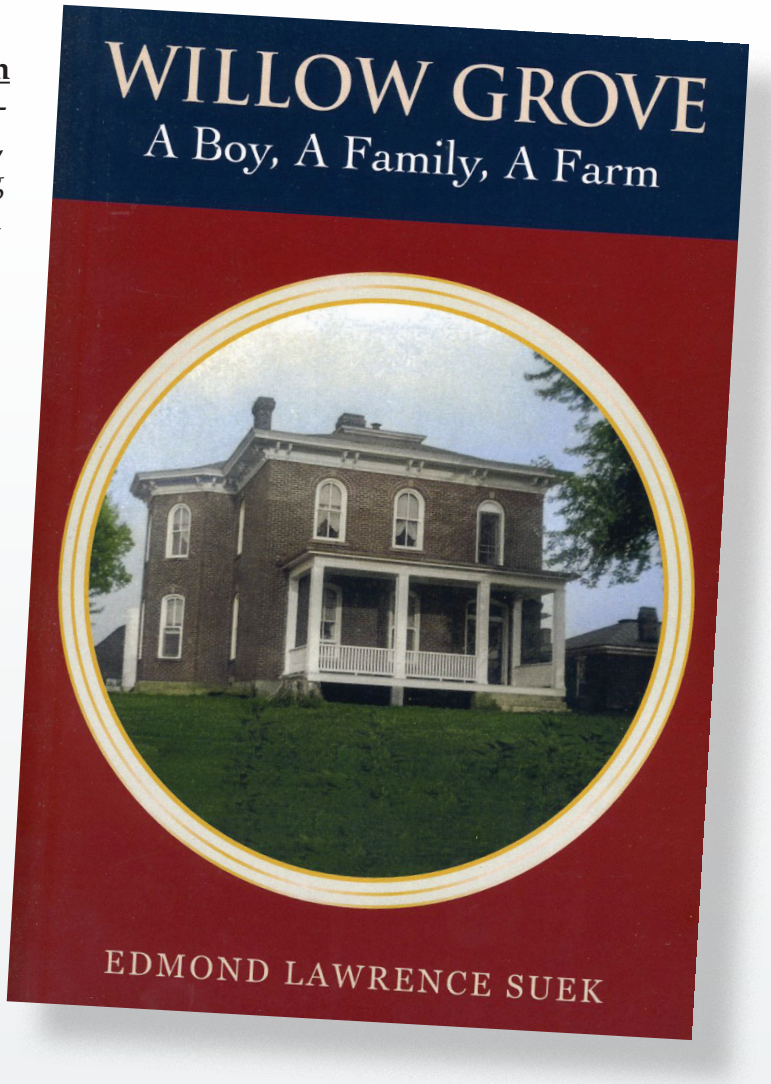
Thanks go to the Tamarack Foundation for the Arts Fellowship program for selecting me and the project to tell the McDonald sister's story in 2013. The funding helped with travel, and promoting the work at Sauder Village Rug Hooking Week 2016. Thanks also goes to Ellie Schaul who co-coordinated the Appalachian Corridors Exhibition in 1968 where the first rug received a purchase award and has helped me with research. I have since published an article in Jan/Feb 2017 Rug Hooking Magazine; conducted workshops at the Clay Center and online; and presented a lecture at the 2024 Penn Dry Goods Textile Series, Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center in Pennsburg, PA.

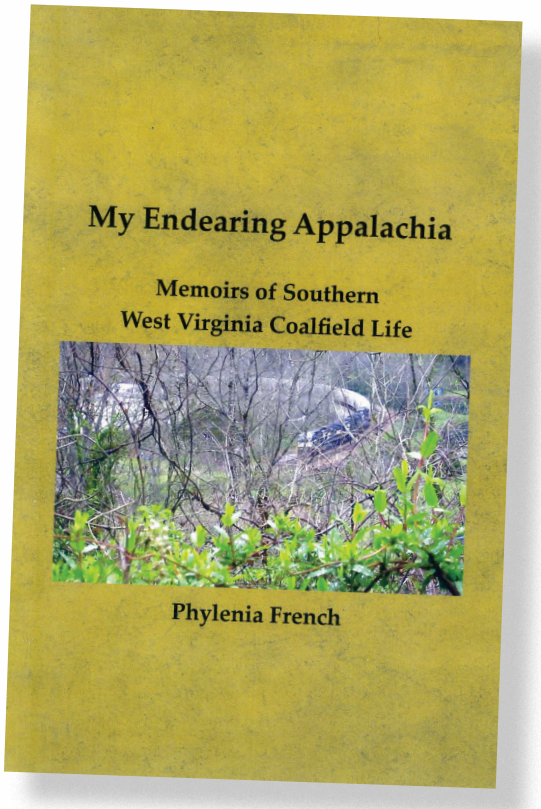
WV Books Available

We love promoting new books about West Virginia and Appalachia at GOLDENSEAL. Most of these publications have been mailed to our office for review, so this is not a comprehensive listing. We try to include these reviews in our Winter issue each year. If you know of a West Virginia history or folklife book that came out this year or will be out next year, please ask the author or publisher to send us a review copy: GOLDENSEAL, Culture Center, 1900 Kanawha Blvd. East., Charleston WV, 25305-0300.

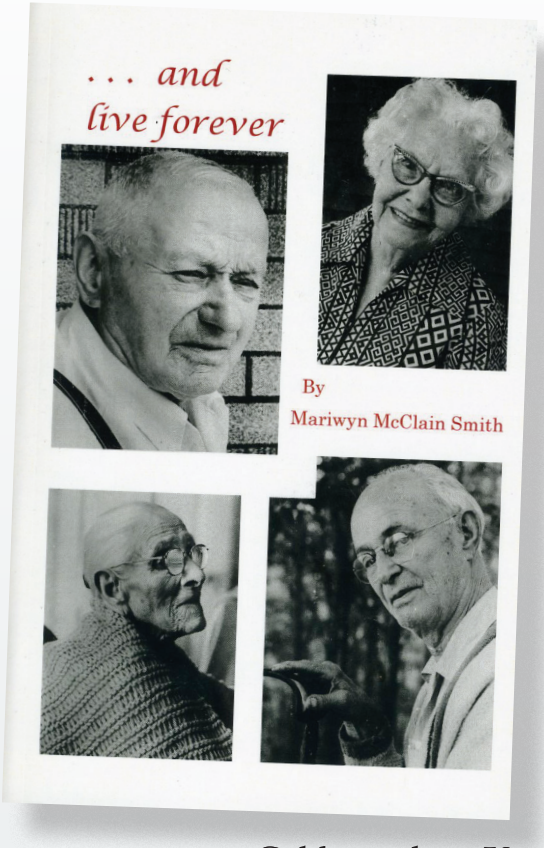
If you're looking for a copy of one of the following books, consider checking first with your local independent bookstore or the publisher. Though most of these books are available online we always encourage folks to support in-state businesses. –ed.

Willow Grove: A Boy, A Family, A Farm by Edmond Lawrence Suek (Orange Blossom Publishing, 416 pp.) In Willow Grove, Suek shares his recollections of growing up in Jackson County West Virginia on a rural dairy farm post World War II. What started as a small personal memoir quickly began to grow as he delved deeper into his family history, and shared long phone calls with his mother recounting their years at Willow Grove. Covering his childhood years from 1946-1955—the years he lived at his beloved family farm, Willow Grove—readers may find themselves laughing along, crying, and reminiscing of their own childhood as he recounts boyhood memories and lessons learned along the way. Broken into five chapters that cover a variety of subheadings, Suek shares some of his fondest memories, as well as those not so fond, in what the reader comes to understand as the strong foundation he would build his life on. Filled with family photos and maps of the region, this is a thorough picture of a time gone by that readers will relate to, especially those of us who grew up similarly in Appalachia.



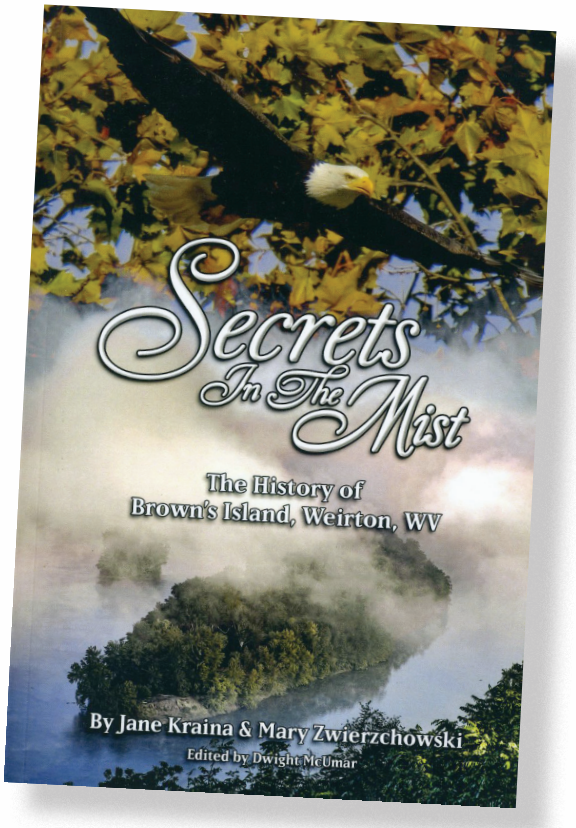


My Endearing Appalachia: Memoirs of Southern West Virginia Coalfield Life by Phylenia French (McClain Printing Company, 105 pp.) As the author notes in her introduction, "Hard work. Hard times. Good times. And happy times. Heartwarming and heartbreaking experiences. In all these places, each family member dealt with individual responses to them, yet we needed each other."— such are the memories she recounts in *My Endearing Appalachia*. Growing up in the coalfields of McDowell County, West Virginia during the 50s and 60s certainly had it's up and downs, as the author, and many other folks who were brought up in the coal camps of Appalachia can attest, but one enduring sentiment that seems to stand out is the happiness of growing up in nature sheltered by the mountains of West Virginia. In an era of 'make do and mend', many folks could make ends meet by supplementing with a family garden, a bit of frugality, and moral support of loved ones. That is not to say it was easy, but many folks now grown, look back with fondness on their childhoods growing up in the coalcamps, as does this author, making for a charming heartwarming read. Filled with many good quality family photos from the author, this is a lovely read for anyone looking to reminisce on "bygone days" in Appalachia.



...And Live Forever by Mariwyn McClain Smith (McClain Printing Company 521 pp.)

