Folk Elements in the Fiction of James Still

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FOLK ELEMENTS IN THE FICTION OF JAMES STILL

A Thesis

Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Edith C. Walker
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FOLK ELEMENTS IN THE FICTION OF JAMES STILL

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PREFACE

The concept of this study grew from a combination of interests. A lifetime residence on the edge of Appalachia and five years as a field worker in the Kentucky Department of Economic Security fostered a deep concern for the poor of the region as well as an abiding interest in the folk culture of the rural areas. Dr. Kenneth Clarke's Folklore in Literature class at Western Kentucky University engendered an appreciation of folk materials in literature. I was sure in the early spring of 1968 that some aspect of that field would be the general area of my thesis. When Dr. Mary Washington Clarke introduced me to the work of James Still, the idea of the present study began to take form. Months of abstracting representative folk elements from Still's fiction, and documenting from field studies and data collected from various published works preceded its writing. I shall be pleased if my "spade work" helps to build a stepping stone to wider studies of this Kentucky writer.

I am indebted to Professor Dean Cadle of Asheville-Biltmore College for his excellent bibliography on Still, to Mrs. V. P. Henry for her helpfulness in obtaining materials for me through the Lake Cumberland Regional Library, to Dr. Will Fridy and Dr. Hugh Agee, members of my graduate committee for their helpful suggestions. I wish especially

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to thank Dr. Mary Washington Clarke, chairman of that committee, for her encouragement, her graciousness in sharing her knowledge and judgment, and for her infinite patience. Finally, I am deeply indebted to my family who lovingly sacrificed much of their normal homelife so Mother could work on "that thing."
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INTRODUCTION

Today, with the eyes of America focused on the depressed regions of Appalachia, any attempt to understand the life and character of that region seems especially relevant. Such attempts have been made in increasing numbers during the past decade, producing an impressive outpouring of statistics explaining the condition and needs of a people largely left behind in the material progress enjoyed by the rest of the nation.

While the contribution of the sociologists is impressive, a deeper appreciation and understanding of the inhabitants of the southern mountains can be obtained elsewhere—in its literature. What Dean Cade has pointed out in the writing of James Still as ... "The dramatized plight of human beings accepting poverty without accusations or judgments and without rantings against ephemeral institutions"1 places a folk culture in a larger human concept and uses the concrete experience that is individual and local to imply the universal.

Although his published works are limited to three books—Hounds on the Mountain (poems), River of Earth (novel),

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1Dean Cade, "Man on Troublesome," Yale Review, LVII (December, 1967), 247.
and On Troublesome Creek (short stories)--fewer than fifty uncollected poems, and around twenty short stories, James Still has given the southern mountaineer his own voice in American literature in a regionalism that is genuine and untainted with sentimentality.\(^2\) His convincing characterizations, his colorful use of language, his emphasis on sense of place, his humor and his themes contribute to his artistic creation.

This study attempts to complement earlier studies of Still's literary art such as that of Dean Cadle and Katherine Craf by pointing out the integral use of folk elements in his fiction. The methodology combined field studies with investigation of the works of folklorists and historians and novelists whose writings center around the same general region as do those of Still.

For the purposes of this study "folk elements" will denote the orally transmitted traditions of the common people of a particular region. In this case, the "folk" are a rural people who have remained relatively stable for several generations and thereby have preserved traditions likely to disappear or modify in an urban society. These traditions include material culture with its associated arts and skills, customs, folklore, and speech.

The following chapters will show some facets of James Still's intimate acquaintance with the folk life of Eastern Kentucky. Chapter I, "James Still's World," will show how

\(^2\) Dayton Kohler, "Jesse Stuart and James Still, Mountain Regionalists," College English, III (March, 1942), 533.
the author's fictional world is patterned after the real world of Appalachia. Chapter II, "Material Culture," will reveal Still's use of an accurate and vivid picture of this aspect of mountain life to define the lives of his characters, to lend authenticity and to illustrate concretely the reliance of the mountain people on traditions orally transmitted. Chapter III, "Customs," will illustrate Still's integration into his plots of certain traditional relationships of the mountain man with his friends and neighbors. Chapter IV, "Folklore," will show the diffusion of mountain lore—riddles, legends, songs, beliefs, and superstitions—throughout Still's work. Chapter V, "Speech," will present, in relatively non-technical terms, Still's careful selection of traditional speech patterns and phrases in the dialogue of his characters.

No attempt has been made to interpret the economic or sociological implication in Still's writing. Interesting though such studies would be, they lie outside the scope of this paper.

Later studies may form a broader critical evaluation of James Still's place in American literature. Such an evaluation would, of course, utilize earlier and more specialized studies such as the present one, and would consider how the folk elements abstracted from Still's stories in this study would function as symbol, atmosphere, and tone in his literary art. The present study leaves no doubt of the wide range and variety of authentic folk elements in the stories of James Still and provides a concrete basis for future and more speculative studies.
CHAPTER I

JAMES STILL'S WORLD

James Still's real-life world of Eastern Kentucky shares with the rest of Appalachia a heritage which well qualifies its people to make and keep alive a folk tradition --"[the preservation] . . . of a common culture in isolation long enough to allow emotions to color its forms of social expression."¹ Twentieth-century folklorists Cecil Sharp, Leonard Roberts, Hensley C. Woodbridge, and D. K. Wilgus have found there a rich lode to mine. Historians, poets, and novelists have turned again and again to the mountain country for material and inspiration;² the mountain country, in turn, has nurtured and sustained its native writers. Often, since the country is a part of his very being, the mountain man tells the truest mountain tale, sings the clearest mountain song, and understands most fully the implications of the mountain tradition. So has it been with James Still, born in the Buckalew Mountain region in Chambers County, Alabama, on June 16, 1906, educated at Lincoln Memorial University at Harrogate, Tennessee, and Vanderbilt University,


²Thomas D. Clark, Josiah Combs, John Fox, Jr., Jesse Stuart, Lucy Furman, Billy C. Clark, and others.
and long time resident of Knott County, Kentucky. He uses effectively in his short stories the authentic folklore, customs, regional speech and attitudes of his adopted community.

Although Still's stories center around Knott County, Kentucky, and its immediate environs and occur after the second decade of the twentieth century, a brief review of the geography, historical development and culture of the mountain region of Eastern Kentucky will furnish perspective and serve as a reminder of the long traditions reaching ever backward into a more remote past.

The Cumberland Plateau of the Appalachians is a region of flat-topped ridges and steep-walled valleys. Eons ago the plain raised from the floor of an inland sea "faulted," rearing the mountain range from which the Big Sandy, Cumberland, and Kentucky rivers carved their channels. The bog left by the receding sea eventually turned to coal. Magnificent forests covered the ridges, loamy soil lay in the narrow valleys and abundant game roamed the mountains. 3

The tributaries of the Kentucky River have played a central part in the lives of Kentucky mountaineers since the early explorers followed their courses westward as early as the late seventeenth century. Thomas D. Clark pictures the first white men in the region "wandering ... through its

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maze of headwaters. Well before the American Revolution the first settlers followed the same passes made by these streams through the mountains. Harry Caudill speculates that three or four generations of hardy pioneers had occupied parts of Eastern Kentucky before the settlement of Harrodsburg. In a surge of westward migration following the colonization of Boonesborough in 1775, the early backwoodsmen were joined by a mixture of German Protestants, Scotch-Irish, Huguenots, Irish, Scots, Welsh, Hollanders, and English who were already occupying the back country of the colonies in western Virginia and North Carolina. They sought and found fertile bottoms, a plentiful supply of game and a freedom from the stricture of society. The creeks of Cutshin, Thousand Sticks, Defeated, Tom Biggs, Stillhouse, Upper and Lower Devil, Quicksand, Lost, Frozen, Squabble, Buffalo, Betty Bowman, and Troublesome document events and manifest the imaginative naming prowess of the backwoodsman. By 1812, when migration decreased, homesteads in most


