



With a practiced hand Mrs. Francine Alvey fills the ribs of a new basket with a tight mesh of split oak. Photo by David Sutherland.

BASKETS AND FOLKLIFE IN EDMONSON COUNTY, KENTUCKY

Andy Wallace

rural schools; the party games in lieu of square dances; the candy breakings, corn huskings, and various other frontier social institutions, all have passed from the stage. Any occurrence of these activities today is generally staged for the purpose of depicting a bit of yesterday's life styles.

Stemming from earlier periods in Kentucky's history are many artifacts of material culture which are generally long lived because of traditional skills and materials employed in construction. The observant folklife researcher can hardly avoid noticing houses, barns, corncribs, and other essential architectural forms that reflect the cultural heritage of their builders in the same way that folk speech, songs, and legends do. Persons traveling across the state from one region to another are likely to remark on the clustering of building types on the culture landscape: "Aren't the tobacco barns here in Western Kentucky rather tall and skinny?" or "Notice how a few of the barns here in the Bluegrass are built against a bank," or "Wonder if all mining camps have two-story shotgun houses?"

Kentucky's regional folk houses and barns and other forms of artistic and functional craftsmanship are symbols of honest and exacting work, and of the daring and resourcefulness of pioneer forefathers whose legacy reaches into the present. We can speculate that in our age of rapid technological change, some people feel a need to reach back, to rediscover continuity in their culture, to keep their balance in the present through reminders of the past.

For some 175 years Haskel Skaggs' kin have lived in Edmonson County, Kentucky. "Hack" works as a guide at Mammoth Cave National Park, which now comprises about half the county, and employs many of the natives of the area. It's an area rich in traditional lore of all types and remained fairly isolated up until the Second World War, largely because of a lack of adequate roads. The county is split almost evenly in half by the Green River, and no bridge spanned it until a few years ago, with ferries carrying essential traffic up to that time. The population of the area has been stable for over a century, and many of the families have been in Edmonson County since the first settlement. The people are predominately Scots-Irish, and were all English speaking when they arrived. They are traditional, conservative people, in the best sense of the word.

I was lucky enough to have Hack Skaggs and his wife Bertha introduce me to a number of rich tradition bearers in the Mammoth Cave area. I had called at Mammoth Cave National Park to let them know that I was in the area on a field trip for the Festival of American Folklife. The Superintendent suggested that I might take Hack along with me, as he was familiar with most everyone in the county. It proved a fortuitous choice.

Hack and Bertha Skaggs have never taken a course in folklore; I doubt they know precisely what the term means, but they knew what I meant by "traditional", "old-time", "handed down." For a week we visited with neighbors, relatives and friends and

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talked about the old crafts, music, local stories, farm lore, and what it was like to live in Edmonson County, Kentucky. What came across to me was a people rooted in the land, a resourceful, hard-working people living in the present, but with a respect for and awareness of the past, and the older ways.

In fact, the past and present seem to exist rather harmoniously together: Most farmers now use modern techniques while religiously observing traditional planting and harvesting signs; the old ballads and gospel songs are liberally mixed in with more modern pop tunes—a good song is a good song.

The Caves area has long been known as a traditional basketmaking center in Kentucky. The baskets used to be distributed as far away as Missouri and Indiana. Although there is now no basket industry, as such, a number of families still make white oak baskets for community use and to sell to visitors to the Park. The techniques used in making the baskets have not changed in two hundred years. The trees are cut, the ribs rived out, and splits shaved, all by



The Mammoth Cave area has been home to six generations of the Skaggs family. Haskel Skaggs, a guide at Mammoth Cave National Park, carries an intimate knowledge not only of the geology but also of the geography, history, and folklife of the area. Photo by David Sutherland.

hand, though most of the people still making baskets are in their seventies or eighties.

Lestel Childress is one of the younger people in the area still practicing this craft. He learned from his mother, who still manages to produce some fifty baskets a week, while piecing beautiful patchwork quilts in her spare time. Quilting is, I think, a fine art in this part of the country, with the older women in most every household making quilts for their children and grandchildren. Ora Lowe, Lestel Childress'

mother, is a meticulous and accomplished quilter, not only with piecework, but with applique work and elaborate pattern work.

The Green River has in the past provided a livelihood for residents of the area, with logging, the river trade, and fishing all native to the region.

As trades, these are pretty much a thing of the past, but Carl Wolfe still weaves the fyke nets he uses to fish the Green River, having worked on the river most of his life, first in the logging industry, and then on riverboats. When he's not fishing he now makes wonderful models of cabins and boats and gives them to his friends. A young teacher at the local high school has befriended Carl Wolfe, and has learned from him how to make the intricate nets. What would have been a lost art has been passed on.