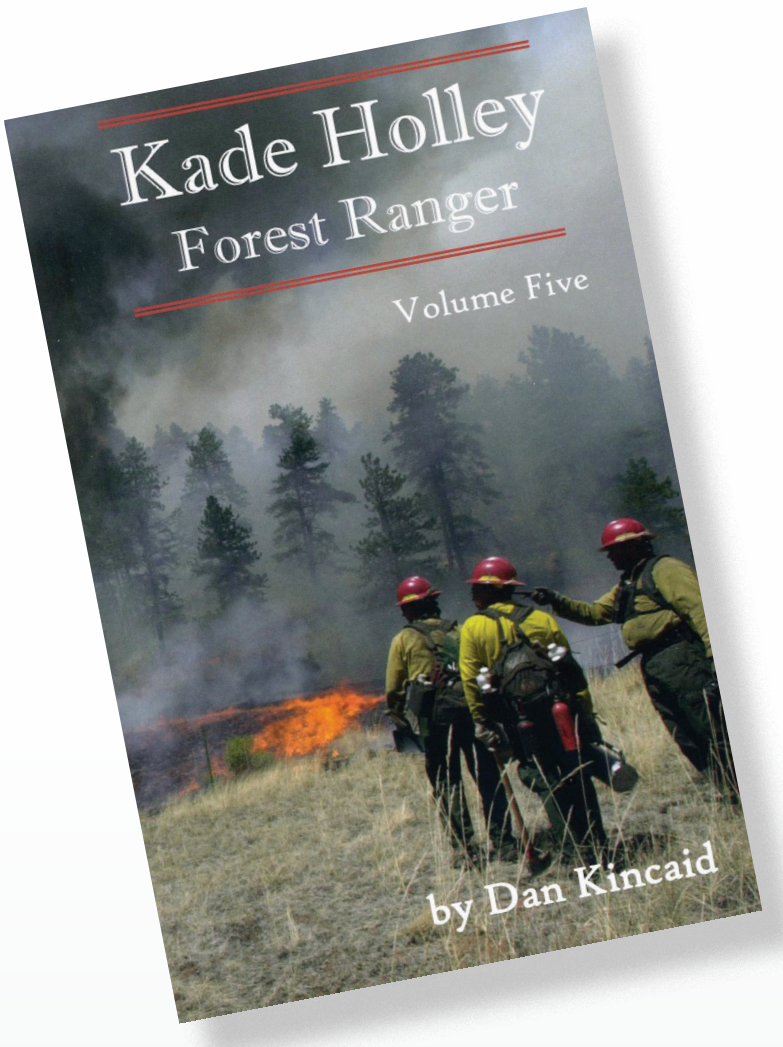
This reprint from 1974 is a compilation of Senior Citizen articles originally published in the *Parsons Advocate*. To be eligible for an interview at the time individuals had to have passed their 80th birthday, and have been a resident of Tucker County for several years. Many of them had lived their entire lives in Tucker County. The resulting articles have bits of wisdom and historical recollections that are now priceless. Many of the folks interviewed immigrated to America as teenagers. Sisters, brothers, couples, and individuals all share their stories. Two interviewees had lived more than 100 years, others were close to that, and several of the couples interviewed had celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. This is a publication that should never be forgotten, as the title suggests, through these interviews the folks within the pages may live forever.

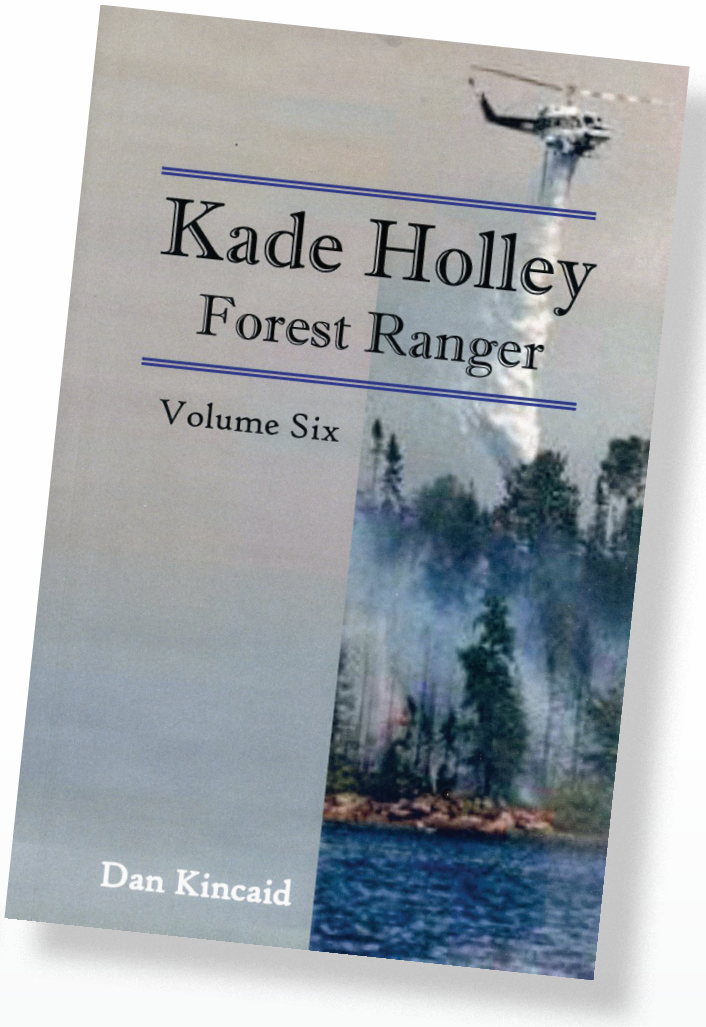


Secrets in the Mist: The History of Brown's Island, Weirton, WV by Jane Kraina and Mary Zwierzchowski (independently published, 257 pp.) In making this book Jane and Mary interviewed over 100 people, gathering bits of information from each to piece together the history of Brown's Island, commemorating the 19 men who lost their lives in the coke plant explosion that took place December 15, 1972. The book follows the history of the island from its earlier recorded history and Native American settlement to the preparation and building of the coke plant and the eventual explosion that took place. It even addresses the rumors of a Shawnee burial ground the plant may have been built on. This is a truly interesting compilation of interviews that tell the story of the island and this historic event in first and secondhand accounts. As Cath Priest notes on the back cover, " A remarkable long sought examination of the tragedy of Brown's Island from eyes and memories of people who lived it, suffered it, and long awaited the uncovering of the facts so relevant to the history of the triumphs and tragedies of this industrial community." History lovers will undoubtedly enjoy this carefully researched and thoughtfully written book.



Wandering Back-Roads West Virginia: Volumes One-Three by Carl E. Feather (The Feather Cottage, 162 pp.,170 pp.,183 pp.) This series of books combines the photos and interviews of Carl Feather spanning decades of documentary work, wandering the backroads of West Virginia, sharing people's stories. In many ways his work aligns with what GOLDENSEAL magazine aims to do —share the authentic stories of our people. Carl's work has appeared in our publication since 1987. The author himself states in the introduction, "While many of these stories have appeared in GOLDENSEAL, others are seeing print for the first time…Some published works appear here in longer forms and with more images and details." If you enjoy reading Carl's "West Virginia Back Roads" which is a regular feature in our magazine, you will certainly enjoy this more indepth look at the stories he has written over the years.

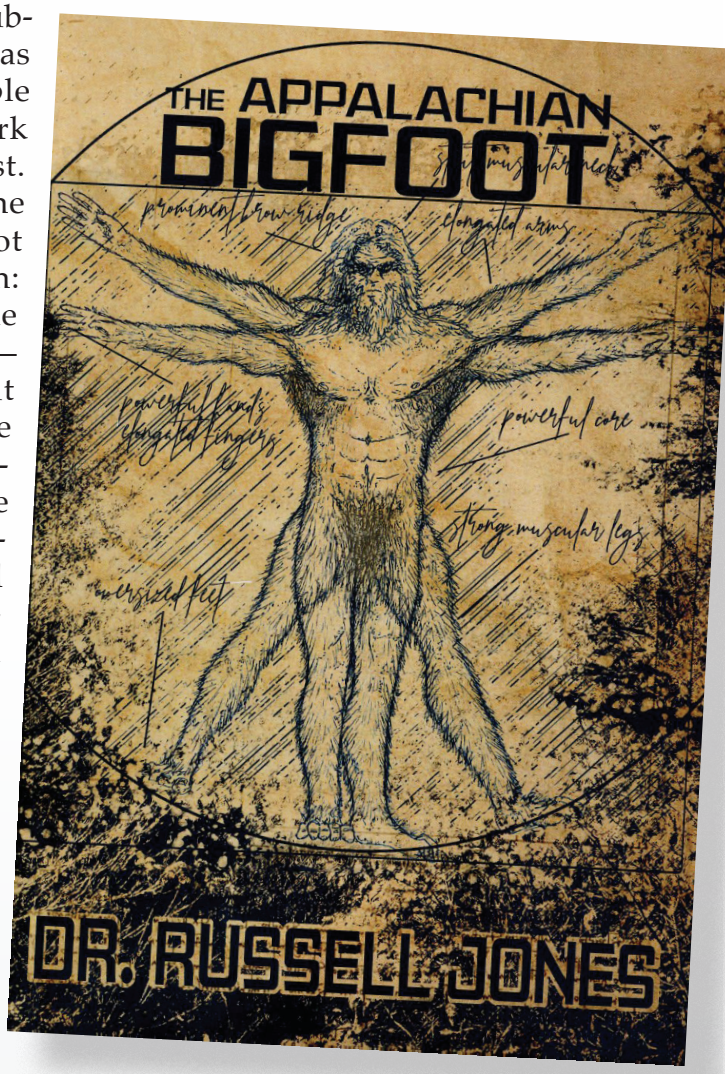




Dan Kincaid is back with more **Kade Holley Forest Ranger Volume Five & Six,** (Kade Holley Publishing, 162 pp., 204 pp.) We have shared Dan Kincaid's other Kade Holley Books in this space, and he is back again with volumes five and six. Kade Holley is a Forest Ranger employed by the U.S. Forest Service who spends time across Appalachia and the Midwest fighting forest fires, educating folks through public affairs and community outreach, and forest management. These books are a great way to learn more about the work that Forest Rangers do. Readers will enjoy these stories, perhaps not realizing the real life knowledge they are gaining along the way.

The Appalachian Bigfoot by Dr. Russell Jones

Review by Genie Moninger



In The Appalachian Bigfoot (Beyond The Fray Publishing, 216 pp.) Dr. Jones uses scientific data he has collected over a span of years, as well as multiple eye witness accounts to explain his lifelong work to prove the Appalachian bigfoot does indeed exist.