7 White, pp. 6-7.

8 Caudill, p. 10.

of the region were within five or ten miles of neighbors at the most.\textsuperscript{10} The creek beds continued to serve as a highway system up to the time of World War II.\textsuperscript{11} According to Dr. Thomas Clark, "the real heart of the up-river country is to be found up the creeks."\textsuperscript{12} Dr. Clark has characterized well the important position of these creeks in the lives of the mountain people:

Creeks to the mountaineers mean long and narrow ledges of bottom lands where houses and barns can be built, and where meager crops of corn can be grown. Likewise every creek forms a cove and settlers have followed them in locating suitable spots for building cabins. Large families have been reared, and the increase has married and always pushed higher up the creek. Soon a community of people bearing the same name and all akin have come to exist. Natives along the Kentucky River and its tributaries speak of branches and creeks within the same range of meaning that city dwellers refer to streets and street corners. A traveler is always given directions by creek valleys and junctions with main streams. A native will announce that he lives at the "head of Fall" or the "mouth of Buffalo."\textsuperscript{13}

Not only have the creeks served as highways, but also they have provided power to turn corn mills and furnished drinking water. An added influence on the mountaineer is the constant music of the creeks gurgling over their shallow, stony beds and their wild beauty as they "... scamper ... behind huge boulders and under cover of thickly overgrown woodland

\textsuperscript{10}Caudill, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{11}Clark, The Kentucky, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 13.
and ... tumble down steep hillsides with crystal clear water from bubbling mountain springs... "14

James Still leaves no doubt of the vital importance of the mountain streams. Their central position is reflected in the title of the collection of short stories, On Troublesome Creek, and in titles of individual stories ("On Quicksand Creek," "On Defeated Creek," "Journey to the Forks"); in frequent mention of creek beds as highways ("On a July Sunday we went down Little Carr..."); "15 "We watched him move along the creek road..."); "16 "Nobody passed up-creek or down..."); "17 "... The medicine drummer came down Shoal Creek..."); and in the use of creek names to define and characterize community ("Folks traipsed from Rockhouse Creek... from Deadmare Branch..."); "18 "Boone had been yon side Rockhouse Creek to sell my weave work..."); "19 "Hit's alike all over, Boone's Fork, Little Fork, Little Carr, Quicksand, Beaver Creek, Big Leather-wood..."); "20 "No needcessity o' lock or key on Shoal

14 Ibid., pp. 112, 113, 7, and 8.


16 Ibid., p. 68.


18 Ibid., p. 61.

19 Ibid., p. 157.

20 Still, River of Earth, p. 122.

21 Ibid., p. 134.
""Troublesome Creek, '"22 "'... If this town soaks its elbows in Troublesome Creek, it's bound to be a good 'un.'"23

Just as faithfully recorded in the works of Still as these place names of mountain streams is the way of life along their rugged courses.

Most of the early settlers had migrated southward from Pennsylvania into the western sections of Virginia and the Carolinas and thence westward into Kentucky.24 Perhaps some dropped out of wagon trains moving further westward because of a broken wagon wheel or other emergency and remained by necessity or inertia.25

Whatever their reasons, the early settlers found a land "served from the beginning of time by a lavish natural hand..."26 Virgin land in the narrow valleys and cleared slopes supplied crops of corn and vegetables sufficient (even abundant) to the needs of the widely scattered mountain families. If corn were difficult to market, corn liquor was not, and the Scotch Irish, long accustomed to evading British officialdom in the same manner, became proficient "Moonshiners"

22Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 37.
23Ibid., p. 112.
to avoid federal taxes. Primeval forests provided ready cash and, during the last half of the nineteenth century, mountaineers "... ran numberless rafts of unbelievably fine logs ... down the Kentucky River ... on the crest of spring freshets to markets in Ashland, Cattlettsburg, Louisville, Cincinnati, Valley View, and Frankfort." Eventually, a fourth natural resource, deep layers of coal with accompanying pockets of natural gas and oil, first rivaled and then surpassed the other three in economic importance. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the economic welfare of Eastern Kentucky has been dependent on coal and the fortunes of its people have varied with the industrial fortunes of the nation. The demand for coal and timber during World War I created a boom which "... tapered off in the early 1920's ... and collapsed with the great depression." Many miners went back to the land, some to other industries, but many stayed in the coal towns working when work was available and hoping for a return of their former prosperity. The prosperity brought by advanced technology to other parts of the nation during the 1940's failed to alleviate the problems of the mountains.

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28 Clark, Kentucky: Land of Contrast, p. 269.
29 Ibid., p. 273.
30 Ibid.
31 White, p. 53.
Thus, every decade since 1930 has brought to the mountaineer a lessened capacity for sustaining a "decent level of personal economy."\textsuperscript{32} James Still's awareness of the economic plight of the farmer-coal miner comes through with clarity and objectivity. The opening sentence of his episodic novel, River of Earth, reads: "The mines on Little Carr closed in March." From this beginning, the book follows the fluctuating fortunes of Brack Baldridge for whom mining is "... the only trade I know..." and Jolly Middleton, who farms the narrow ridges and "... wouldn't work in a coal mine if there was gold tracks running in."

With what human resources did the mountaineer meet and deal with the jarring transition from backwoodsman to miner to unemployed laborer? From master of his land to hired servant of eastern industrialists? From a world in which common sense and physical brawn marked the value of a man to a world in which "book-larning" took precedence over native wit? Pioneer families, predominantly Scotch-Irish,\textsuperscript{33} carried to the frontier "... a sense of independence and ... individuality ... clan loyalty ... almost heraldic courage ... and a rigid sense of honor."\textsuperscript{34} The geographical isolation of the region, responsible for the retention of pioneer traditions, has created in the

\textsuperscript{32}Clark, Kentucky: Land of Contrast, p. 277.
\textsuperscript{33}Kephart, p. 151.
descendants of these settlers a value orientation often dramatically contrasting with those of middle class America. Dr. Marion Pearsall defines this value system in terms of responses to six underlying questions: What is the relation of man to nature? to time? to space? What is the nature of human nature? of human activity? of human relations? Dr. Pearsall found the mountaineer fatalistic, responsive to slow and "natural" time rhythms, and oriented to concrete places and particular things. She found, further, that he viewed human nature as basically evil, the nature of human activity as "being" rather than "doing," human relations as personal and kinship-based.

As a result, perhaps, of these values, the mountaineer of the early twentieth century was characterized by "... (1) economy of words that ... did not necessarily betoken a scarcity of ideas, (2) a dislike for making a display of the more tender feelings of their nature, (3) an undemonstrative manner that ... might have great firmness behind it, (4) a dour exterior that ... covered up a genial disposition and a kind heart, (5) wariness combined with fairness of purpose, (6) a practical attitude combined with underlying sentiment, (7) a capacity for hard and patient work, and


36Chart developed by Dr. Marion Pearsall, University of Kentucky, reprinted in Jack E. Weller, Yesterday's People (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 6.
(8) a . . . great reserve of strength. 37 Contemporary historians and sociologists have noted an erosion of certain of these qualities, independence becoming mere insularity, 38 and strength diminishing to a " . . . spirit of passive resignation." 39 In 1937, the year following the publication of the first mountain short stories of James Still, Edward E. White wrote: "Behind the little log house the long eroded fields lie hard and desolate; they speak almost aloud of thankless struggle and poverty. The poorest man with the least equipment and the most meager training is on the poorest land." 40

With a constant counterpoint between present conditions and inherited traditions, James Still writes poignantly of ". . . love, loyalty, hunger, death . . . and the will to endure. . . ." 41

James Still's fiction world recreates the dingy mining camp, veiled in the sooty mist of a burning slag pile, its rows of cold and gloomy houses leaning against a bare hill at one end of town and sitting on posts hanging above the creek waters at the other, the ever-present groan


38 Clark, Kentucky: Land of Contrast, p. 276.

39 White, p. 92.

40 Ibid., p. 62.

of the coal conveyor ringing through the town "... like a rusty bell," men grumpy from work in the mines plodding through the mud ruts of the streets. Small wonder that Mother Baldridge is "... again raising chaps in a coal camp ..." and longs to settle down "in a lone spot, a place certain and enduring with room to swing arm and elbow, a garden place for fresh victuals and a cow to furnish milk for the baby." Still's boy narrator dreams of becoming "... a man such as Grandpa Middleton had been before he got killed, learning to read and write, and to draw up deeds for land ..."; he longs to "... learn to plow, and have acres of my own ..." and swears that he will "never ... be a miner digging in a darksome hole."