Walter Dawson Logsdon, Bertha Skaggs' father, is now in his 81st year. He spent most of his life teaching in one-room school houses in Edmonson County, while farming as most of his neighbors did and still do. He's both an educated man with an M.A. degree and a rich storehouse of traditional lore, both oral and material.

Mr. Logsdon, an expert basketmaker, sat and chatted with me about baskets and his life in the county, and we sang and talked about the old songs. He's a great singer with an astounding memory.

He talked about how he came to make baskets . . .

"In my boyhood days, after my father died when I was six years old, the only way we had of earning a living, was to make those baskets and sell 'em. I was the only boy in a family of five girls and my mother. We made these baskets and took 'em to market, and sold 'em in exchange for groceries. After I grew up and got on my own, still knowing how to do this, I decided to go to school. Had it not been for the fact that I knew how to do this work I'd never have been able to have gone through school."

"Back in the days when everybody kept chickens on the farm, they were mainly used for an egg basket. Gather up their eggs, put 'em on the arm, you know, and carry four, five, six dozen eggs to the grocery store. And you could carry back your little bundle of groceries, in the basket. . . . We made a bushel basket . . . it was used by farmers; they'd go to the barn to feed and carry corn in that basket from one place to another to feed their hogs and horses and cattle and so on. . . . Now you notice I use this one here to carry in my potatoes. I've got it stained a little bit, and by the way, this one is made of scraps—white oak. I never did use much of anything else. Now you can use maple in the spring of the year, when

the sap's risin', the maple is tender, you know, you can bend it. That's the beauty about this white oak, the reason we use it, you can bend it and it'll stay just where you put it."

We talked about the caves and what the local folk thought about them and I asked him about Floyd Collins, martyred local, whose fame spread to other areas by way of a song made up about him. His reply surprised me.

"I remember where Collins got trapped. And it's all such a common thing with us. We just didn't pay any attention to it. My brother-in-law, B. Doyle, my first wife's brother, owned the property where that sand-cave was located, and it's an actual fact, he got trapped in there . . . died in there. They finally brought him out in many months, two, three, years. . . . Yes, there was a song about Floyd Collins in that sand-cave. Yes, there was. But I never did learn it."

He did remember the ballad "Pearl Bryant," a widespread and rather gory song popular in the area years ago. After singing it he explained how he came to learn the song, providing an enlightening background to the ballad, and a good story to boot.

"Well, I learned that by word of mouth—tradition. That was, ah, I barely can remember when this happened. It happened up in the eastern part of the state, here in Kentucky. This Scott Jackson was a medical student, going to school, he was in love with this Pearl Bryant, and things happened that do happen to young people and he wanted to make away with her, you know. And he took her out and he killed her. And he was hanged for it. The two of 'em . . . there was two of 'em hanged. But the other fellow was actually reported not to have much to do with the crime. He just went along with it. And, ah, he cut her head off. And his sister . . . her sister rather . . . Pearl Bryant's sister, begged Scott Jackson to tell where her head was. And he never would tell. And the man that was hanged with him pled with him, told him, 'Now, if you tell the whole truth, I won't have to die.' Jackson told him, 'If I die, you'll have to.' Now this is just tradition, this is hearsay. And they were both hanged. And later on they found a skull, somewhere in that area, and it was supposed to have been the skull of Pearl Bryant. Yeah, I can barely remember it. Not the actual incident, but when it was fresh on people's mine, they talked so much about it you know. Warning the girls 'Be careful who you went out with.'"

Fitting material for any tabloid newspaper today, but much more colorfully told!

"LOOK AT BROWN RUN": PLACE NAMES IN KENTUCKY

Robert Rennick

Of all the things about Kentucky that have impressed my friends from other sections of the country, I am convinced that none have quite the appeal of our colorful place names. Scores of letters are received annually by our Kentucky Historical Society, our research libraries, our state and local newspapers, and me asking how certain places had acquired their unusual names. When we can, which isn't often, we send the authenticated account of the derivation of the requested name. Otherwise, with tongue in cheek and wink of eye, we pass on some old story that local residents have told and long accepted to explain the name, either a highly implausible yarn or an account that has the ring of authenticity but which has never been verified.

Here are the traditional accounts of several of Kentucky's more provocative place names that I've often been asked to share with my friends.

A Mr. King is known to have been among the first settlers of the Letcher County valley formed by what was later called *Kingdom Come Creek*. According to local legend, when later settlers arrived in that valley and asked who'd come first, the answer was usually "King done come."

An early settler of the Cabin Creek area of Lewis

Robert Rennick is the Coordinator of the Kentucky Place Names Survey, Place Names Survey of the United States.

This river, now impounded, is said to have been called "Nolin" after a search party in the area was unable to locate a pioneer named Lin. Photo by David Sutherland.