This book caught my eye, as I grew up in the Appalachian region listening to tales of bigfoot from my father. In 1976 we watched "Sasquatch: The Legend of Bigfoot" together. It always left me wondering—and at the impressionable age of ten—convinced that there may be something more out there. The legend appeals to those of us who love the freedom of the deep woods, the magic of nature, the wonder of things not yet proven. There are too many eye witness accounts to simply dismiss out of hand. For those, like me, who are still curious enough to delve further into Dr.Jones collected data, read on friend. In these pages you'll learn of the scientific side of tracking this elusive being—the hours of work that have been spent collecting data and tracking migrational evidence to prove the existence of said bigfoot in the Appalachian region.

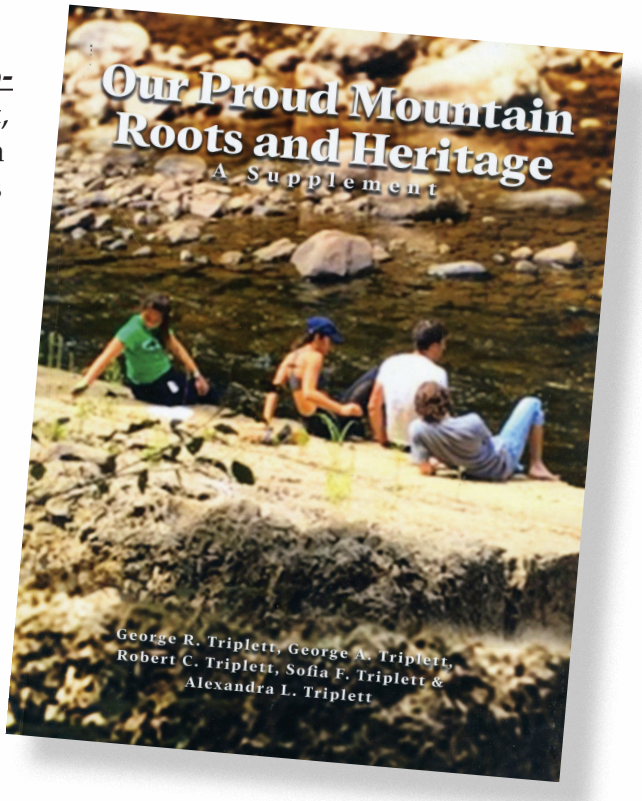
The book took off or, if you will permit, came alive for me when I read the extensive eye witness accounts. I do not believe that, with clear conscience, one can simply dismiss multiple people's testimony describing sightings of what is clearly the same being.

This reader admits The Appalachian Bigfoot is not for everyone. If your mind exists strictly inside the parameters of undeniable, rock solid proof, maybe stop reading here. This book is about the journey of wondering how soon it will be proven, not if it will be proven.

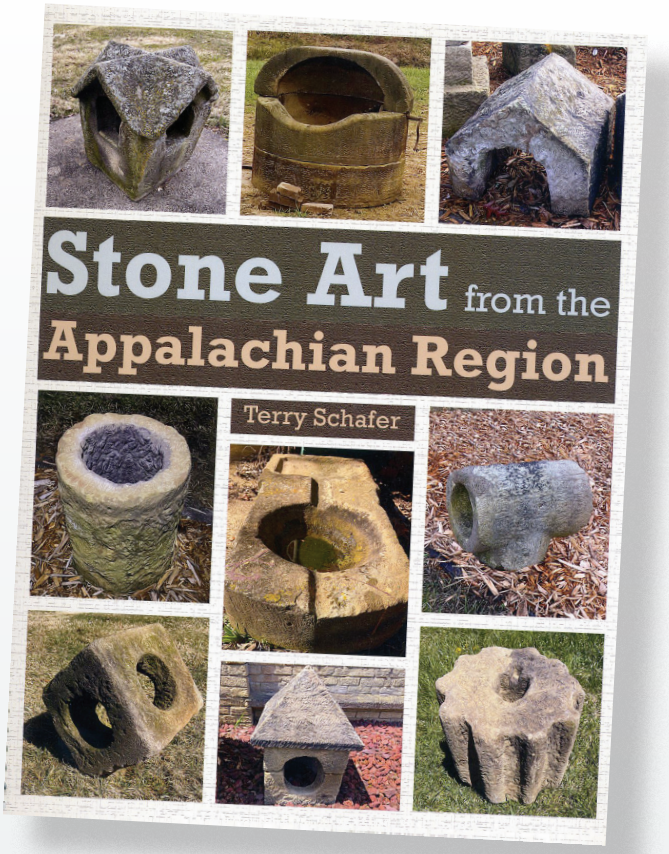
If you are wondering, is the Appalachian bigfoot real? If you, like this reader, want to explore the wonder of one of Appalachia's biggest phenomenons, absolutely read on! I know what I now believe to be the truth. I hope this sparks your curiosity and that, for a few moments in time, you allow yourself the privilege of entertaining the possibility that bigfoot is real!

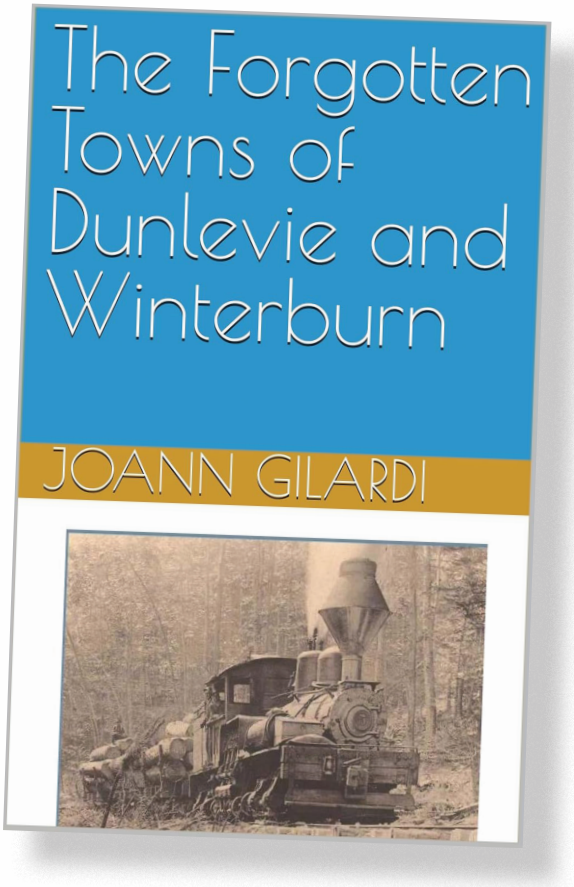
GENIE MONINGER is a proud West Virginian, Appalachian born and raised.

Our Proud Mountain Roots and Heritage: A Supplement by George R. Triplett, George A. Triplett, Robert C. Triplett, Sofia F. Triplett, & Alexandra L. Triplett (independently published, 223 pp.) This book is the product of a lot of hardwork from the author and his family. At 223 pages it is packed full of information on families in Randolph and Pocahontas Counties. This book is a great example of genealogical research, and successfully traces back thirteen generations in the Triplett family. It also offers the reader a look at life in Randolph and Pocahontas from an early time covering the rural communities of Coalton, Norton, Mabie, Montes, Flint, Falkner, and Bowden. The Hart, Rossi, DiBacco, Saccoccia, Arbogast, Harris, are all discussed in this book, but most extensively is the history of the Triplett family. Readers may find their own copy on Amazon.

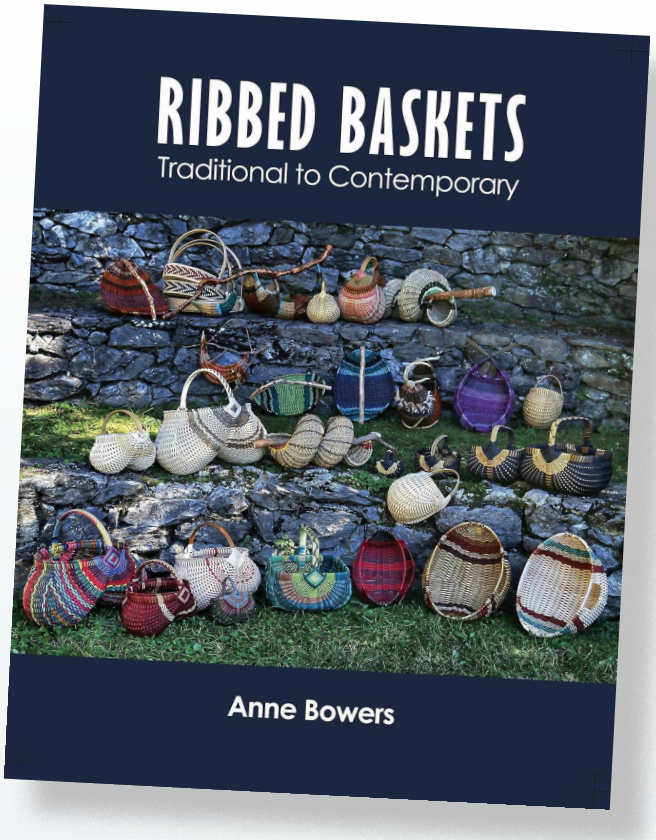


Stone Art From the Appalachian Region by Terry Schafer (independently published, 40 pp.) is the work of over two decades of research from the author. With several chapters dedicated to chimney stones, captstones, rafter stones, vertical flue stones, and functional water related stone works of art—this book is a great resource for anyone looking to learn more about stone art of the Appalachian region. Stone was an important resource for people in the Appalachian region. From Native settlements through to early pioneers, stone was used as foundations for structures, fireplaces, watering troughs, sisterns, fountains, wash basins, grindstones, and more. With clear, colored photos throughout the author walks the reader through the various examples of unique stone art he has encountered in his travels throughout West Virginia and Ohio, roughly dating each piece and noting it's location. He also covers some tools of the trade artists used in their finishing work dressing stones. To purchase your own copy of this unique publication you can reach out to Terry at his email americanindianart@gmail.com or by calling 740-525-2807.