Though the life of the mountain farmer often affords a contrast to the unattractive mining camp and the valley farmer enjoys a comfortable self-sufficiency in his fiction, James Still portrays realistically the plight of the families who tend crops in the uplands. Uncle Jolly Middleton, whose fortunes as a farmer are played against those of Brack Baldridge, the miner, in River of Earth, plowing with his mule the rooty new ground on a mountain swag, observes,

"Hain't many folks know how to tend dirt proper... A mighty spindling few. Land a-wasting and a-washing. Up and down Troublesome Creek, it's the same. Timber cut off and hills eating down. Hit's alike all over, Boone's Fork, Little Car, Quicksand, Beaver Creek, Big Leatherwood. ... What's people going to live on when those hills wear down to a nub?"

James Still provides no answer to Uncle Jolly's query.
The determination of Still's mountain parents that their children will receive "schooling" is perhaps his most optimistic note, and yet the two small boys walking to the settlement school in "Journey to the Forks" meet on the road a character who exhibits that attitude of insularity which Thomas D. Clark observed in eastern Kentucky. Cain Griggs "... never put much store by all them fetched on teachings ... quare onnatural things, not a grain o' good on the Lord's creation." At the end of the story the two children are still traveling toward the school but they are pictured as "... picking ... [their] way through stony dark." In River of Earth the children's beloved teacher is killed by an irate parent whose son he had whipped.

In two of Still's post World War II stories, the folk tradition of playing pranks on friends and relatives has degenerated into a crude and dangerous practice. In "Run for the Elbertas" two boys harass the driver of a truck hauling peaches, finally causing a delay which ruins his entire load of fruit. In "A Ride on the Short Dog" two boys play vicious pranks on the third, finally breaking his neck in a game of "swapping licks." The vicious cruelty of these boys' pranks illustrates "... the deterioration that has occurred to the mountain boy after industrialism of the

42 Still, On Troublesome Creek, pp. 129-136.
region left him no work on the farm, none of its traditional forms of recreation, and no respect for self or others."45

Thus, James Still's fictional world is patterned after the real life world of Appalachia, a world in which far-reaching economic changes must be met by a tradition-bound people. In the creation of this fictional world, the folk culture of its people is defined.

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CHAPTER II

MATERIAL CULTURE

Thomas Clark suggests that one understands the Kentucky mountain people only through sharing in their common everyday experiences.\(^1\) Perhaps one reason is that so many folk traditions are manifested within the family group. Certainly James Still has portrayed the mountain family realistically and sympathetically within a framework of their simple, tradition-filled lives. Still's settings are rich in folk art and tradition.

The material culture of home architecture, household furnishings, foods, clothing, medicines, and homemade toys, and the arts and skills associated with these have strong traditional characteristics.

James Still pictures four types of mountain homes. The first, and most common, seen in *River of Earth*\(^2\) and in "Maybird Upshaw"\(^3\) corresponds to the typical mountain home described by Clark "... a one-room log cabin

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\(^1\) Clark, *The Kentucky*, p. 11.


beginning, with room after room added as the family grew."\(^4\) Often there was an open "hall-trot" for the dogs and an adjoining "shed room" kitchen.\(^5\) The second type is the "great log house" of the Buckharts in "The Stir-Off,"\(^6\) a more commodious version of Clark's mountain home, one in which, no doubt, there were numerous "... annexes for bigger children and wayfaring strangers."\(^7\) The third is the mining camphouse, the dingy, crowded, weatherboarded structure\(^8\) one sees pictured in so many "poverty" articles in current periodicals. And, finally, the hastily constructed, boxed house of "The Proud Walkers."\(^9\) According to Dr. Lynwood Montell, construction skills and practices were a part of the folk tradition, passed from father to son, from carpenter to apprentice.\(^10\) Still describes in detail the construction of a rock chimney. "Rocks were gathered ... and a clay batter stirred."\(^11\) A bucket of mud and a coffee sack full of rocks were carried up the ladder, the rocks were "buttered" with

\(^{4}\) Clark, The Kentucky, p. 116.

\(^{5}\) Ibid. See also Henry Glassie, Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), pp. 94-101 and passim.

\(^{6}\) Still, On Troublesome Creek, pp. 85-107.

\(^{7}\) Clark, The Kentucky, p. 116.

\(^{8}\) Still, River of Earth, p. 184.

\(^{9}\) Still, On Troublesome Creek, pp. 35-60.


\(^{11}\) Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 54.
mud and placed on the chimney. Janice Giles uses the term "cat 'n' clay" in The Enduring Hills for a chimney of sticks, rocks, and mud plastered together.

Still's stories are a storehouse of household items produced by skills transmitted orally from one generation to the following one. On the beds are "shuck mattresses" or "shuck ticks," mattresses filled with corn husks. The shuck tick is well known in northwest Arkansas as well as in Appalachia. More affluent families sleep on "feather ticks" and enjoy "duck pillows." An Adair County informant relates the squabble among a group of heirs over the deceased mother's feather tick, a verification of its status among hill folk. Bed coverings are homemade cotton quilts, one of the most lasting of the folk arts enjoying at the present time a lively revival.

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12 Ibid.
14 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 50.
15 Ibid., p. 35.
16 Dialect Notes (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1966), III, 156.
17 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 117.
18 Ibid., p. 51.
19 Interview with Mr. Joe Morris, January, 1959.
20 Still, River of Earth, p. 8.
An often mentioned furnishing in the "shed room" kitchen is the "meat box," a large, salt-filled wooden box in which meat is preserved. If the family is affluent enough to have a smokehouse in the back yard, the meat box is kept there. Also mentioned are such items as a powder rag made from a moleskin, bullets kept in a leather pouch, a "cathole" cut in the back door, plates decorated with a "wedge print," a pipe bowl carved from an "oak boss," rio lamps, and pegs near the kitchen door for hanging garments. All are familiar items to Adair County informants.

Still presents three typical traditional diets: the bounty of the well-to-do valley farmers like the Buckharts and the cattlemen; the pinch-penny diet of the family just existing on a marginal level; and, finally, the fare of the miner's family in boom times. Breakfast is a main meal in any home. Uncle Kize, sprouting his second set of teeth at

21 Ibid., p. 184.
22 Ibid., p. 6.
23 Ibid., p. 15.
24 Ibid., p. 12.
25 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 19.
26 Ibid., p. 13.
27 Ibid., p. 55.
28 Still, River of Earth, p. 5.
29 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 19.
one hundred and three, breakfasts on hoecakes, butter and molasses, and a "middling-sized slice o' ham." At the home of Tom Zeek Duffey, cattle trader, breakfast consists of slabs of ham, scrambled guinea eggs, flour biscuits the size of saucers, and buttermilk "a duck couldn't have paddled through, so thick and good it was." Breakfast at the Pierces' in Janice Holt Giles' The Enduring Hills is almost identical, with the addition of cream gravy. The staple breakfast for the less affluent is boiled wheat, sometimes without sugar.

