

NEWS

APPALACHIAN CENTER
BEREA COLLEGE

LETTER



Gordon B. McKinney • Thomas Parrish, Co-Editors

Vol. 30 No. 2 Spring 2001

Looking Forward

June 22-24: 12th annual Paul Pyle Dulcimer Daze, Tullahoma, Tenn.; jamming and socializing Friday and Saturday, with a potluck and a barbecue, and concert on Sunday afternoon. For details, phone Bill Rust at 931/455-6800.

June 23: Leigh Hilger brings her original folk music to Charles and Myrtle's Coffeeshouse at the Unity Church, 105 McBrien Road, Chattanooga; phone 423/892-4960.

July 8-August 12: Summer session, Augusta Heritage Center, Davis & Elkins College, with intensive dance instruction—Savoy Lindy, flatfooting, French-Canadian stepdance and a raft of others—jam sessions, public dances and concerts. You'll find other things going on during this time as well. For full information, write the center at Davis & Elkins College, 100 Campus Drive, Elkins, W.Va. 26241; augusta@augustaheritage.com; phone 304/637-1209.

July 13-15: 24th annual Uncle Dave Macon Days Old-Time Music and Dance Festival, Cannonsburgh Pioneer Village, Murfreesboro, Tenn. Heralded by the people who devise such ratings as one of the top 20 July events in the Southeast, this family-oriented jamboree—named for the first person to be featured on the Grand Ole Opry as an individual performer—is expected to draw more than 45,000 people and offers \$5,400 in prizes; it's the home of three national championships—old-time banjo, old-time buckdancing and old-time clogging. There's lots more, too. If you want overall details, get in touch with Wendy S. Bryant, P.O. Box 5016, Murfreesboro, Tenn. 37133; phone, 615/893-6565; the 800 number is 716-7560.

July 19-21: Master Musicians Festival, Somerset, Ky. During this Thursday-Saturday weekend, this town 75 miles south of Lexington will be the scene of the ambitious and now well-established festival founded by Somerset native Gabrielle Gray. This year you can hear traditional mountain music, rock, bluegrass and a variety of other types, from such performers as John Jackson, Mike Seeger and Seattle's Laura Love Band; Thursday evening will be devoted to American folk blues, featuring Odetta, the "queen of American folk music," the 92-year-old (and recently married) blues fiddler Howard Armstrong and other stars. For details, phone 888/FUN JULY or write Master Musicians Festival, P.O. Box 1212, Somerset, Ky. 42502.

July 19-22: Summer edition of the 54th annual Craft Fair of the Southern Highlands, showcasing work by mem-

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Stillness at Dead Mare Branch

The most striking thing about the death of James Still, which came on April 28, was the intensity of expressed feeling it educed from other writers. Long spoken of as the dean of Appalachian writers—he was 94 at the time of his death—Still was also the special hero of many.

He was "certainly the most influential Kentucky writer



James Still: "Most influential"

of the last 50 years," said Gurney Norman. "He's the parent of writers who came along after 1940." Continuing the familial image, Chris Offutt said that not only had Kentucky lost its greatest writer, "we lost our grandfather."

"Nobody has captured Southern Appalachian folk life better than James Still," said Wade Hall, a literary historian. "We are lucky to have had him," said Kentucky's laureate historian, Thomas D. Clark. "He was the last of the old Southern writers."

As a craftsman, a stylist, a creator of compact poetic prose, Still, of course, had few rivals. In addition, as Loyal Jones observed, Still was "his own best character."

A native of Alabama and a graduate of Lincoln Memorial University, Still also had a degree in library science

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bers of the Southern Highland Craft Guild; Asheville Civic Center, Asheville, N.C. This year the directors continue their emphasis on education, with craftspersons showing what they do and how they do it. Full information from the guild at 828/298-7928.

July 22-28: Old-Time Music and Dance Week, Warren Wilson College, Asheville, N.C. Part of the college's Swannanoa Gathering, which this year celebrates its 10th anniversary, this tuneful week is only one of a number of specialized sessions; others offer you the opportunity to pick up such skills as Celtic bouzouki, Orkney guitar tuning and Mongolian throat singing. Who could say no? To find out more, call 828/298-3434 or check www.swangathering.com.

July 28: 19th annual Blue Ridge Draft Horse and Mule Show, Ferrum College, Ferrum, Va.; a showcase of old-time draft animals and a demonstration of the skills involved in working them. For details, call 540/365-4416.

July 29-August 3: 24th annual Appalachian Writers' Workshop, Hindman Settlement School. As always, this popular summer jamboree will star a staff of matchless literary mentors, but this year the firmament will be lacking its most illustrious member; for the first time in many years, the staff will not be headed by the long-unchallenged dean of Appalachian writers, James Still, who died in April. (See *accompanying story*.) The show will go on, however, with the participation of Linda DeRosier, Chris Holbrook, George Ella Lyon, Robert Morgan, Sharyn McCrumb, Lee Smith and many other writing types. For full details, write the school at P.O. Box 844, Hindman, Ky. 41822, or call 606/785-5475; e-mail: hss@tgtel.com.