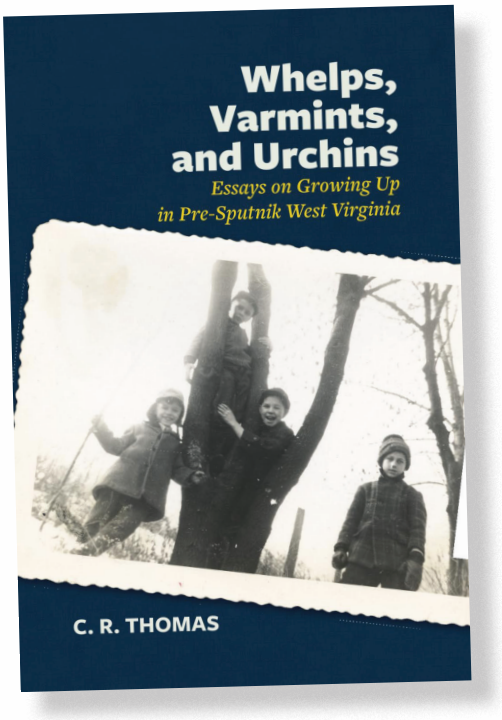


The Forgotten Towns of Dunlevie and Winterburn by JoAnn Gilardi (independently published, 108 pp) covers these two historic sawmill towns of Pocahontas County. With many unseen historic photos from Ms. Jessie Beard Powell who shared her life of pictures, of the town and family, and colored photos made by the author, this book recounts the history of these forgotten towns. Taking the reader from the acquiring of the land In June 1905, by Ernest V. Dunlevie of Buffalo, New York through to the community's eventual decline, any West Virginia History buffs or rail fans will count this book worthwhile.



Ribbed Baskets: Traditional to Contemporary by Anne Bowers (Dorrance Publishing, 108 pp) In this instructional book, basketmaker Anne Bowers [see our Fall 2024 issue for more on Anne's basketry] guides the reader through the art of ribbed basketry. This book is a must have for anyone looking to learn the skill of basketmaking, or basketmakers looking to expand their knowledge. According to the description, "These are different from other kinds of baskets because, to make these baskets in the traditional way, measurements can't be given. Instead, author Anne Bowers trains people how to visually measure and how to shape with their hands so the baskets they make are successful from the start." Anne created this book with the intention of sharing her knowledge so this skill may not be lost to time like some other artforms and skills that have fallen out of practice, the knowledge dying with the maker. She intentionally created this book for learners of all skill levels. There are beautiful color photos throughout that illustrate the making process. You can purchase your own copy from dorrancepublishing.com.

Whelps, Varmints, and Urchins: Essays on Growing Up in Pre-Sputnik West Virginia, by Charles R. Thomas (independently published, 266 pages) Some readers may recognize the name C.R. Thomas from our previous issues of Goldenseal. Dr. Thomas passed away in September of 2023. Five of the stories included in this collection of his work were also published in GOLDENSEAL at some point. As summed up so eloquently on the back cover, "Childhood business ventures and political endeavors, not-always-stellar teachers, ill-advised adventures, sports, pranks, hitchhiking, a night spent in jail, time serving in the US Marines, formative role models, unforgettable friends and family … such tales are what Chuck Thomas brings to life in this collection." Readers will get a kick out of Dr. Thomas's relatable and hilarious tales. You can find your copy on Amazon by searching the above title.



"Old-Time Conversations: Finding Health, Happiness and Community Through Old-Time Music." By Craig R. Evans

Review by Gerald Milnes

Old-Time Conversations: Finding Health, Happiness and Community Through Old-Time Music (McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 287 pp.), documents a mid-western old-time banjo player's take on the national old-time music community as it exists today with an emphasis on banjo makers and (mainly eastern and Appalachian) old-time music players. It starts with a Foreword by fiddler Clare Milliner, who presents her autobiography and her introduction to traditional music, in much the same path as the author takes and as various player's interviews do later in the book. It follows that the preface, Introduction, and Part One are largely a recounting of the author's personal journey through early family life and musical influence (his mother played piano), his educational experiences, and his various occupations in advertising, marketing, and web site design. This leads up to a point at fifty years old whereby as a marketing executive he decides (with the help of therapy and a pastor) that he needs a life changing direction. He finds that new path in old-time music.

This new direction leads him to West Virginia's Dwight Diller and a banjo workshop that was held in the state of Michigan. As Dwight equated old-time music with religion, this suits the author fine, and Dwight tells him when he achieves progress, "that's the Lord speaking through you." The progress with his banjo playing under Dwight's tutelage leads the author to find the community of musicians he is seeking. It takes him out of his doldrums. He then extrapolates how this national community of musicians find meaning in life through many conversations with today's traditional musicians and luthiers.

Part I: My Story, is Evan's life journey that, near the end finally introduces the end endeavor, which is to meet and interview banjo builders and then old-time music play-

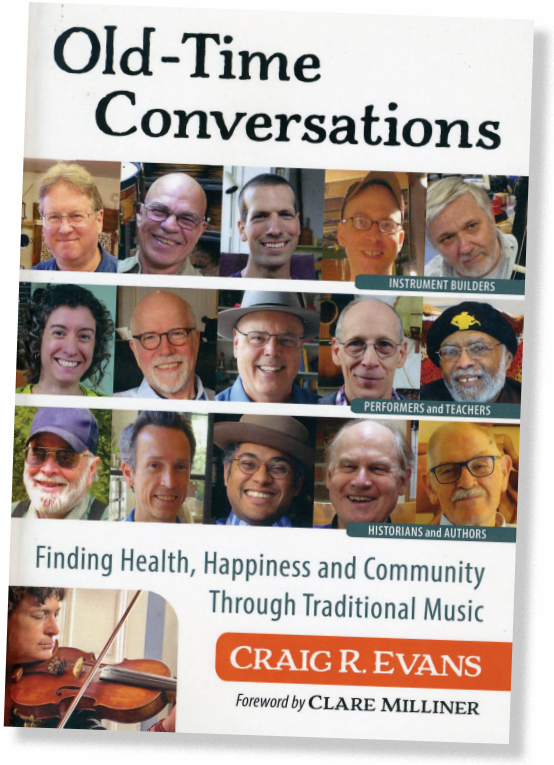
ers. This ends up with a promotion of the author's three-series production of DVDs which provide the bulk of the material for this section.

Part II gets to the interviews and introduces transcribed excerpts of the DVD recordings with several nationally known (to players) old-time banjo builders, and a few who are more obscure. Evans offers comments and locational settings for these meetings. Their personalities, interests, and reasons for what they do are drawn out by the author. Most have reasons, other than profit, for doing what they do, although some have attained financial success. For many depictions of their work, the banjos themselves, you must seek them on-line.

Banjo builders Kevin Enoch and Pete Ross are included and have had connections to the state through their teaching efforts at the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins. Most other featured builders come from disparate regions in this country and even Canada. The author explores their trajectories through various musical genres and styles and even benevolent motives that eventually leads them to old-time banjo building. Most had previous woodworking experience of some kind.

Part II then concentrates on performers and teachers. Most interviewees are known to contemporary players in the digital age and because they are currently touring and performing. They include Mac Benford, Paul Brown, David Holt, Sheila Kay Adams, John McCutcheon, Rayna Gellert, "Sparky" Rucker, and Claire Milliner. They mainly provide interviews about their life's journeys. They differ from most all of the people from whom they learned, who did not relate to the music as professional musicians. Revivalist players are the main concern here.

Part II continues with historians and authors. Dom Flemons explains black influence on the music and Tim Brooks is described as a "musical history truth finder." Bill Malone's deep dive into the history of country music, evident in his published works, makes comments of interest to players and enthusiasts. It seems that most who play old-time music have an interest in its history and Malone's expertise is significant. West Virginian Dwight Diller (1946-2023) is interviewed here, although he never authored any works, he speaks about his musical philosophy as much as about the music itself. His unique take on old-time music, as it connected to his personal life experiences, religion, and relationship with West Virginia's talented Hammons Family is explained.



Part III, In the Company of Music introduces The Appalachian String Band Music Festival, better known as "Clifftop," located in Fayette County, West Virginia. This section accurately depicts the old-time music scene as it exists today, whereby the musical community seems to be as important as the music itself.

Finally, the question is presented, "Why Play Old-Time Music" which is followed by "How Music Works Magic," which is a conversation with author Josh Turknett.

GERALD MILNES is the retired Folk Arts Coordinator at the Augusta Heritage Center of Davis & Elkins College. An author, musician, and folklorist, he makes his home in Elkins.

Goodbye, Old Man Winter:
Helvetia Celebrates Fasnacht

By Peggy Ross

Spring is here, and you can thank the folks in Helvetia for that. They burned Old Man Winter last month, just as they do every year. The flames are lit at midnight on the Saturday preceding Ash Wednesday. That's the night this Swiss community celebrates Fasnacht, a ritualistic chasing away of cold weather.

In an earlier time, Fasnacht Eve was Shrove Tuesday, the day before Lent began. But the actual origins of this late-winter festival go back to pagan times, when similar celebrations scared away evil spirits and attempted to please the goddess of fertility as the new growing season approached.

Over the centuries, all that became intertwined with Christianity, and today Fasnacht is celebrated in the same spirit and at about the same time as Mardi Gras. Fasnacht is less boisterous and lasts only one evening, but it has its noise, masks, costumes, and merrymaking. The dancing is so vigorous that a less hardy stock of people would drop mid-step.

"When I was a little girl, Helvetia held dances every Saturday night," Eleanor Mailloux (pronounced Mahue) says. "We danced waltzes, mazurkas, folk dances, squares and the 'Helvetia Polka.' After Fasnacht was over, though, we didn't dance again until after Easter."

Mailloux's ancestors were Swiss, just like all the other settlers of this Randolph County mountain community, which is not much more than a crossroads today. After spending their first years in America in Brooklyn, the founders established Helvetia in 1869 as an organized agricultural colony. It wasn't easy, but after years of deprivation, their rocky fields started to flourish and repay the effort.

The German-speaking farmers sought ways to relax. They needed a respite from the work. Mailloux says there was a time when almost everyone in the area played some sort of musical instrument. "Folks often got together on Sunday afternoons. That was when the Star Band Hall was used frequently. Women played right alongside the men," she recalls.

The Star Band was a brass band with a strong ethnic flavor. Today, groups performing at Helvetia mostly play string-band music, but for Fasnacht a Swiss band gets together not only to play but to yodel and perform on the Alp horn.

The community hall, built in 1939, is all decked out for the event. Old Man Winter's effigy hangs from the greens-adorned chandelier high in the center of the room. The spacious hall is often in use in this gregarious neighborhood.

But Fasnacht isn't something that just happens overnight, nor is it just a dance. Masks are homemade and costuming requires forethought. They are supposed to be frightful — "the scarier the better," according to a recent pamphlet, "because the idea is to drive Old Man Winter away." Visitors can bring their own or rummage around at the Beekeeper Inn to find something suitable.