At the Buckharts' the cellar and smokehouse are filled with barrels of molasses, bins of Amburgey apples, gourds of lard, strings of "lazy wife" beans, cushaws, pumpkins, squashes, and shelves of preserves. Equally well stocked is Ulysses Jarret's cellar house in "A Master Time." Staple diet of the poor mining family consists of a variety of dried beans: "creasebacks," "shucky beans,"

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30 Ibid., pp. 129, 140.
31 Ibid., p. 157.
32 Ibid., p. 117.
33 Giles, p. 18.
34 Still, River of Earth, p. 8.
35 Still, On Troublesome Creek, pp. 87-89, 93.
37 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 110.
38 Ibid.
and "bled leather breeches." Potatoes, cornmeal mush, and fried hominy are common in winter diet. In the spring wild greens are a welcome change: branch lettuce, ragged breeches, bird's toe, and swamp mustard. Occasionally, wild meat is added to the menu: dove, squirrel, quail, or rabbit, fried more often than not, but sometimes broiled over the hot coals.

Clark lists biscuits, fried pork, and white gravy as the basic "up-river" foods and suggests that corn is the real symbol of food to Kentucky people. This reliance on corn meal when other food is scarce is typical of Still's mountain families. Clark also mentions shucky beans, sorghum, and dried pumpkins.

The self-sufficiency of the mountain family is reflected in another way by Still in his mention of homemade

39 Ibid., p. 18.
40 Ibid., p. 15.
41 Ibid., p. 37.
43 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 67.
44 Still, River of Earth, p. 12.
45 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 167.
46 Still, River of Earth, p. 12.
47 Ibid.
48 Clark, The Kentucky, p. 386.
49 Ibid., p. 385.
50 Ibid., pp. 388, 389.
clothing worn by his characters. In "I Love My Rooster" the mother speaks of the socks and stockings which she has knit for the family and the shirts and dresses which she hand made. The shirts are made without tails (to save valuable material) and the boy narrator longs for a "store bought" shirt that he can tuck into his trousers. In "The Proud Walkers," little Fern, unhappy after the family has moved to a new location suggests that the new neighbor's children probably "... wear flour-sack dresses, and you kin read print front and back." The same story describes the process by which the father shines his boots by dabbing tallow on them, breathing on them and rubbing with a linsey rag. This boot-cleaning process is described a second time in "On Quicksand Creek" which also mentions leggings improvised for a boy from coffee sacks to protect his legs in freezing weather.

In the yard and garden of Still's mountain families, still other evidences of folk culture are seen. In River of Earth Father helps Mother with the family wash by swinging the "battling stick" on a chestnut stump, a practice

51 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 16.
52 Ibid., p. 52.
53 Ibid., pp. 43, 44.
54 Ibid., p. 111.
55 Ibid., p. 113.
56 Still, River of Earth, p. 15.
described in Dialect Notes from the Tennessee mountains and Southeast Missouri. To combat moles in the garden, Father whittles two green walnut sprouts, shaves bark until it is brown with sap, drives them in the farther ends of the mole's trail. The walnut juice is supposed to get into the mole's eyes and turn it back. In the yard are gourds on poles for the martins to nest in, an example of material culture of the mountains which survives to the present day. These bird houses can be seen on lawns in rural counties of central and eastern Kentucky.

Kephart found few toys among the children of Appalachia in 1913: rag dolls, broken bits of pottery, and a few "ridey horses." "Store bought" toys are virtually non-existent in Still's mountain stories. Aside from the "spin tops" bought at the mining commissary, the toys are all homemade. This is not to say that there is a lack of entertainment, however. On the contrary, the children's toys and games described by Still illustrate an unusual ability to improvise.

57 Dialect Notes, II, 306.
58 Still, River of Earth, pp. 14, 15.
59 Ibid., p. 43.
60 Kephart, p. 259. Adair County children in the 1930's often kept entire "stables" of "ridey horses" or "stick horses" made of ironweed or tobacco sticks.
61 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 23.
One of the most ingenious and elaborate of the home built toys is the "flying jinny," "... a long hickory pole ... pegged in the middle to a sourwood stump."62 Boys straddle this homemade merry-go-round (called a "flying Dutchman" in some areas),63 and whirl around at dizzying speeds. Boys also enjoy "Johnny walkers" fashioned by Grandpa.64 These homemade stilts are well known in various parts of the Southern highlands. In North Carolina they are known as "Tom Walkers" and in Louisiana as "George Walkers."65 Toys made from spools are popular ones in the Still stories. In River of Earth Father fashions a "spool pretty" for the baby by threading a waxed string through a notched spool, twisting match stems in the end loops so that the spool rolls "... like a tumble bug."66 He curves "spool pipes" for the children to blow soap bubbles through.67 Both uses of spools were common in Adair County in the 1930's and are not unknown even today. The Brown Collection records the use of spools for bubble pipes in North Carolina.68

62Ibid., p. 96.
64Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 164.
66Still, River of Earth, p. 80.
67Still, On Troublesome Creek, pp. 67, 79.
68The Brown Collection, I, 233.
Other folk toys include whistles carved from hickory sprouts, 69 corn cob "poppets" (dolls), 70 and spin tops carved by the boys themselves. 71 An informal game among the boys involves gathering "noggin sticks" in a weed patch and hitting each other over the head to see who will "holler" first. 72 They also enjoy tying June bugs on to threads, 73 collecting potato bugs in jars, 74 and swinging on gates. 75

Hardly to be called as a child's toy, but nonetheless an interesting device fashioned by mountain boys, is the "bull-fiddle" or "dumb bull." Fashioned from a hollow log, a strip of resined cowhide and a string on a hickory sprout, the crude instrument makes a noise "... like a wildcat's scream..." and frightens cattle into a stampede. 76 "On Quicksand Creek" gives a detailed description:

Ark... found a hollow log... with a narrow crack in its upper side. ... He drove twenty penny nails at the ends of the crack in the log; he cut notch-holes in the tips of the hide string and stretched it taut over the nailheads. Ark had me resin the hide string while he fashioned a bow of a hickory sprout and a twine cord. The dumb bull was finished. 77

69 Still, River of Earth, p. 69.
70 Ibid., p. 44.
71 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 23.
72 Ibid., pp. 94, 95.
73 Still, River of Earth, p. 69.
74 Ibid., p. 14.
75 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 19.
76 Ibid., pp. 123, 126.
77 Ibid., pp. 123, 124.
At midnight "Ark dragged the hickory bow lightly across the dumb bull's string." The resulting sound, described above, was "like something fleeing Torment." Henry Giles, Adair County hill man, author and newspaper columnist, recalls hearing stories of "dumb-bulls" in the northern section of Adair County where he was reared, but has never seen one himself. Jon Bowling, student at Lindsey Wilson College, Columbia, Kentucky, told of making a dumb bull under the direction of his grandfather, Mr. John Marshall Moss, who was, before his death, a storehouse of information about earlier days in the Keltner community in the western part of Adair County. Jon said that his uncles, when they were boys, used dumb bulls to hide by the roadside and frighten horseback-riding passers-by. The dumb bull described by Jon consisted of a three-foot section of hollow log, either end of which was covered with hide. Holes were pierced in the center of the rawhide ends and a resined string threaded through the holes was pulled back and forth in a sawing motion to produce the sound.

Yet another skill connected with material culture and important in the lives of Still's characters is the practice of folk medicine. Uncle Mize's chest pains are

78 Ibid., p. 124.


80 Interview with Jon Bowling, Columbia, Kentucky, April 6, 1969.
relieved by a hot rock wrapped and laid on his chest. He drinks cherrybark tea for his blood, a remedy described in the Brown Collection as cherrybark soaked in whiskey and also mentioned in The Kentucky. 'Sang, or ginseng, is good for "quickening the blood." It is listed as a folk remedy, though for a different purpose, in Kentucky Superstitions.