August 10-12: Augusta Festival, Elkins, W.Va., sponsored by the Augusta Heritage Center of Davis & Elkins College. This celebration, which draws thousands of people, is the capstone of the summer's Augusta activities. This year's participants include such remarkably named entertainers as Balfa Toujours and the Missing Person Soup Kitchen Gospel Quartet. For details of all these varied events—crafts, music, dance, folklore—throughout the summer, see the contact information for July 8-August 12.

August 19-26: Last summer's woodworking special returns to the John C. Campbell Folk School. Let Lyle Wheeler teach you how to construct a traditional red oak mountain rocker; the class will emphasize post and rung construction and wet and dry joinery with mortise and tenon; previous experience is recommended. If all goes well, you'll take home a chair and a footstool. If you're not interested in chairs, the school can find plenty of other things for you to do during the summer. You can get details on all activities from the school at One Folk School Road, Brasstown, N.C. 28902; phone 800/-FOLKSCH; www.folkschol.org.

September 7-9: Ironweed Festival, a project of the Appalachian Women's Alliance; phone 540/745-5345; AWA@swva.net.

October 5-7: 19th annual Sorghum Makin', John R. Simon's Family Farm, 8721 Pond Creek/Carey's Run Road, Portsmouth, Ohio 45663. If you've ever wanted to play around with a sorghum evaporator or you maybe have a yen for apple butter, this could be the place for you to spend the weekend. All the eating (or, no doubt, eatin')

will be accompanied by acoustical music, while butter gets churned and soap gets made. The number to call is 740/-259-6337.

October 6-7: 28th annual Fall Festival, John C. Campbell Folk School, with music, dance, food, crafts—to be sure—and special activities for children. See contact information for August 19-26.

October 12-14: Annual Fall Fair, Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen, Indian Fort Theater, Berea, Ky., continuing the guild's 40th-anniversary celebration. For details, phone 859/986-3192.

October 18-21: Fall edition of the Craft Fair of the Southern Highlands; Asheville, N.C. See contact information for July 19-22.

October 21-28: Old-Time Week and Fiddlers' Reunion, another production by the busy bunch over at Davis & Elkins. As usual, a lineup of experienced teachers and guest master artists will be on hand to guide participants toward mastery or at least progress in old-time fiddle, banjo, guitar and hammered dulcimer, and the reunion will bring together such veterans as Lester McCumbers, Elmer Rich and Woody Simmons. Those who don't pluck or otherwise play can choose between classes in basketry and Appalachian folk culture. See contact information for July 8-August 12.

October 26-28: 27th annual Celebration of Traditional Music, Berea College. The list of featured performers includes Art Stamper, the Haywood County Ramblers, the Dowden Sisters, Sparky Rucker, the Last Old Man, Ed Cabbell, Ginny Hawker, Tricia Kilby and Donavan Cain, and Ora Watson, Mary Greene and Cecil Greganis; Alan Jabbour will lead a symposium: "Fiddle Tunes of the Old Frontier." For full information, get in touch with the Berea College Appalachian Center, 859/985-3140.

October 27: 28th annual Blue Ridge Folklife Festival, billed as "the largest celebration of authentic folkways in Virginia." Ferrum College, Ferrum, Va.; phone 540/365-2121.

Black Lung on Hold

Among the many and varied actions that marked the last few days of the Clinton administration, one held special meaning for parts of Appalachia. On January 19 the Department of Labor issued new rules streamlining the procedure for dealing with claims for black-lung benefits—most notably by imposing limits on the amount of expert testimony and medical evidence coal companies can present in their efforts to fend off the award of benefits. (Black lung—coal miner's pneumoconiosis, caused by long-term breathing of coal dust—kills more than 2,000 people every year.

As it is now, no more than 8 percent of claims are approved, partly because coal companies and insurers are allowed to submit almost limitless amounts of evidence, rendering the process so slow that sometimes the dispute isn't settled until the miner is dead and an autopsy makes the determination. The new rules have received the support of the Bush administration as well as of the UMW, but the companies profess to see poverty ahead if a D.C. federal judge okays them. The judge has promised a swift decision.

Poet and Patron

Remarkably, two of Appalachia's and Kentucky's leading literary figures died in April—James Still (*see page 1*) and his Knott County neighbor Albert Stewart, who was 86.

Well-known as a poet, Stewart played a special literary role as a teacher and encourager of young writers. He founded a writers' workshop at Morehead State University and the now-famous workshop at Hindman Settlement School. In 1973, wishing to make sure that his writer friends had a proper place to publish, Stewart established the quarterly magazine *Appalachian Heritage*, which since 1984 has been published by Berea College.

A 1936 Berea graduate, Stewart held a master's degree in English from the University of Kentucky, where he taught English literature and writing. "No one," said Loyal Jones, "was better at recognizing talent and was more supportive of it than Al." Billy C. Clark once expressed a similar sentiment, noting that "there's not a Kentuckian who ever lived that's touched more writers' lives than Al Stewart has."