Kathy Mailloux, who works in her mother's Hutte Restaurant, says her mask making begins several months before Fasnacht. She works in papier mache, creating fierce countenances with paint and imagination. Prizes are awarded for the best, the funniest, most beautiful, most bizarre, and most traditional costumes during Fasnacht.

Here where "we're all in favor of progress if you don't make any changes," the Hutte is the focal point for the evening's kickoff. Mailloux and her staff cook for days, including as much as 48 hours at a stretch just before serving begins.

By the time festivities get underway, some of them go home to bed instead of joining the fun. Others hang in there, leaving dirty dishes in the kitchen and pots stuck to the table. Bleary-eyed and weary, they join in the foot stomping at the hall.

The Swiss are beer drinkers by tradition, but Helvetians have got rules about that. "For two generations now, the people of Helvetia have decided to not allow beer in the town hall because it caused problems," Mailloux says. It is not, however, banned outside. When the band takes a break, there are dartings in and out as people slip out for a drink or a trip to the cold, cold toilets.

Helvetia is a tight knit community. That shows up in the dancing as much as anywhere else. Rare is the



A Helvetia celebration, about 1915. Photo by Walter Aegerter, courtesy State Archives.

Fasnacht Hozablatz

Food is a big part of Fasnacht, especially the foods that won't be available during the coming season of Lent. Here's a traditional Helvetia recipe for hozablatz:

9 eggs
1 cup medium cream
1 pinch salt
enough flour to make a stiff dough

The old people say that the dough should be rolled so thin that you can read a newspaper through it. In the old days, the women had a special apron that they spread over their knee for making hozablatz, which translates into English as "knee patches." They would pull a small piece of dough into a very thin patch.

You can also roll the dough out and cut into patches three or four inches in diameter. Heat some lard in a skillet — it should be hot enough for fast frying. When the patches are golden, turn and brown the other side. Remove to a paper towel, sprinkle with sugar and invite me!

--Eleanor Mailloux

person, old or young, who sits one out. Neither are baby-sitters required for this communal gathering. Children are as integral a part of the goings-on as are food and drink. As long as they are old enough to walk, they dance right along with everyone else — accepted and more or less ignored. The only danger may be of getting trampled.

It is easy to see that these people have danced together for years. They do it with grace. They are at ease with one another. Except for the strangers in their midst, feet are adept at following squares with or without calling, circles are beautifully formed, and no one misses a do-si-do.

The "Helvetia Polka" is still danced. Helvetia, by the way, is the Latin name for Switzerland.

The hall's tables groan under the weight of Fasnacht foods. Because part of the menu's goal is to get rid of the year's leftover fats, much of the spread is deep fried. Not for the faint of stomach or cholesterol watchers, it includes donuts, keucli (thinly-rolled, deep-fried cake), hozablatz, bolleflade and other goodies.

The food begins earlier in the evening at the Hutte's by-reservation smorgasbord, featuring a plethora of Swiss offerings: bratwurst, chicken, potato dumplings, sauerkraut, Helvetia cheese, homemade bread and desserts. Wine is shared if someone happens to bring it along and feels like spreading the wealth among other diners. Only 48 people can be served at once in the restaurant, so sometimes an anxious Mailloux orders people to vacate tables so others can be seated.

A parade of masked merrymakers forms in town after dinner despite cold weather or snow. They carry noisemakers and lampions, the former to scare away evil spirits and the latter to light their way to the hall. Among the costumed revellers are outsiders who may have had to call from the foot of the mountain for residents' four-wheelers to come get them. The weather does not always cooperate on this day devoted to ending its sting.

Fasnacht has been "discovered," that's for certain, and visitors are numerous. It's a homecoming, anyway, and just as well, because that prompts absentee property owners to come back to open their houses and take in guests. The nearby bed-and-breakfast inns, like Grandpa John's three miles away in Pickens or Juanita Bunter's house just down the road in Czar, fill up fast. Eleanor's Beekeeper Inn is booked a year in advance.

Visitors, then, have few choices. They can go back down the mountain when the fun has ended, pitch a tent on the freezing ground, or sleep in a travel trailer or car. Lucky is the person who gets invited to stay with someone they know.

The celebrating doesn't truly end at midnight, but Old Man Winter certainly does. Unceremoniously dragged from his chandelier, he is dumped on the prepared bier in the yard and set ablaze. People cheer as his strawy innards crackle into ashes. Then many of them go on to other parties.

Fasnacht is not easily given up.



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Folks gather outside of Helvetia Star Band Hall as the lampion parade takes place during Fasnacht 2024. Photo by Jennie Williams, West Virginia Folklife.

Fasnacht in Helvetia:

A Celebration of Swiss Traditions and Community Spirit

by Becky Hill

On a chilly, gray February morning, I find myself driving the winding back roads to Helvetia. I arrive a little carsick but brimming with excitement because I'm about to introduce my partner to one of my favorite holidays in one of my favorite places. Helvetia, a small Appalachian Swiss settlement nestled in Randolph County, has a population of just thirty-eight. But today, several hundred people have navigated the same path to join in the revelry of the 57th annual Fasnacht, a Swiss pre-Lenten tradition dating back to 1520 that celebrates the end of winter.

We arrive as the town begins to stir. People are meandering about, masks tucked under their arms—not yet fully in costume, but ready at a moment's notice. There are two main roads in Helvetia, Pickens and Helvetia-Adolph Road, the Hütte restaurant is seated right at the intersection of both. The Swiss architecture adds to the town's charm, with a library, post office, two dance halls, and several buildings dating back to



Sculptor Jamie Lester of Morgantown, West Virginia prepares for the lampion parade outside the Helvetia Star Band Hall, 2015. Photo by Pat Jarrett.

the 1860s, all framed by a babbling brook running through the center. Cell phone service is a bit unreliable here, and GPS can be spotty at best, making Helvetia feel like a place where time works a bit differently.

My first stop is the Community Hall to check that everything is set up for the evening square dance. I've been given the honor of hosting the dance tonight—a task that fills me with both anticipatory excitement and a little nervousness. I learned to call square dances while traveling the backroads of West Virginia when I worked on the The Mountain Dance Trail through Augusta Heritage Center. And tonight, I get to support the unique square dance traditions of Helvetia, a task I don't take lightly. I review my notes and check-in with the band before quickly heading over to the Hütte. If one thing is certain, it is that I must get a piece of their legendary peach cobbler before the night is through.

By the time we arrive, the line outside the Hütte stretches down Pickens Road as people wait to feast on Helvetia's famed sample platter—homemade sausage and cheese, hot apple sauce, fresh bread, sauerkraut, and more. As someone who has visited Helvetia many times before and runs a small old-time music and dance festival here, Helvetia Hoot, I'm surprised to see so many unfamiliar faces in line. Cars are parked for miles in either direction, and more are still arriving. It seems the word about Fasnacht has spread, thanks in part to *Fallout 76*, a video game released in 2018 that featured Helvetia. The locals I do recognize are busy serving food, setting up



Becky Hill (left) pictured with Sarah Brown as they await the results of the mask judging contest. 2024. Photo courtesy of the author.



Fasnacht attendees patiently wait in line during the mask judging contest. 2024. Photo by Jennie Williams, West Virginia Folklife.

sound systems, selling tickets, leading jam sessions, and bustling around town hosting this fantastical event—all while still sporting a bit of sparkle in their eyes. The work required to run this event is hard, but worth it for the community. The Helvetia Restoration and Development Organization raises funds for the village's restoration, development, and archives, while sharing their unique Swiss traditions with others.

Once seated, the coziness of the Hütte soothes any nervousness I had felt about the square dance. I let the comforting smells from the kitchen wash over me as I regale my partner with stories of Fasnacht past—of the vegetable band that serenaded masqueraders, of David Russell hollering out square dance figures as we danced underneath the effigy of Old Man Winter, and of how the youngest girl awake at the end of the square dance would cut down Old Man Winter and throw him into the fire. I reflect on how special it is to have these memories, and how, while some things have changed, the heart of the tradition remains the same.

The Fasnacht schedule has shifted in recent years to allow for more family participation—and it's working. Events begin at 3 p.m. and wrap up by 10 p.m. Little ones run around donning dinosaur masks, roaring at anyone who passes, while others stare at the masks with a mixture of curiosity and unease. Earlier in the day, Dave Whipp led a historical walking tour of the town, and Clara Lehmann shared the history of Fasnacht and Lent inside the Zion Presbyterian Church. Helvetia is telling its



Masked dancers crowd the dance hall during a Fasnacht celebration. Photo courtesy of Alan Byer.

story in its own words, and it's a beautiful thing to witness.

After our meal, we make our way to the field, passing the Star Band Hall where the sound of *Country Roads* emanates from a raucous jam session inside. I slip away to put on my costume—turquoise sparkling jellyfish—while my partner transforms into the Four Winds, an impressive mask making endeavor for his first Fasnacht. As the sun sets, a procession of wondrous masked creatures begins to gather in the field. The crowd is large and diverse; there are families, puppeteers whose masks are larger-than-life, a few spectators on four wheelers just trying to take it all in, and I even spy the West Virginia State Botanist and State Folklorist. Eventually I am able to recognize a few people in the crowd I know and I can't help but wiggle wildly at them. Here we are in the middle of Helvetia in masks we sculpted with our hands, attempting to scare away Old Man Winter. I smile to myself as I think—Helvetia is at it again, enchanting all who find their way here.

The evening reaches its pinnacle during the mask judging. Many of the masks are crafted from paper mâché, hand-painted, carved, or sewn—each a testament to the hours spent creating them. As several hundred masqueraders promenade in a large circle for the contest, Phil McAvoy strums his guitar, singing the songs that help him get through the winter. Local judges stand at the center of the circle, awarding small felt Swiss flags to the mischievous masqueraders they believe deserve recognition for their artistry. Cheers erupt as the winners are announced. I'm even awarded a flag, even though I'm unsure I deserve it, I'm elated to receive it. After the judging, the lampion parade begins. Volunteers hand out paper lanterns, leading the crowd from the field down Helvetia-Adolph Road, across the brook, and to the Community Hall, where the effigy of Old Man Winter will be tossed into the flames, signaling the end of winter and the arrival of spring. As the parade marches through the town, the night sky is on full display, and the lanterns illuminate the faces of masked revelers, both young and old. As we slowly make our way towards the campfire the sound of voices chanting grows louder and louder until Old Man Winter has been consumed by the flames. Spirits are high, and many revelers toss their own masks into the fire as they get caught up in the festivities.