Tea brewed from boneset leaves will cure worms in children. Ratsbane is yet another useful tonic. Indeed, "ol' doc down at Blackjack says there's an herb to cure every ill," a judgment substantiated by Thomas D. Clark, who asserts that "... hundreds of ... common weeds and herbs are collected into the granny woman's herbariums." In

81 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 156.
82 Ibid., p. 153.
83 The Frank C. Brown Collection, VI, 115.
84 Clark, The Kentucky, p. 119.
85 Still, River of Earth, p. 54.
87 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 163.
88 Ibid., p. 74.
90 Clark, The Kentucky, p. 119.
"The Burning of the Waters" Father, attempting to support the family from the sale of herbs, collects ginseng, golden seal, seneca, dock, wild ginger, cohosh, cranes-bill, bluing weed, and snake root. The medicine drummer, a passing folk institution, plays a key role in Still's story "Locust Summer." His tonic is so potent that it "... cures any ill, fixes up and straightens out man or beast..."92 Uncle Samp in River of Earth treats a chronic cough with "... a horn o' Indian Doctor tonic... after every meal."93 In the same book, the boy narrator studies the Indian doctor's picture on the back of the almanac and thinks that his mother "... ought to be taking this tonic for her sick spells..."94 Remedies to stop bleeding are suggested by neighbors when little Fletch in River of Earth is injured by an exploding dynamite cap. Spider webs, lamp aut [sic], and fresh dirt are all recommended.95 Both cobwebs and soot are mentioned in a list of folk remedies collected by Earl D. Hunter.96

92Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 75.  
93Still, River of Earth, p. 193.  
94Ibid., p. 218.  
95Ibid., p. 219.  
96Earl D. Hunter, "Folk Remedies of Man and Beasts," Kentucky Folklore Record, VIII, No. 3 (July-September, 1962), 160.
The process of whiskey making involves both material culture and traditional skills. The whiskey still and the process of whiskey making are described in detail by Jim Couch in Leonard Roberts' *Up Cutshin and Down Greasy*. The still and process play a prominent part in James Still's short story, "The Scrape," and in other stories, "The Stir Off," "A Master Time," the moonshine jug is passed among the characters.

"Now the way you begin making whisky, you carry your old barrels to the place, in some holler where they are plenty of water. A still is a thing you can make. You take and get you a sheet of copper the size you want to make your still, large or small, and you take some brass brads and put that thing in the form of a barrel. Then you take plank and make a head for this still. After that you want a hole in this head, so you take a auger and hand saw and saw a round hole in the head for your cap, whatever cap you want. It's a 'gag' about twelve inches, I guess.

"But start with your mash first in the copper still. Take and heat your water boiling, then you take meal. Pour your meal in the barrel, and then you pour in your water. You stir this meal up until you cook it good. You keep right on adding meal and water until you cook it right into a mush. Well, when you get it cooked to your notion, you take about a quart of flour to ever' barrel, and put it right down on top of your mash to hold your heat in. 'Ell we let that set over to the next day, let it get good and cool.

"And then we take an old sausage mill to grind our malt corn. We'd sprout what was called malt corn. Take and put corn in a coffee sack in water until it sprouted good, until long sprouts come on it. Then we'd take this mill and grind this malt corn up, about a 'gag' to a barrel. And we'd go back and put this malt corn in that barrel. And then you take your hands like making dough, and you bust ever' lump in there. Stir just like making gravy, to get it all dissolved just like milk. And then you cover your barrel real good, and in about three days this meal will go to working. You've seen slop, now, be setting in a bucket in hot times, come up in big bubbles
and bust. That's the way mash works. It'll work in about three or four days sometimes.

"Then it'll clear off, and all that meal will settle back in the bottom. And then we'll go ahead and get a forked stick, and we'll get into them barrels, and we'll stir all that up together. We'll take and build us a far and heat that until it turns into a simmer, beginning to get ready to boil. Then we take our cap, put a stick with a hole in it down in the cap, and put it in that hole in the still. And then we'll take clay mud and daub all the steam in there. The steam is coming out about two feet long, sourwood. Take it and bore me a hole in it. Start in at one end and bore as far as I can, and then start at the other end and bore the hole out. We use that for an arm. We put that in that still cap, and we'll daub it in there. Well, we'll put a worm in it if we're making the old-fashioned way—we'll take our worm then and put in the other end of that arm, and we'll daub her in there good. And of course if we're making it with a crooked worm, we'll have a barrel to put that worm in; and if we're making with a straight worm, we'll have a trough made and a hole bored in each end of it, and the worm would run through it for our water to pur in on.

"That goes to boiling in the still, and the steam comes out into that worm and evaporates in the worm, and when it comes out to the end, we catch it and call it singlings. It's an alkiehel, but not high-powered alkiehel. It runs a stream about the size of a number-eight or ten gallons, sometimes twelve.

"I'll have this still full of singlings and go back and pour 'em in a 'barrel. I'll go right back and repeat it over and over till I'll get me a barrel of this what I call singlings. Well, now I'll take my old still a part and wash and scrub it. Have to wash ever'thing. Take you about three hours or three hours and a half to get it cleaned up ready for your second run.

"Then I'll put these singlings back in the still. Get 'em on the far now and get 'em to boiling, just up in the center, like you was a-making sorghum, you know when they go to foaming up in the pan. I'll cap 'em up like I did in the first place. Well, I'll pull my far down to a very small far—you wouldn't want to overhear it. Just heat it enough to get it started to boil good enough, and then just keep a small steady far under it. Keep about one temperature all the time. About an hour after you capped your still up again, your first shots of alkiehel begin to run. Two hundred proof. You'd catch that in
a jar or jug, whatever you wanted to catch 'em in. Set it around. I always mark mine--number one, two, three, four, like that. Catch it in a gallon fruit jar or gallon jug. Sometimes I'd catch it in a gallon jug. "When I'd get this run off down to where it gets . . . weak . . . I'll get me two old wash-tubs. I'll put me so much of one kind in there and so much of another. Take me a stick and keep it stirred up good. I'll keep a-tasting, you know, clear down in the bottom, and shaking it. I'd put some in a bottle and give it three shakes and turn it back upright. Get the bead of the whisky till it would be the size of a squirrel's eye--that's the way I alius judged it. I'd have a hundred and ten proof whisky. And I'd keep on that way till I got my whole batch o' whisky just the way I wanted it. Jar it up and go to selling it then." 

In "The Scrape" the narrator, a young man, is on his way to a square dance when he meets Jiddy Thornwell. At Jiddy's suggestion they decide to go by Bill Hopson's still. The still was hidden so well that, according to the narrator, "We waded bresh, seeing nothing, and of a sudden there it was under a wedge o' a cliff rock. Fire burnt beneath the kettle, yet not a drop o' likker had driddled through the worm." Jiddy drinks a gourd dipperful of the "still beer" out of the tub despite the narrators' warning that it is "pi'zen." Then the two proceed to Loss Ramsey's to see if he has any whiskey already run off. They can hear Loss's "thumping keg" before they reach the still and find that he has a big run on. The "short quart" that he gives the boys is "fresh-run and warm."

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97 Roberts, pp. 61-64.

98 Still, On Troublesome Creek, pp. 184, 185.
"The way a thumping kag works, you hook your old still up... but you would have your thumping kag at the end of the arm where the worm connected in the old-fashioned still. You have you a ten-gallon barrel a-setting there and drill you a hole in it, and let your arm reach down in it about six or eight inches. On the other side of this kag we drill another hole down in the top and make us another chuck. This reaches to the bottom of the kag. We put an arm on this chuck a foot or two long and connect our worm to it. Use a coil worm and put it in your flake barrel. This gives us a thumping kag between our worm and our still.

