

# NEWS

APPALACHIAN CENTER  
BEREA COLLEGE



# LETTER

Helen M. Lewis – Thomas Parrish, Co-Editors

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## Looking Forward

**July 9-15:** Celtic Week, sponsored by the Swannanoa Gathering Folk Arts Workshops, will explore the Scottish and Irish traditions. For details write to P.O. Box 9000, Warren Wilson College, Asheville, N.C. 28815.

**July 9-August 13:** Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops, Elkins, W.Va. The workshops are week-long classes in mountain-rifle construction, wild herbs and mushrooms, autoharp and just about anything else you can think of. There's also a series of musical theme weeks, from blues to Balkan and Yiddish. For detailed information, write the Augusta Heritage Center, Davis & Elkins College, 100 Campus Drive, Elkins, W.Va. 26241; phone, 304/636-1903.

**July 16-22:** Old-Time Music and Dance Week, sponsored by the Swannanoa Gathering Folk Arts Workshops. Details from P.O. Box 9000, Warren Wilson College, Asheville, N.C. 28815. If you'd rather concentrate on dulcimer doings, you can do so during Dulcimer Week—same time, same place.

**July 30-August 5:** Blues Week at the Swannanoa Gathering.

**July 30-August 5:** 18th annual Appalachian Writers' Workshop, Hindman Settlement School. This year's collection of role-model luminaries definitely includes Jim Wayne Miller, and among the others on hand will be James Still, George Ella Lyon, Bobbie Ann Mason and Sharyn McCrumb. Information from the school at Hindman, Ky. 41822; phone, 606/785-5475.

**August 19-20:** Mountain Days Festival, Eastwood Park, Dayton, Ohio. You may not be surprised to learn that this festival will, as always, feature music, crafts and food. It's sponsored by Our Common Heritage, P.O. Box 864, Dayton, Ohio 45401.

**August 28-September 4:** Grandest Old-Time Music Festival in Mid-America, Avoca, Iowa—fiddlers, food, you name it. You can find out more from Bob Everhart at P.O. Box 438, Walnut, Iowa 51577; phone, 712/784-3001.

**September 21-23:** "Down Home, Downtown: Urban Appalachians Today," a conference sponsored by the Urban Appalachian Council, Cincinnati; Vernon Manor Hotel and the Mayerson Academy, Cincinnati. It's too late for you to submit a proposal for a paper, but you can plan to attend the conference, which will focus on practice (providing health care, social services, etc.), community activism and research.

**September 22-24:** 16th annual seminar of the American  
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## Colored People Wins Weatherford Prize

In his book *Colored People*, the author, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., tells us, he tried "as artlessly and honestly" as he could to "evoke a colored world of the fifties, a Negro world of the early sixties, and the advent of a black world of the later sixties, from the point of view of the boy I was."

A native of Piedmont, W.Va., Gates grew up to take a Ph.D. from Cambridge University and become a professor of English and chairman of Afro-American studies at Harvard and a prominent figure in the literary world generally. In this "memoir," as he terms *Colored People*, he takes the reader back with him through the years to his tiny home town on the banks of the upper Potomac River in West Virginia. In so doing he has produced a vivid and insightful coming-of-age story that has won for him the Berea College W. D. Weatherford Award for the outstanding work on Appalachia produced in 1994. The award is to be presented to the winning author on June 27 at a luncheon in Berea.

### Fresh Point of View

In its review of *Colored People* (Winter 1995), the APPALACHIAN CENTER NEWSLETTER commented that as they read the book "even nonblack readers who believe themselves well-informed on the life of minorities in the mountains will find themselves looking at the region from a fresh point of view." The book not only concerns itself with "colored people," however, but also presents a striking picture of Piedmont and towns like it and of life in the 1950s.

Sponsored by the Berea College Appalachian Center and Hutchins Library, the Weatherford Award honors the work published anywhere in the United States that in its year best illuminates the problems, personalities and unique qualities of the Appalachian South. The award was established, and supported for 17 years, by the late Alfred Perrin, retired publications director of Procter and Gamble in Cincinnati. (For an obituary article on Perrin, see the Winter 1995 issue of this newsletter.) The award commemorates the life and achievements of W. D. Weatherford, Sr., a pioneer and leading figure for many years in Appalachian development, youth work and race relations.

Winners in recent years have included *Fair and Tender Ladies*, by Lee Smith; *Generations*, by John Egerton; *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, by Ron Eller; *Storming Heaven*, by Denise Giardina; and *Coal Towns*, by Crandall Shifflett. ■

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Quilt Study Group; Museum of the American Quilters' Society, Paducah, Ky. Contact the sponsors at 660 Mission St., Suite 400, San Francisco, Calif. 94105; phone, 415/495-0163.

**September 27-October 1:** Southern Arts Booking Conference, Charlotte, N.C., sponsored by the Southern Arts Exchange, 181 14th St., NE, Suite 400, Atlanta, Ga. 30309. This conference offers a marketplace to storytellers, musicians, dancers, theater groups and others that would like to perform in the South. For more information by phone, call 404/874-7244.