As the flames grow, the string band inside the Community Hall kicks into a fast hoedown, drawing people in. This is my cue to step away and begin my role as host for the square dance. The transition from revelry to calling square dances takes a moment, but soon I'm behind the microphone, asking everyone to "Circle Up."

At this point, many families begin to wrangle their kids and head home, but those who stay are in for a night of exuberant square dancing. My job tonight is to teach square dance figures to rowdy masqueraders as local callers yell out traditional Helvetia figures like "Swing ol' Adam, Swing ol' Eve." I see myself as a translator between local tradition-bearers and newcomers, empowering social dance to fill the Community Hall with joy. The Helvetia Polka, a Swiss schottische, is requested over and over as couples twirl around the floor, doing the "one, two, three hop." The State Birds, featuring legendary Monroe County musicians Tessa and Chance McCoy, shred old-time fiddle tune, after fiddle tune, as the crowd hollers their way through each dance.

As the evening winds down, the crowd thins and the clock nears 10 p.m. We wrap up with a waltz, sending everyone out into the night. If you're lucky enough to still be standing at the end of the square dance and get the right invitation, the party continues down the road at a neighbor's house, where local musicians play into the early



The dancers get warmed up, during the 2024 Fasnacht celebration. The State Birds, featuring West Virginia musicians Tessa and Chance McCoy accompanied by Cody Jordan, Jesse Milnes, and Joanna Burt-Kinderman provide the music. Photo by Jennie Williams, West Virginia Folklife.

hours. This is the moment when you see the community exhale—they've managed to pull it off again, and now they toast to the 57th annual Fasnacht. Tomorrow, they'll wake up a bit bleary-eyed and exhausted to pack it all up, clean out the dance hall, and put the revelry in storage until it's time to do it all again next year for the 58th annual Fasnacht. But right now, they revel in the moment.

Right now, I too exhale—the square dance was a success, and my heart feels full. I stay out until the clock strikes a new day. When I finally sneak away from the merrymaking to head to bed, my partner and I find ourselves alone on Pickens Road and something moves us to sing. I'm not sure I know why we lifted our voices up into the night sky, but I like to tell myself that maybe it was the sound of the coming of spring.

BECKY HILL is a sought-after percussive dancer, Appalachian square dance caller, choreographer, curator, and educator. Becky has studied with an array of percussive dance tradition bearers and performs regularly with Jesse Milnes. She was a 2018 OneBeat Fellow and a 2024 Balkans OneBeat International Fellow, as well as an Artist-in-Residence at Strathmore, John C.Campbell Folk School, Loghaven, and Hambidge Center for the Arts and Sciences. She co-founded The Mountain Dance Trail and worked for Augusta Heritage Center for nearly a decade as the Event Organizer, she now serves as the cultural advisor for Augusta's Old-Time Week. As an avid organizer and teacher, Becky's work is deeply rooted in the connections between music and community. Learn more at www.rebeccahill.org This is her third contribution to GOLDENSEAL.

Memories From a Child of the Mountains, Wyoming County, WV

by Nancy Rhodes

A blank sheet of paper awaiting a memory. A memory rapidly fading from an aging brain. Moments of wonder giving way to gentle smiles. These memories are all that remains in the detritus of a long life well lived—all that remains is love. There are mountains surrounding those memories, mountains as old as time, mountains with tall trees holding the secrets of those who came before, mountains containing the gold of rich men in the form of coal.

These same mountains are the playgrounds of children who live among them. They support dreamers, adventurers, and freedom seekers who reach for the sky. Those who have never felt the hug of a mountain have never sobbed at the foot of one of her trees.

In the year of our Lord, 1944, seven-year-old Jenny sat at the base of an ancient oak thinking of her favorite uncle, Johnny, at war in a place called The Pacific. All of her uncles were somewhere in the War but Johnny was in terrible danger right now. Her mother said so, crying as she peeled potatoes for supper.

Jenny's mother, Ana, taught Jenny to read from a newspaper before she ever went to school. She started with the funnies and graduated to the front page several months ago. Jenny would sit on the floor beside her mother's chair and read the news aloud as Ana drank her morning coffee. The news spoke of Peleliu and France. It spoke of death and victory in the same sentence. Jenny took this news with her to the mountain and the old tree.

"I don't know what this means," Jenny whispered to the leaves. "Does it mean Johnny will die?" There was no answer except for a gentle breeze through the tree branches. Even the birds were suddenly quiet, just for a second. When the sounds of nature returned, Jenny sighed and felt the traces of tears beginning to fall as she mourned the possibility of the loss of someone she held dear.

Grandmother Mountain held the strength of millennia in her rocks and soil. Rich black dirt covered her glorious core like a mane of wildly unkempt hair. Her gray eyes shone from granite outcroppings. She wore rhododendrons in her hair. Sandstone and black diamonds of coal decorated her clothing. Expressive hands held the forest and all of its creatures. Life of many forms sifted through her strong sturdy fingers. She is power. She is forever. She is a survivor. She listens to her children when they speak. Jenny made her way home for supper. Grandmother Mountain watched as this child of her heart arrived safely at home before she settled down into the gathering dusk.

With clean hands, a shining face, and a water-splashed dress front, Jenny climbed into her chair and bowed her head as Ana said the blessing for food, home, and love. After supper was finished, dishes done and put away, Ana and Jenny walked to the front porch and sat on the old swing to watch fireflies as they drifted through the night air twinkling as they went.

"Mom," Jenny said, "Do you think Johnny is OK?"

"I don't know, Sweetheart. I hope he is safe. It's a hard thing to say, hard to be at

war, hard to be away from home. I know he misses you as much as you miss him. My brother is a good man, strong and brave enough to do what he must do. Part of what he must do is to survive so he can come home to us. He is always in our thoughts, always in our prayers, and we write letters so he will know how much we love him. That's our part of the bargain. We will never let him think he is forgotten here at home." Jenny nodded, snuggled closer to Ana, and pretended she didn't notice the tears on her mother's face. They sat in the swing for a while longer, gently moving back and forth, counting fireflies, and listening to the myriad of night sounds. They went back inside to get ready for bed. Just before she turned off the light Jenny said "Good Night, Mountain. See you tomorrow."

Around mid-morning a very fine 1940 flame red 2-door Chevrolet pulled onto the dirt road leading into the woods. A tall dark-haired soldier climbed out and stretched his tired body. He walked around the car and opened the passenger door for his brand-new bride. Married for all of two hours, they were giggling and nervous but very happy. He kissed her and then walked back to open the trunk of the car. He opened a small suitcase, took out his civilian clothes, and walked over to the brush to change. When he returned he wore denim and flannel again just like the Paul she fell in love with while they were still in high school. He folded his uniform with care, placed it in the back seat where it would not be disturbed,

"We need to find a place to pitch the tent, Susie. This isn't much of a honeymoon but I think we'll be able to get started here. We have so little time together before I ship out. I didn't want to waste a minute." said Paul.

Hand in hand they walked through the nearby forest. They found a small stream winding through the trees. After walking a bit further, following the stream, they found the perfect spot for a tent. Another trip back to move the car closer and to get camping equipment out took about fifteen minutes.

"I promised Dad I would be very careful with his most prized possession. He loves this car. He tried to smile when he gave me the keys but he remembers too many of my car adventures," Paul said, laughing at the memory.

Paul knew his father would have given him anything he owned at this moment in time. He also had war memories which haunted him still. He was proud of his son. He was terrified for his son. More than anything, Paul's father wished for the teenager who thought he was invincible to be at home and safe. It is not the way of men to seek safety when their concept of duty calls but the cost of duty is often beyond comprehension.

Together, Paul and Susie created a perfect camping site. The tent stood tall. A camp stove was settled on a rock. Groceries were safely stored. Sleeping bags were fluffed and set. An air of anticipation permeated the site. Well and truly they were Pvt. and Mrs. Paul Thomas—the world, the war, even tomorrow—all became insignificant.

Grandmother Mountain spread her protective branches to include the young people laughing beside a stream. She had seen many lovers in her long life. She sang with them, cried with and for them, blessed them with her wisdom, and gave them strength in times of need. The memory of her presence became a beacon of hope that resided quietly within the heart of the wisest among us.

Jenny had been busy at home for a few days. She helped in the garden and the other small details of life with a family. She

slept in some mornings just because school was out. She tried on last year's summer clothes and discovered she had outgrown most of them. Her grandmother had been saving pretty feed sacks as material for some of Jenny's summer clothes. After the sacks were washed and ironed they contained about a yard or more of fabric, plenty enough for a pair of shorts. Ana was a good seamstress and very pleased to get the material. Some of last year's things could be altered enough to work as play clothes, especially since Jenny spent so much time in the woods. Her clothing paid the price for her adventures. Something was always torn, stained, or had buttons missing.

"I'm going to the woods Mom," Jenny called out from the back door. Ana laughed and said, "Be careful out there." Jenny ran across the field and headed toward the trees. She found the old oak, pulled a book from the waist of her shorts, and settled down to read for a while. Deeply engrossed in the adventures of Nancy Drew, she was surprised to see a man and a woman walking nearby.

"Hello," said Jenny. "Do you like my woods?"

"Hello," said Paul. "I didn't know these were your woods. I thought they were mine. I used to spend a lot of time here when I was about your age."

"I guess they are mine now," Jenny said. "Not many people come here anymore. My name is Jenny. Who are you?"

"I'm Paul. This is Susie. We are camping here on our honeymoon."

"What's a honeymoon?" Jenny asked.

"It's what they call the time people spend together after they just get married," Paul explained.

"Oh," said Jenny. "Then what do you do? Do you go to live in a regular house?"

"Most folks do, Jenny. We aren't doing that yet. Susie will go back to her home but I will be going overseas." Paul said.

"Are you a soldier?" Jenny asked.

"Yes, I am. I'm going to Europe in a few days," Paul said. Jenny noticed that Susie held Paul's arm a little tighter and that she looked down at the ground, hiding her face from view. Paul put his hand over Susie's and they stood for a moment as if frozen by the shock of reality.

"Are you scared?" Jenny asked Paul.

"Yes. A little. This is not part of any plan I made for our lives. War changes everything for all of us." Paul said.

"When you go to war will you see my uncles?" Jenny asked.

"I don't know, Jenny. There are so many people there. I may see them and not know them or I may not see them at all."

"If you see them and know them, will you tell them Hello for me? Tell them, especially my Uncle Johnny, how much I miss them. Tell them to hurry home. Momma cries for her brother but I'm not supposed to know it." Jenny said.