"The steam runs from that still into this thumping kag, and we catch about four gallons of singlings and take them and pour 'em in the thumping kag. And then when the steam goes into that thumping kag, it comes out of there good whisky from then on as long as you run, you see." 99

In the first half of the twentieth century, because of his geographical isolation, the mountaineer lived apart from the popular culture of the Kentucky lowlands. The life of James Still's fictional characters provides an accurate and vivid picture of the material culture of the mountain people. The four kinds of mountain homes which he describes help to define the lives of the families who reside in each. The arts and skills involved in the production of household furnishings, food, clothing, toys and in the practice of folk medicine in the home illustrate the self-sufficiency of mountain life in the period of which Still writes. The author's knowledge of whiskey-making in the traditional mountain still lends authenticity to episodes in which this process plays an essential part. The description of this

99 Roberts, pp. 65, 66.
material culture illustrates concretely the reliance of
the mountain people on traditions orally transmitted.
CHAPTER III

CUSTOMS

The genial side of the mountain man's disposition, mentioned in Chapter I, manifests itself in his associations with friends and neighbors—in his almost legendary hospitality, in his love for a well-delivered practical joke, as well as in formalized gatherings such as hog killings, stir-offs, square dances, cock fights, and funeralizing.

Still shows in story after story that, although living conditions may be crowded and food may be scarce, "... mountain hospitality is absolute."¹ The stranger is always welcomed even though he may have to sleep in a room with several people and share a bed. One idiom for a close friendship is "thick as four in a bed,"² and Clark relates an incident in which a poverty-stricken mountaineer invites his dinner guest to "... take a 'tater. Take damn' near all the taters."³ Kephart found the same philosophy prevailed among the mountaineers he visited, and tells of waiting for a family member to take a sack of corn to mill before a meal could be prepared.⁴ In several Still stories, this boundless

¹Clark, The Kentucky, p. 114.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., p. 113.
⁴Kephart, pp. 199, 200.
hospitality carries an added burden of clan loyalty, another mountain trait. Cousin move in with a family when the mines close. In spite of the scarcity of food, Father cannot ask them to leave because they are his "blood kin" and Mother finally burns the house down to evict them. Again, when times are hard, men from the mines come just as the garden is "coming in" and ask for a "mess" of beans. Father, who "... never yet turned a body down ..." allows them to pick and carry away every young bean while Mother cries silently. Other visitors are more welcome. Uncle Jolly, who delights the children with his practical jokes and exasperates Father with his not infrequent brushes with the law, is given a bed in the main room. And neighbors from miles up and down are entertained at funeralizings and weddings.

Practical jokes help relieve the tedium of the struggle for existence. Uncle Jolly, a "born fool" according to Father, delights in "cutting a rusty." He gives the children cedar gum to chew, causing their teeth to stick together. Euly repays Uncle Jolly by putting pins through

5 Weatherford and Brewer, p. 4.
6 Still, River of Earth.
7 Ibid., p. 17.
8 Ibid., p. 40.
9 Ibid., p. 176.
10 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 157.
11 Still, River of Earth, p. 36.
his saddle. When he parries by mounting his horse behind the saddle he lands on a handful of "snatchburrs."12

Uncle Jolly appears again in "School Butter,"13 a short story built around a popular taunt which will be discussed in a later chapter. In this story Uncle Jolly performs sleight-of-hand tricks. The narrator asserts that Uncle Jolly "could snatch money out of the air; he could pick anything he wanted right out of the sky. And he would laugh. He would pull a trick and laugh like a tree full of crows."

In the story, Uncle Jolly first appears riding "barebones" (without a saddle) past the schoolhouse, "his mare-mule wearing a hat between her ears and a Sunday tie around her neck."

He circles the schoolhouse "riding sober as a jury boss," and making the mare-mule jiggle her hoofs and prance. Then he stood on her back and reached into the air— . . . and pulled down a book. He opened a volume and pretended to read though he couldn't have named the letter his mule's tracks made." Many of the "scholars" know tales of Jolly Middleton's pranks. One child relates an incident in which he tipped his hat to a lady and "out flew a bird."

Another child tells of the "Law" attempting to arrest Jolly when "up to the Law he rode, gave his beast a jab, and low she bowed. He reached and shook the deputy's hand, 'howdy-de! and was gone ere the Law could bat an eye." Again, Uncle

12 Ibid., pp. 38, 43.

Jolly passes the schoolhouse "stretched on the flat of his critter's back, a hat covering his face, a poke of meal for a pillow. The mare wore his shoes on her ears." Behind the pranks and tricks of Jolly Middleton in this story lies a serious purpose, the obtaining of new textbooks for the children.

The same character type, the prankster who obtains some good for his people through tricks, appears in a later Still story, "The Fun Fox."14 Again, the setting is the one-room school. The prankster is Mace Crownover, whose trade is "confounding folks." One child reads a theme for the new teacher:

A man bought a horse off Mace Crownover. The critter was blue or green or purple, or some such color, you couldn't tell which. You couldn't learn till the rain washed away the pokeberry and madder dye. The beast was gray as teeth.

The children all agreed that "Old Mace's tricks are the best going." The men loafing at the general store agree. Argus Bagley coaxes Mace to "tell of the foot logs you doctored to snap in two under people, the gallus straps cut during election rallies, the tree fiddles you fashioned to stampede cattle. Or tell of you dying--playing stone dead purely to hear your kin holler and bawl." The plot in "The Fun Fox" involves a "forty-dollar collect package" which has come to Mace at the post office. Mace has vowed that he will "clear" the package though Argus Bagley is sure that

14James Still, "The Fun Fox," Woman's Day, XVI (September, 1953), 101, 137-144; Mountain Life and Work, XLIV (May, 1968), 12-16.
he "hasn't a cent to his pocket" and is convinced that it is a trick. Mace will not reveal the contents of the package. On an assigned day a crowd meets at the post office to see how Mace will get his package. Mace collects the forty dollars from the crowd, all of whom are beset with curiosity about the contents of the box. No one wants to cut the twine, suspecting a practical joke. When the package is finally opened by the new school teacher, it is found to contain recreation equipment for the school. The "scholars" themselves are clever pranksters in "The Fun Fox." "Antics were pulled under . . . the teacher's very nose, though catch a body . . . [he] could not." A chair collapsed under him, the chalk box was filled with soot, the pointing stick broke when he lifted it, and his lunch box was filled with wasps, and ink was put in the well water. Jesse Stuart, Kentucky mountain writer, remembers getting in trouble for somewhat similar antics in the Plum Grove School in Greenup County. His sister enumerated his offenses to their mother:

"Mom, Jesse got a whipping today. He hit Bill Weaver with an apple core. He tore down the girl's playhouse. He got into Mr. Collins' apples. He tore down a 'doodle' of Mr. Wheeler's cane hay by running and tumbling over it. He even said a bad word."15

Sometimes pranks are less good-natured and take on a crude, even vicious, tone. In River of Earth Father's cousins, Hari and Tibb, whose hearts according to Mother are "black as Satan," cut off Uncle Samp's cherished long

mustache while he sleeps. 16 Already mentioned in this paper has been the practice of stampeding cattle with a "bull-fiddle." The cruel tricks of "Ride on the Short Dog" and "Run for the Albertas" described in Chapter I of this paper follow in the same tradition.

The same range from innocent and amusing to cruel and vicious characterizes the games played by children and young folk in Still's fiction. From the description of a child's swinging on a gate to the dramatic scene of two young men fighting to the death with knives while each has one hand tied to the other, the flavoring of tradition is strong. Boys in Still's stories play a variety of marble games. In "fatty hole" they spin marbles from their fists into dirt pockets, the losers getting their knuckles thumped. 17 In "big ring" they put a marble in a circle drawn in the dirt with a brogan toe, and attempt to knock it out of the ring with a second marble. 18 Other organized games include "sheep fight," a head butting contest 19 and "rooster fighting," exchanging blows with arms doubled and feet on a mark. 20 Men in the mining camps play "crack-o-loo," pitching silver dollars at a mark, 21 and draughts.

16 Still, River of Earth, p. 9.
17 Ibid., pp. 82, 83.
18 Ibid., p. 83.
19 Ibid., p. 92.
20 Ibid., p. 104.
21 Ibid., p. 155.
In "The Scrape" the young man narrator is instructed to tie together the arms of two enemies and he does so not realizing that they are carrying knives. He watches, horrified, as they battle until both are unconscious from loss of blood.