**October 6-8:** "Old-fashioned Sorghum Makin'," John Simon Farm, Pond Creek, Ohio. You can find out more from Simon himself at 614/259-6337. Anyway, Simon says, "Come on up!"

**October 12-15:** 16th annual Tennessee Fall Homecoming, sponsored by and held at John Rice Irwin's Museum of Appalachia, which has been validly described as "the most authentic and complete replica of pioneer Appalachian life in the world." The event will feature more than 175 varied activities, with artists and stars in all fields. Museum address is P.O. Box 0318, Norris, Tenn. 37828.

**October 15-22:** Old-Time Week, Elkins, W. Va., including fiddlers' reunion October 20-22. Write Augusta Heritage Center, 100 Campus Drive, Elkins, W. Va. 26241 or call 304/636-1903.

**October 27-29:** 22nd annual Berea College Celebration of Traditional Music, sponsored by the Appalachian Center and featuring a variety of top performers. For details write to College P.O. Box 2336, Berea, Ky. 40404 or phone 606/986-9341, ext. 5140.

**November 6-12:** American Music Week, sponsored by the Sonneck Society for American Music—not a single event but a range of activities that will be announced on the American Music Network, accessible through ArtsWire on the Internet. If you have an event that should be listed, contact Marjorie Mackay Shapiro at 212/249-6498; fax, 212/935-1775, or William Everett at the Department of Music, Washburn University, Topeka, Kans. 66621.

## New Director for Appalachian Center

On July 15, Gordon McKinney, executive director of National History Day and a widely known Appalachian scholar, will succeed Helen M. Lewis as director of the Berea College Appalachian Center.

Lewis, who accepted the post in 1993, had agreed to serve a two-year term as interim director and is now returning to the Highlander Research and Education Center. Loyal Jones, the founding director, who had served for 23 years, retired in 1993.

McKinney has held the directorship of National History Day, which is based at the University of Maryland, since 1992. This independently funded program involves some 450,000 students across the country in activities that include writing papers, building projects, staging performances and producing videos. Previously McKinney served as administrator of research for the National Endowment

for the Humanities. Holder of a Ph.D. from Northwestern, he earlier was a professor of history at Western Carolina. In addition to his labors as a teacher and administrator, McKinney is the author of numerous journal articles on Appalachian affairs, politics, war and baseball history.

## McNamara's Mountaineers

In his best-selling apologia, *In Retrospect*, former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara has told the world that he realized, early in the game, that the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was a great mistake.

Alice Cornett, a writer based in London, Ky., recently raised an interesting question for the former secretary. Writing in the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, Cornett wondered whether McNamara knew or cared that his best soldiers came from Appalachia.

According to information gathered by a Veterans Administration doctor, Cornett says, men from the mountains were preferred for walking point—leading patrols into enemy-held territory. On the basis of the figures he compiled from studying casualties in all U.S. wars, the doctor coined the term "Sergeant York syndrome" to explain the great disparity between combat deaths of Appalachians and overall army totals.

Vietnam produced a national figure of 58.9 deaths for every 100,000 males in the population. But for West Virginia, which had the highest rate of any state, the figure was 30 percent higher—84.1. Neighboring Kentucky showed some interesting figures of its own. The statewide total was almost eight deaths per 100,000 over the national count. But Appalachian Kentucky actually exceeded West Virginia by a hair—84.2 to 84.1.

In talking to one veteran, Cornett found him not bitter at all. "If they was to call me tonight," he said, "I'm ready to go." This time, however, McNamara would probably advise him to take a good look before re-upping.

## EYE on Publications

*Salvation on Sand Mountain*, by Dennis Covington (Addison-Wesley). Through the years a great many Southerners have sought their fortunes—or, at least, living wages—in the Middle West and, though often not really fond of their new home, have made themselves endure life in what is in many ways the region of America most antipathetic to the South, Appalachian migrants, in particular, would get away when they could, of course, shuttling hundreds of miles on weekends just to feel for a few hours the embrace of their native hills.

Such people were most often factory workers, but Dennis Covington, a onetime English teacher at an Ohio college, not only belongs to their number but went them one better. Unable to endure either Ohio or academe, he simply quit his job and, with his wife, returned to his home town, Birmingham, to begin a new life as an unemployed writer.

During a war-reporting trip to Central America, Covington experienced an epiphany of a kind: "I found the antidote

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## Personalities...

Berea College Public Relations



**Gordon McKinney, executive director of National History Day, has been named director of Berea's Appalachian Center (see page 2). He takes up his duties on July 15.**

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for a conventional life," he says; "I got the shit scared out of me." But, back home, he still felt an inner need his conventional city Baptist church couldn't satisfy. Nothing too odd about any of this, perhaps, but Covington's spiritual quest then led him into some definitely atypical territory—the world of small-church snake handlers scattered from Alabama up through Tennessee into Eastern Kentucky. He went into this exotic world not only to observe it but, whether he knew it or not, to take part in it. *Salvation on Sand Mountain* tells the story of that participation.