Susie looked up at Jenny and said "Do you cry, too, Jenny?"

Jenny thought for a minute before she answered. "Yes, sometimes. I cry here so the mountain is the only one who hears me. Momma would be upset if I cried with her. She tries really hard to be brave so when she can't be brave, I'll be brave for her."

"That's a very grown-up thing to do, Jenny. If I need to cry, may I come to your mountain too?" Susie asked.

"Yes, of course you may. Grandmother Mountain always listens. She already knows Paul and Paul brought you to his special place. Now she knows you, too." said Jenny.

"It's nice to meet you, Jenny. Take good care of yourself and your mamma." Paul said as he and Susie turned to go back to their camp.

Jenny went from seven to eight that summer. She still read the news to Ana every day but that too, had changed. She no longer read the front page news. Ana was concerned that Jenny was too deeply immersed in the talk of war so she asked Jenny to read from the women's section of the paper. Together they read recipes and Ana taught Jenny to bake.

Visitors to the mountain were scarce that summer, as a result of rationing. Tires, gasoline, and replacement parts for broken vehicles all were in short supply. The war demanded all of that and more. Almost everything was put aside for "the Boys over there." Every family was issued coupons to be used for the purchase of meat, shoes, coffee, dairy, and cooking oils. Even chocolate was in short supply. The post office was busy making sure packages from the family to military personnel were safely sent on their way to Europe or the Pacific theater. Every mother, auntie, and granny was busy making cookies, cakes, and candies for the Boys. They prayed for the Boys, cried for the Boys, and supported each other when Gold Stars were seen hanging in living room windows. The Boys were flying on wings of hope from home wherever they were.

Jenny lived in coal country. The men in her town were miners or railroad men and both were working at full production. Steel production was essential in the manufacturing of war materials. Every man who didn't go to war worked to support those who did. Fathers, uncles, and grandfathers did their bit. Every city or small town felt a terrible void in the absence of a generation of young men.

The ladies also went to work. Women who had never imagined themselves as anything except a wife, mother, and homemaker suddenly found themselves working cash registers, butchering meat, cashing checks at the bank, or directing traffic on Main Street. Even children suddenly had serious chores to be done every day. The war made heroes of everyone who picked up the slack and discovered they were much more capable than they ever knew. Nothing would ever be the same again. The notion of becoming more—more successful, more educated, and less small-town-oriented became the focus as bigger dreams were born.



Nancy Rhodes. Photo courtesy of the family.

The changes came to Jenny in ways she never expected. The sound of heavy equipment moving woke her early in the morning. She was horrified as she watched its slow progress toward Grandmother Mountain. They were cutting a road across her reading spot.

"Mom! Mom! What are they doing? Why are they doing that?" Jenny asked. She was crying and shocked. "They are taking down the trees and all the bushes. Where will the deer go? Will the babies be safe?" Jenny asked.

Ana put her arms around her daughter and led her to the kitchen table. They sat down and Ana began an explanation she knew her daughter would never understand. "Honey, they are going after a vein of coal up on the mountain. They said it was close to the surface so they are doing what they call strip mining. The coal is important to the soldiers. They make steel out of it and steel is in almost everything soldiers need, tanks, Jeeps, trucks, ships, airplanes, rifles, even canteens. Johnny, your other uncles, your new friend Paul, they all need these things if they are to come home to us. We all have to give up something, sometimes a lot of things, but it is always so they can come home sooner," Ana said. She brushed the hair from Jenny's face and gave Jenny a washcloth from her pocket so she could wipe away her tears.

After the workers went home, Jenny walked across the field to see what they had been doing to her mountain. She couldn't help crying. "Oh, Grandmother, I am so sorry." She walked over and touched the oak tree now lying on its side, roots exposed to the air. She wept deeply and to the soul. Jenny whispered to the mountain, "I'll never forget you, never as long as I live. I will remember you as you were. Thank you for being my friend." Then Jenny turned and walked away. She didn't visit the mountain for another 17 years. When another spring came around, the noise and dirt from mining became impossible to live around. Ana decided that she and Jenny should move closer to town.

Ana found a job in town and seemed content while working in the local doctor's office. Jenny followed the usual path of young girls on their way to womanhood. Her imagination was still living on the mountain where she searched for gold and Indian relics, and looked for new travel routes to faraway places. She walked in the City Park, read in her bedroom, and made up stories from everyday events in town. When she returned to school she was very happy to have a new teacher—Mrs. Thomas. In school they carefully followed the teacher-student policy but after school Jenny and Susie became fast friends who still cried together. Paul was in Germany. He still had not met any of Jenny's uncles.

On May 8, 1945, the war in Europe ended and everything changed again. Younger men joined the workforce. Steel was still in high demand both here and abroad so the coal industry remained operating at peak output. Many of the returning veterans were taking advantage of the G.I. Bill which provided financial and living assistance for job retraining or college students. The world was eager to forget the horrors of warfare and return to capital warfare where the bloodshed was less obvious.

Jenny benefited from many of the changes. She was a shining star in high school where her practical skills were appreciated and her grade average was high. She graduated with honors from high school and enrolled in a teacher's college fairly close to home.

In the summer of her second year of college, she felt she needed a job and was hired as a nursing assistant at the local hospital. In that environment, Jenny learned what life was all about. She shared the pain of loss with strangers. She held the hands of the dying as they ended this life journey. She witnessed the horrors which humans can inflict upon themselves and others. She saw the pain and joy of birth. She recognized her destiny. She transferred

"The birds still sing. The stream now houses minnows and crayfish. The deer and the bear reside where people are not generally located. I still have rhododendrons to wear in what is left of my hair. Mountain laurel still grows close by. I am still here, Jenny, and so are you. You own the heart of these mountains because you love us. You bring us a joyful heart. These mountains know we are part of each other forever. When you need me, remember our oak tree and I will hear you. The Father who made us all will also hear you."

to a school with a notable reputation as a leader in the field of medical research and enrolled in their school of nursing. Two years later she passed her State Boards and became a BSRN.

On March 4, 1961, Jenny joined the first group of Peace Corps volunteers. The term of service was two years. She knew she was going to Africa, but the exact location was not yet available.

Before she left the country, Jenny wanted to see her mountain one more time. This time, when she went home it was not just to visit her mother. Jenny needed to feel the strength of the mountain in her body, still alive, still serving her people. She drove by their old house and into the forest. When she found a spot she remembered, she parked the car and walked toward the upward slope. She placed both hands on a young oak tree and whispered, "Hello, Grandmother Mountain. I have missed you so much. I will be out of the country for two years and I need to borrow your strength and patience to get me through life in a strange place." She felt rather than heard the mountain speak.

"I have missed you, Sweet Jenny. Our time together was too short. I thought I might be able to watch you grow up. You can see that I have been carelessly used in your absence. I have lost much of my exterior form. I have no scalp. I am full of tunnels where my black veins of coal used to run. I am now hollow within, except for the water left to fill up the tunnels. I have served our people. Because I am, our people had work. They had food and homes, and they raised their children to be strong. I served in your war. I gave all I had to give, including my timber. There is little left of me and yet I survive. I heal. I endure misadventure for our people. I will be here the next time there is a need for what I have, treasures yet unknown to men.

"The birds still sing. The stream now houses minnows and crayfish. The deer and the bear reside where people are not generally located. I still have rhododendrons to wear in what is left of my hair. Mountain laurel still grows close by. I am still here, Jenny, and so are you. You own the heart of these mountains because you love us. You bring us a joyful heart. These mountains know we are part of each other forever. When you need me, remember our oak tree and I will hear you. The Father who made us all will also hear you." We endure because we love. With these words, Jenny set out to live her life with love and intention, carrying within her the strength of the mountains.

NANCY RHODES was born in Beckley, West Virginia in 1938. She grew up in Mullens, W.V., the daughter of Harvey and Thelma Smith. Her father was a train engineer. Throughout her life, she maintained deep and caring relationships with her schoolmates. She loved the mountains of Wyoming County and though life took her away from her mountains, they remained forever home in her heart. Nancy passed away in February of 2023.

West Virginia Back Roads

A Slippery Tradition

Text and Photographs by Carl E. Feather



Covered dish in hand, Lenox Oyster Stew dinner attendees enter the community center, where the dinner is held on New Year's Day. 2025 marks the 100th dinner of the Preston County tradition.

Preston County crossroads has been eating oyster stew on New Year's for a century

When the sun rises over Briery Mountain come New Year's Day 2025, several cooks and dozens of residents in the Lenox area will be preparing for the 100th anniversary of a community dinner stewed in camaraderie and tradition.

The Lenox Oyster Stew dinner, held in the Community Center on Brandonville Pike, got its start back in 1924, but it took two extra years before the tradition could mark its centennial. World War II and Covid-19 each cost the tradition a year. Canceled in 2021, it rebounded the following year with 98 attendees, right on track for what was the 98th observance.



Candace Bolinger chats with a diner who delivered his household's contribution to the table of side dishes at the annual event.

With black Angus cattle roaming the hillsides near the community center and a strong thread of German ancestry among the community's long-time residents, one might expect beef stew or a cabbage dish, not oyster, as the menu. However, meals based upon the slippery delicacy were common in Preston County decades prior to the annual tradition's founding. Most likely, the B&O eastern-Maryland freight connections completed in the 1850s facilitated the importation of oysters for holiday meals.

The *Preston County Journal* of January 31, 1884, acknowledges at least three oyster suppers in Cranesville alone that week, including one at a "grand social party" given at the home of M.E. Feather. In Valley District, an "oyster supper and hop" were held at Fred Barlow's on New Year's night, 1887. That same holiday season, oysters were on the menu at the Irondale home of John W. Rowe, who promised to furnish oysters to all who wanted them for Christmas morning. Rain could not keep folks from attending an oyster supper at Fellowsville during Thanksgiving 1913, and in Bruceton Mills, about six miles north of Lenox, the Odd Fellows gave an oyster



Guests pause for prayer at the 2023 Lenox Oyster Supper, held New Year's Day in the Lenox Community Center.

supper December 28, 1901. Oysters were on the menu February 20, 1919, in Kingwood, when the Ladies Aid Society of the Presbyterian Church served a supper of oysters in all styles, baked beans, potato salad, coleslaw, pickles, bread and butter, coffee for 50 cents a person.

One of the most interesting oyster suppers given in the county was that of Wednesday evening, November 28, 1923. It was given by Mr. and Mrs. George Canton Sr. in honor of George's escape from the Confederates at Andersonville 60 years prior! The stories emanating from Mr. Canton's chair that evening would have made the meal a must-attend event regardless of what was served!