Social instinct is highly developed in the mountain community. Often friends and neighbors gathered to help with some household task. Still centers two stories around such gatherings: "A Master Time" at a "hog-kill" and "The Stir Off" at a molasses-making.

The hog kill at Ulyssus Jarrett's was to be "a quiet affair, a picked crowd, mostly young married folks." Starting on a cold January afternoon, the slaughtering lasted until supper time. After a bountiful meal a snow fight between husbands and wives began a long evening of merriment including apple and potato roasting in the ashes on the hearth, corn-popping, and candy-pulling. A churn full of whiskey with a gourd dipper added to the festivities.

The slaughtering process took place at the barn. With three iron pots of boiling water in readiness, the two hogs were shot and the carcasses scalded in a barrel.

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22 Ibid., pp. 181-190.
Then the men "... scraped the bristles free with knives while the women dabbled hot water to keep the hair from 'setting.' The scraping done, gambrels were caught underneath the tendons of the hind legs and the beasts hefted to pole tripods; they were singed, shaved, and washed, and the toes and dew-claws removed." Hams, loins, shoulders, and bacon strips were "salted down" in wooden boxes in the cellars. The bladders were fashioned into balloons, the heart, sweetbreads, and "lights" saved for immediate use and a "sheep [sic] dog and a gang of cats dined well on the refuse."

Except for the omission of the sausage-making, this account of hog killing agrees with those described by Adair County informants.

An autumn event, the molasses "stir-off" was a more elaborate affair. Mr. James Nunn, who grew up in Metcalfe County, Kentucky, during the depression years, recalls sorghum making as both a social occasion and an important autumn task. The following is his written recollection of the process:

Sugar was one of those scarce staples at our house, and Papa made sorghum molasses every fall for use as a sugar substitute. . . .

The excitement began when Papa and the help began to beat the leaves off of the cane stalks with large sticks. This was called stripping the cane. When the cane was stripped and cut, it was hauled to the cane mill on a horse drawn wagon. All this usually took a day or more.

The next day was spent grinding the juice from the cane stalks with a horse drawn machine. As the horse walked around and around the mill, he pulled a lever which turned two iron wheels. The lever was made of a long wooden pole about twenty feet in length attached at one end to the big gear of
the mill and the other end to the collar of the horse. The cane stalks were hand fed between the two big wheels which squeezed the juice from them and sent it through a large spout into a wooden bucket. The juice was carried and poured into a large metal pan placed over a deep wood-filled trench. By late afternoon the pan was full of juice and the wood underneath the pan was set afire. Blended with the smell of fall and the burning wood came the sweet aroma of cooking molasses.

About sundown the neighbors and their "youngens" came from every direction. The neighborhood musicians... fiddled and picked the banjo to everyone's delight. Uncle Joe always told us "youngens" a haunted tale or two, after which we moved about in the darkness with more caution. The elders swapped news about the latest happenings while we children indulged in a few frolicking games.

By ten o'clock the sorghum was cooked off and the "youngens" were invited to sop the sorghum pan. To do this we used a wooden paddle, which some gent had whittled out while the social activities were taking place.

When the sopping was finished, everyone told Mama and Papa what a good time he had and how pretty and clear the sorghum looked. They thanked Papa for the sample jar of molasses which he had given them to take home and said "goodbye."

Still uses this occasion as the setting for a story of mountain courtship. Details of the actual sorghum making process are carefully selected to advance one aspect of the plot—such shenanigans take place that the boiling syrup is neglected and over-cooks into "seventeen gallons of 'candy-jacks.'"

The "stir-off" party is described by Dave Couch in Leonard Roberts' Up Cutshin and Down Greasy.

We would have a stir-off every night when we got to making 'lasses. Get the cane into the mill and grind it into juice of a day, and then it would take us till sometimes two o'clock in the night to get it stirred off... We would have some of the same games we had at the other get-togethers. Run sets, play Fleased or Displeased, or Old Dock
Janes, London Bridge. I don't know how many different games they would play, but a lot of them. . . I played the banjer all the time. . . Had to play fast for the dances.26

In "The Stir-Off," Gid Buckheart had "... only invited neighbors and a couple o' fiddlers" but where there were three marriageable daughters "... a rambling widower . . . was apt to come unbid . . ." and "a mighty crowd" had gathered at the Buckhearts' before evening. Still's boy narrator sits on "... a heap of milled sorghum stalks . . . molassy spoon smoothly whittled wooden paddle ready . . . to taste the foam." As the golden foam rose one man "chunked the fire" while another "... ladled green skimmings into the sorghum hole." Old Gid Buckheart tested the sirup by "spinning drops off of chips, tasting." His instruction to the boilers was to "Stir till it 'gins making sheep's eyes, and mind not to over-bile." Mrs. Buckheart regrets that "a couple gallons o' juice" was not saved for candy. A scuffle between Old Gid and Squire Letcher turns into a free-for-all in which most of the young men and boys are ducked into the waist deep hole of green sorghum skimmings.

Important both as a social and a religious celebration, funeralizing is a well documented mountain custom. Two such occasions are related in River of Earth, one from

which the book gets its name, the other held for a baby who had died the previous winter.  

Thomas D. Clark devotes a full chapter of The Kentucky to this delayed funeral service established as a custom in the days when isolation of mountain homes often made impossible in the winter months a formal funeral at the time of burial. According to Clark,

These days have been planned in advance by the family for nearly a year. Those stooped, sad-eyed, and heavy bonneted women in black funeral dress have spent long hours laboring over a hot cooking stove preparing for the company, which will stop by their houses after the preaching. The family directly interested in the services has put forth their best efforts at preparing a bountiful meal because the preacher will return home with them for dinner.

Services at the grave, which has been decorated with white-washed stones, paper streamers, and flowers, are held to pay respect to the dead, to make converts, and to encourage the backslider to mend his ways. Often several preachers are on the program, and with each sermon, the emotions of the mourners are worked higher. After the sermon, mournful hymns are chanted or sung as the congregation moves to the memorial stone where the preacher kneels and "lifts his voice in loud and tumultuous supplication." Thus, the

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27 In his sermon in River of Earth (p. 76) Brother Sim Bobberly asks, "Oh, my children, where are we going on this mighty river of earth, a-borning, begetting, and a-dying. . . ."

28 Still, River of Earth, pp. 180, 181.

29 Roberts, p. 56.

30 Clark, The Kentucky, pp. 197, 198.
service comes to a close and "the upset Baptist congregation becomes a neighborly folk gathering." 31

In The Quare Women Lucy Furman describes a funeralizing in Knott County, where Still's stories are also set. Several of the folk traveled up the left fork of Troublesome to a branch, followed the stream for a time, crossed a mountain to a "gap" where they reached the burying ground. The "faint threat of song" they had heard in the valley "... became a rich, minor, hauntingly beautiful chorus of men's voices." The congregation was "... seated on rows of planks laid across logs in the shade. ... There were a number of small lattice grave houses." Five preachers took part in the meeting held for four deceased persons, one of whom had been dead for eight years. The service followed the order given in The Kentucky. Sometimes a hymn was sung between sermons. The meeting "broke" at three o'clock and the congregation invited for dinner at the home of one relative who had "'cooked up' for a week, and was ready for all comers." 32

The first funeralizing in River of Earth was held in Seldom Churchhouse on Defeated Creek. The Brack Baldridge family was walking to the post office at Little Carr, having gotten word of a letter there for them. When they saw men

31Ibid., pp. 199, 201, 204.

and women walking toward the churchhouse with "yard flowers and wild blooms in their arms: honeysuckle and Easter flowers, and sesash," Mother surmised the occasion was a funeralizing. This service was inside the churchhouse where "... black-bonneted women gathered beside the pulpit. Men moved restlessly ... crossing and uncrossing their legs.