Loyal Jones

Albert Stewart: Mentor to many

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from the University of Illinois and an M.A. in English from Vanderbilt. He had lived in Knott County, Ky., since the 1930s, much of the time in a log house that could be reached only by dirt road and creek bed.

"He's quit a good job and come over in here and sot down," said one bemused neighbor, who did not realize that Still's vacuum-cleaner mind would sweep up and store everything original and pungent said by any of his neighbors and then produce it for use in a story. He didn't intend to stay long on Dead Mare Branch—just long enough to finish his novel *River of Earth*—but that wasn't the way things worked out.

"Thomas Wolfe said you can't go home again," said Wilma Dykeman. "James Still said you can never leave home."

EYE on Publications

A History of Appalachia, by Richard B. Drake (University Press of Kentucky). Everybody knows the word *yeoman*—an agreeable term designating a sturdy small farmer, a fellow who works his own land in the best old English tradition. *Cohee* may not be quite as familiar a word, but, together with *yeoman*, it plays an important part in this new history of the Appalachian region. *Cohees*, it seems, were yeomen or would-be yeomen who, arriving in America during the 18th century and finding no land for themselves on the coast, moved on into the backwoods and by 1800 had established along the frontier a society distinct in many ways from that of the planter and commercial elites.

"None of America's coastal cities in the North or the

South developed a real interest in its backcountry hinterland," the author observes drily, "and eastern elite groups tended to view the backcountry as uncomfortably boorish, though offering a useful buffer against possible Indian attack."

In setting out his guiding themes, Drake wastes no time in equivocation but leads off by declaring his belief that Appalachia is indeed a separate and distinct region within America—that is, that Appalachia actually *exists* and is not merely a figment of do-gooderish, professorial or promotional imaginations; it is not only on our mind, it is on the ground.

He also points to the emergence of a regional economy largely dependent on outside sources of cash—a state of affairs that led to loss of local control of the region's resources as development advanced. This "colonial" concept is clearly important, Drake observes, but side-by-side with it persisted the "yeomanesque" mentality, rooted in faith in farming as a self-sustaining economic activity. Overall, "this vast and varied region is so complex and perplexing that practically any point of view may find some verification."

The author takes his story back to the days when the mountains of eastern America were fought over by numerous Indian nations and in a clear and concise narrative follows events through the coming of the Spaniards, the Dutch, the French and the English. Having established settlements in the coastal areas, the Europeans spread slowly into the mountains, a control consolidated by the fledgling United States after 1783.

As the 19th century progressed, a somewhat different and frequently discriminated-against society emerged throughout the mountains. During the Civil War the contending parties fought over much of the region, and the

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struggle left it with bitter divisions; for one thing, the aftermath was the era of the famous feuds. It was also the era when local-color writers, missionaries and other visitors began giving the world the picture of a region of forgotten Americans who were very curious people indeed: "our contemporary ancestors," said Berea College's energetic president, William C. Frost, in his famous *Atlantic* article of 1899.

By the late 19th century Appalachia—at least, those parts of it with minerals—had attracted the attention of corporate America as a treasurehouse of fossil fuels. Even so, Drake comments, significant noncapitalist attitudes persisted in the region—the yeomanesque prominent among them—and do so up to the present day. It is likewise true that the progressive, commercial elites of Appalachian cities were among the first to suggest harshly stereotypical judgments of their more rural neighbors. There has long been, Drake observes, animosity between the "two worlds" of the region. In the 1960s Harry Caudill saw it as the rich and powerful vs. the bulk of the regions's people, poor and powerless.

In discussing recent events, trends and ideologies, Drake, a retired Berea history professor, shies away from nothing but strides through this intellectual minefield with

admirable aplomb. In fact, this relatively short book (246 text pages) is so judicious, and seems likely to be so useful, that one can only wish it had been somewhat longer.



In *Appalachian Heritage* ...

The Spring 2001 issue of *Appalachian Heritage* announces the recipients of the magazine's annual Denny C. Plattner Awards for excellence in writing. The poetry of the late Albert Stewart is featured, together with the editor's reflections on Stewart's considerable contribution to Appalachian life and letters (for one item, he founded *Appalachian Heritage*). You'll also find an essay by Debbie Hodson regarding the wisdom of taking the old roads into the mountains, another by Jamie Griggs Tevis on the importance of tobacco to an earlier generation of farmers, a humorous memory of community and sharing by Marjorie Bixler, a recounting of adolescence by Lena McNichols and a reflection on loss by Tina Rae Collins. In addition, there are short stories, poems, book reviews and George Brosi's Booklist and Notes.

Appalachian Heritage is available (\$6 a copy, \$18 for a year's subscription) from the Appalachian Center, C.P.O. Box 2166, Berea, Ky. 40404.

Published by
Appalachian Center/Berea College
C.P.O. Box 2166
Berea, Ky. 40404-2166

Nonprofit Organization
U.S. Postage Paid
Berea, Ky. 40404
Permit No. 19

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