Snake handling, we learn, is no ancient rite but developed so recently that its founder died (of snakebite, in fact) only in 1955. Covington became involved in 1991, when, as a stringer for the *New York Times*, he covered the trial of a snake-handling preacher who had tried to murder his wife by forcing her to stick her arm into a box full of rattlesnakes. Despite the unpromising nature of this introduction to the snake-handling world, Covington returned the next year. A comment by the aggrieved wife (herself a snake handler) had stayed with him. Taking up serpents, she told him, "makes you feel different. It's just knowing you got power over them snakes."

Now the average middle-class citizen, whether spiritually hungry or not, would probably find such an observation quite interesting, but would hardly feel himself drawn to the practice. Despite his academic background, however, including study at the University of Iowa writers' workshop, Covington in a variety of ways is not an average member of the middle class. His own family had come from Sand Mountain, where snake handling had appeared in 1912, and he came to feel something of an ancestral tie (though not sure that any of his ancestor had been involved in the



Jane Reed/Harvard University

**Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is the winner of the Berea College W. D. Weatherford Award for 1994 (see story on page 1) for his book *Colored People*.**

practice). In addition, he had as a kid collected snakes, he was a rebel against convention and he had "always been drawn to danger."

During the two years 1992-93, he developed a close relationship with the handlers and a respect for their faith; he indeed took up serpents himself. No summary of this relationship can convey its strange and in many ways unsettling quality. Wayne Flynt of Auburn University put it well in saying that in reading the book he had expected to encounter the Beverly Hillbillies and instead had met "the impoverished spiritual descendants of the apostles Peter and Paul." Fanny Flagg, the author of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, said it a bit differently: "Dennis Covington is either the bravest or the craziest journalist I know." She's got a point.

*Appalachian Mountain Religion*, by Deborah Vansau McCauley (University of Illinois Press). Presbyterians, Methodists and other American mainline Protestants (Catholics, too), we are told here, have always looked on the religious beliefs and practices of mountain people as the products of powerlessness and alienation, stemming from a subculture of poverty.

Malarkey, says McCauley. The fact is, she tells us, that labeling mountain religion as "the religion of the poor" enables mainstream denominations to design, and large foundations to fund, projects to train preachers for a ministry "tooled to Appalachia and its pressing social needs." But beyond that, and more important, says the author, this condescension has for nearly two centuries played an important part in Protestantism's effort to "exorcise the power of mountain religion as a major threat to its own self-image by trivializing mountain religion..."

McCauley presumably does not see this process as the  
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result of a conscious longtime conspiracy on the part of do-gooding denominational leaders and preachers, although some of her language might make you wonder—as when she speaks of missionary efforts (ca. 1900) to induce mountain people to discard not only their religion but also other sociocultural characteristics and become “assimilated into the national culture of accumulation and consumption.” But today’s reformers, McCauley says, have moved far beyond that. Seeing Appalachia as America’s Third World, they eagerly and earnestly wish to help the natives in “the struggle” against oppression. Indeed, she says, the only thing these helpers want to take away from the inhabitants is mountain religion itself—the very thing, however, that may be the most important possession of all.

It is to show the nature of this mountain religion, to chronicle its development and describe its differentiation from the dominant American religious culture, that McCauley has written this history. She emphasizes the difference between “religion in Appalachia,” for example, and her subject, the system of beliefs and practices that embodies the distinctive religious ethos of Appalachia. Mountain religion she characterizes as a long-recognized though little-known “regionally specific” Protestant tradition that in many ways is “an axis around which certain defining traditions and religious movements of American Christianity have revolved...”

*Appalachian Mountain Religion* has earned four stars from Loyal Jones, who credits McCauley with making “a winning argument that Appalachian religion is a true and authentic counterstream to modern mainstream Protestant religion. This is certainly the best thing written on Appalachian religion...” In summing up, McCauley witheringly puts mainstream Protestantism in its place. Before begin-

ning any new crusade to “fix these people’s lives under the impetus of the latest ideological fashion justifying the current state of its long, ongoing mission in Appalachia,” she declares, Protestantism should “‘humble itself down’ and take a lesson from mountain people’s even longer-lived religious culture.”

## Book Notes

•The Appalachia Leadership Initiative on Cancer has announced the publication of *Sowing Seeds in the Mountains*, which is concerned with community-based coalitions for cancer prevention and control. The book is edited by Richard Couto, Nancy Simpson and Gale Harris. You may order copies by calling the Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER.

•Our Common Heritage, the organization of Appalachian people in the Dayton, Ohio, area, reports that its new book *Land of Yesterday*, by Roger Osborne, became an instant best seller. One reader phoned the author to say, “If you never do anything else in your life, you can go to your grave knowing what a wonderful thing you have done for the Appalachian people.” You can get a copy, postpaid, by sending \$7.50 to Our Common Heritage, P.O. Box 864, Dayton, Ohio 45401.

•The Jesse Stuart Foundation (P.O. Box 391, Ashland, Ky. 41114) has republished Harry M. Caudill’s tale of an 18th-century kidnapping, *Dark Hills to Westward: The Saga of Jenny Wiley*. The literary historian William S. Ward credited Caudill with achieving “a picture of a time and place in history when toughness, courage and resourcefulness were essential human qualities if one were to survive.” The book retails for \$20.00, plus \$2.00 h/s.

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