A few weeks later, the first official Lenox Oyster Supper was held in the Hartman Store/lodge hall, a building that had a dark side—KKK meetings were held there, according to one local history. Candace Bolinger, whose mother, Evajean, and brother, Bill, own and operate the Lenox Store [see Spring 2021], says the oyster supper tradition was started by the Howard and Mae Peaslee family. The Peaslee ancestors were from New England, which may have something to do with their penchant for oysters. Also involved in the birth of this tradition were Chester and Virgie Messenger, whose granddaughter, Mary Swecker, still lives on a portion of the family dairy farm south of Lenox.

"It was just a way for (the Messengers) to get together with the Peaslee family. They both liked oysters, and they were a rare thing around here. And it just grew from that," Mary tells me in explaining the event's leap from a dining room table to community center.

Born in 1955, Mary has attended just about "every single one" held at the community center, which stands on land donated by the Forman family. Hers are among the many helping hands that stir the stew throughout the morning, serve it, and tidy up the center afterwards. Helping with the event is as much a family tradition as attending it. "My mother and dad helped



A diner has her bowl of oyster stew just the way she likes it, with plenty of crackers and extra salt and pepper.



Butch Sypolt was recruited to ladle up bowls of oyster stew for the 2023 dinner. In earlier days, volunteers traveled from table to table and served the soup from large pots.



Leny Reed and her son, Stephen, pose with her father-in-law Neil Reed at the 2023 Lenox Oyster Stew dinner.

with it all the time," Mary says. "They would go around and ladle up the soup at the tables."

Hours of work go into making and tending the steaming stew before it can be dipped from the roaster pans to glass bowls. The recipe, entrusted to Billy Bolinger, is simple: one gallon of fresh oysters, two gallons of milk, a stick of butter, celery salt, salt and pepper.

The secrets to successful stew are constant stirring and the element of camaraderie, says Mary. The milk will curdle if it's not stirred, and "if you make it at home, it's never as good," Mary says. "We decided it is because it's made in a big batch. I think it is because it is slow simmered. It just always turns out so much better (at the community event). It's got a really good, rich, deep flavor."

Mary says there was a time when her family's dairy farm provided milk for the stew, but with dairy farming largely absent from the Preston County landscape these days, store-bought whole milk has to be substituted. Until recently, oysters were sourced through the HillTop Fruit Market in Oakland, Maryland, but with that business closing earlier this year (2024), organizers were, as of late November, still looking for a purveyor for the 2025 event."

An hour or two of visiting over a cup of coffee and dessert wraps up the meal, which is served at noon sharp unless the date falls on a Sunday. In that case, there's an hour delay to accommodate the churchgoers.

Years ago, post-dinner entertainment enhanced the experience. It ranged from slide shows and talks on agricultural issues to music and the fingerboard work of Ralph Livengood. Mary says music was a part of



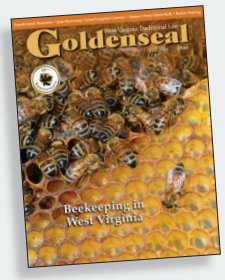
Charles Sisler visits with another diner at the 2023 Lenox Oyster Stew dinner.

the celebration when she was growing up. A Miller family from Valley Point came over and provided piano accompaniment for group singing. "They'd make a whole afternoon of it," she says.

Eddie (Edward Gene) Welch grew up on a Coal Lick Road farm near Lenox and said that he'd probably attended 60 of the dinners in his 73 years. Eddie, who died April 8, 2024, told me during the 2023 dinner that his father, Glen, brought him to the dinner as a youngster. Eddie was continuing this family tradition by having his son Travis and granddaughter Aubrey Welch join him for the food and camaraderie. "You get to see people (at the dinner) that you don't see every day, you see them about once a year, now," he told me. "It's just a tradition."

Even folks who do see each other almost daily still make it a point to congregate at the long rows of folding tables in the community center. Kingwood coffee club members Ron Crites, Daryl Martin, Mike Jenkins, and Bob Meissner went the extra mile for former judge and prosecuting attorney Neil Reed so their friend could observe the tradition. One of the friends drove Neil to Lenox and all four helped carry him to his seat in the dining hall where he was joined by his daughter-in-law Leny, son Stephen, and grandson Ethan. The South Carolina residents attended in support of Neil. The friends' and family's efforts were especially poignant in light of the fact the 2023 event would be Mr. Neil's last; he died June 23 (2023) at the age of 91. Mr. Meissner passed away that August.

An empty oyster bucket is passed between the tables following the meal to receive donations, which fund improvements to the building, pay for maintenance and



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utilities, and purchase oysters for the following year's event. Mary says the homemakers' club used to put on spaghetti dinners in there, but that hasn't happened in decades. Like the old barns and silos that dot the landscape across Lenox, it has become an underutilized asset.

But one would not know it on New Year's Day, when automobiles and pickup trucks overflow from the parking lot onto the pike and guests climb the two steps to the building, toting casserole dishes wrapped in insulated carriers, trays of cold cuts and cheese, and bowls of salads and plates of desserts. Mary says she's seen years when there was a blizzard and the organizers feared no one would risk life for oyster stew, but they came all the same.

In 1960, the entire crowd unknowingly put lives at risk during what became the event's most memorable. According to a *Morgantown Dominion Post* article of January 4, 1960, more than half of the 150 persons attending "collapsed of near asphyxia." While most of the affected were treated at the scene, Mrs. Lawrence Bolinger and Mrs. Ralph Livengood required additional medical attention at Kingwood's Preston Memorial Hospital.

The first hint of a problem came when a youngster collapsed. He fell again after being helped to his feet. A woman was next to fall, and others began complaining of nausea and severe cramps. Some went into convulsions. The newspaper quoted an attendee who said, "Before we knew what was happening, scores of persons were collapsing all around us and suffering what we thought was food poisoning."

Gay Martin and Lawrence Bolinger suspected otherwise and traced the problem to malfunctioning space heaters. There was an obstruction in a flue pipe, causing the toxic fumes to accumulate in the building.

The tradition survived the negative front-page publicity and, decades later, a pandemic. Organizers hope for a well-attended and otherwise uneventful 100th dinner on New Year's Day 2025.

CARL E. FEATHER is a longtime contributor to GOLDENSEAL. He and his wife, Ruth, live in Bruceton Mills (Preston County). Check out his blog at thefeathercottage.com for videos, stories, and photos from his beloved West Virginia. Carl also has a YouTube channel dedicated just to videos from his Backroads stories and books. Visit www.youtube.com/@wanderingbackroadswv



Late January sun shines down on a small log cabin on the Raleigh/Summers County line near Ghent, WV. Photo by Steve Brightwell.

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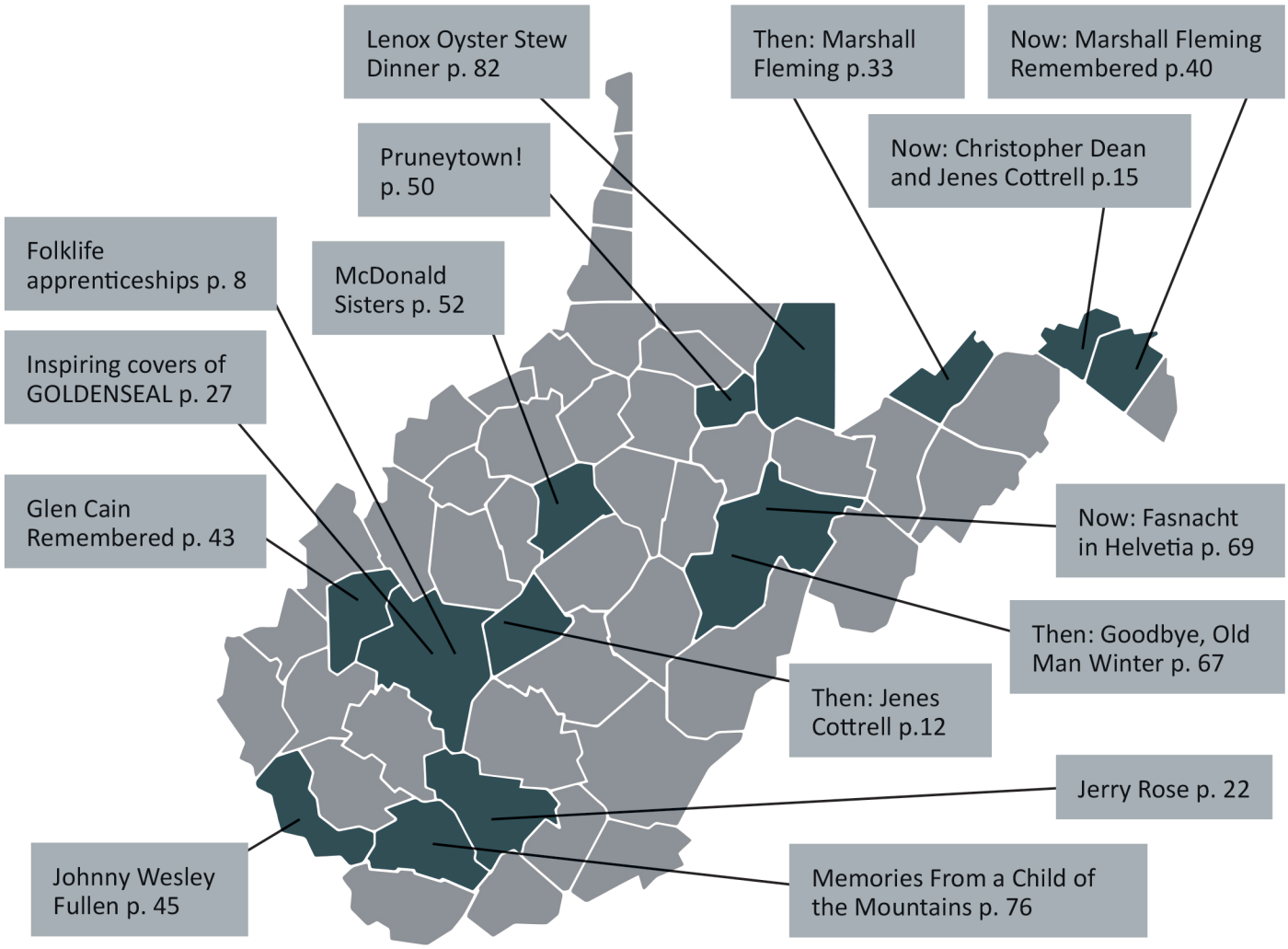

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