... Two were swapping knives..." After a hymn "lined out" by an elder Brother Sam Mobberly ("... a saint if ever one walked God's creation" in Mrs. Baldridge's judgment) "... embraced the pulpit block ... pressed his palms gently on the great Bible ... and began to read." There is no record of the number of preachers who take part because the boy narrator falls asleep during Brother Mobberly's sermon. When he is awakened the family walks back toward home leaving Seldom Churchhouse and the funeralizing behind.33

Mother Baldridge planned well ahead for her baby's funeralizing. The boy narrator recalls:

With the crops laid by we cleared a patch of ground on the Point around the baby's grave. Mother took a bucket of white sand from the Flax-patch sandbar, patting it on the mount with her hands. "We're going to have a funeralizing for the baby in September," she said. "... I've already spoke for Brother Sam Mobberly. He's coming all the way from Troublesome Creek. I reckon we've got plenty to feed everybody."34

Father thinks it not proper to have a big funeral for a baby who died so small that he "hadn't even learnt to walk."

33 Still, River of Earth, pp. 72, 73, 74, 76, 77.
34 Ibid., p. 171.
Mother, however, reassures him that she is having only one preacher and it will be a one-day funeral.

"There hain't no use asking anybody except our kin," Father said. "It'll look like we're trying to put on the dog."

"Everybody that's a-mind to come is asked," Mother said. "I hain't trying to put a peck measure over the word o' God."

Immediate preparations began on Friday before the Sunday of the funeralizing. Two families of relatives helped to scrub the floors "twice over with a shuck mop" and wash down the walls. Even the yard was tidied and Sunday dinner preparation began.

Mother cut the heads off of fifteen dommers [dominic hens or Plymouth Rocks] and our last guinea. The stove stayed hot all day Friday, baking and frying. Cushaw pies covered the kitchen table.

"I reckon you've got enough shucky beans biled to feed creation," Nezzie Crouch said.

Preacher Sim Mobberly came on Saturday morning and stayed the night, sleeping on the feather bed. On Sunday morning the mother "climbed to the Point before breakfast to spread a white sheet over the baby's grave."

Before nine o'clock the yard and porch were crowded. Neighbors came quietly, greeting Mother, and the women held handkerchiefs in their hands, crying a little. . . . The clock was stopped, its hands pointing to the hour and minute the baby

35 Ibid., pp. 174, 175.
36 Ibid., p. 178.
37 Ibid., p. 179.
38 Ibid., p. 180.
died; and those who passed the room knew the bed, for it was spread with a white counter-pane and a bundle of fall roses rested upon it. At ten o'clock Preacher Sim opened his Bible in the arbor on the point.

Other mountain social customs mentioned in the stories of Still are the square dance and the cock fight. Neither has been used as the central setting of a story, however.

In his warm-hearted hospitality, in his delight in a well-delivered prank or a competitive game, in his combination of household tasks with social gatherings, and in his integration of religious and social life, the mountaineer of James Still's Kentucky region reveals his geniality, his sense of fellowship, and, sometimes, his fierce individualism. In story after story, Still has integrated in plot and theme these traditional relationships of the mountain man with his friends and neighbors.

39 Ibid., pp. 180, 181.
40 The narrator of "The Scrape" is on his way to a square dance where there would be "enough fiddlers to curl the shingles" in On Troublesome Creek (pp. 181-190).
41 The boy narrator of "I Love My Rooster" (On Troublesome Creek, pp. 9-34) buys half interest in a game rooster who lost a cock fight and was thought "knob dead" by his owner.
CHAPTER IV

FOLKLORE

James Still's fiction is enriched by the folklore of the mountaineer—the riddles which he uses to sharpen the wits of his children, the legends and tales which furnish him entertainment, the songs through which he expresses his joys and sorrows, and the beliefs and superstitions whereby he attempts to understand and explain the natural forces which surround him.

Riddles sharpen the wits of children and provide a game of mental skill for adults. ¹ Jim Couch recalled for Leonard Roberts his boyhood at the headwaters of the Kentucky River:

My people have alless been a riddling fambly. I can't remember when I didn't know a lot of them, and we would tell 'em any time we took a notion around the far at night. And then they was alless good to try on strangers when we had somebody staying all night with us.²

Why I've told riddles out a-hunting or riding with someone horseback to town or we would have a few at the end of corn rows when we worked in the fields. I guess we done more riddling in the fambly than anything else, at times we did.³

³Ibid., p. 103.
Four traditional riddles are found in River of Earth. All are used for entertainment by the children.

Three appear in collections of traditional lore. The first is whispered by Mother to Euly who asks the rest of the family:

Twelve pears hanging high,
Twelve fellers riding by;
Now each tuck a pear
And left eleven hanging there.  

The answer is, of course, that Each is one "feller's" name. This riddle is Number 120 in the Brown Collection.

The remaining three riddles are told by the children in a "riddling game" in which they take turns trying to baffle each other.

As I went over London Bridge
I met my sister Ann,
I broke her neck and drank her blood
And let her body stand.

A different version of the same riddle is presented by another child, illustrating well the variations always present in verbal lore:

As I went through the guttery-gap
I met my uncle Devy,
I cracked his skull and drank his blood
And left his body aisy.

4Still, River of Earth, p. 44.
6Still, River of Earth, p. 208.
7Ibid. See also Archer Taylor, The English Riddle from Oral Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951). Riddles 806a-813 are versions of the same riddle, although the identity of the object is a kind of fruit, usually a coconut, watermelon, or plum.
The Brown Collection includes two versions of this riddle comparing a jug of whiskey with a man:

As I was crossing London Bridge
I met sister Annie,
I pulled off her head and sucked her blood
And left her body standing.  

and

As I was going over London Bridge, I
met a man, cut off his head, drank his
blood and left a man standing still.  

The fourth riddle in the novel is essentially the same type (identification of an object through a descriptive metaphor), although presented in a descriptive rather than a dramatic manner. A pumpkin is described as

First green and then yaller
All guts and no tallow.

The Brown Collection does not list this particular riddle but does include several riddles in which color descriptions identify a vegetable or fruit.  

"Spelling riddles" provide fun for the Baldridge family in River of Earth. Inaccurate but rhythmic spellings are especially enjoyed by Fletch, the five year old.


9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Traditional in Kentucky hill country, the spelling riddle combines rhyme with a descriptive version of the letters of a word. A favorite with Adair County children is "Mississippi" spelled "M, i, crooked letter, crooked letter, i, crooked letter, crooked letter, i, humpback, humpback, i."
"Kin you spell 'swampstem'?" Father chuckled.

"How do that word go?" Fletch asked.

"Crooked s, rugged m, s, t, 'swampstem.'" Fletch laughed, popping his hands.12

In a later chapter of the same book:

Fletch scuttled out of the corner. "You hain't told me how to spell 'stovepipe,'" he reminded.

Darb scratched into the thick of his hair. "Stove?" He seemed to have forgotten. "Ah, yes, 'stovepipe.' Stove to my rikkle, to my stickle, to my y, p, e, pipe."

Fletch's mouth opened at this spelling riddle.13

The keen interest in the "spelling riddle" can be attributed to the Baldridge family's faith in the power of education. Father Baldridge "allus wanted ... [his] youngens to larn to figure and read writing" although he himself had only "larned as far as 'baker' in the blue-black [sic] speller."14 And when the children bring a third grade speller home from Flat Creek School, Mother decides,

"I'm going to learn myself to spell the words I've forgot, and a sight o' them I've never come across. A body ought to be able to spell things they lay hands to every day, and things going by. Take them martin-birds flying there. I've seen martins all my born days, but I can't say the letters to their name."15

Traditional schoolboy taunts play a part in several Still stories. "School Rutter" is written around a familiar

12Still, River of Earth, p. 89.
13Ibid., p. 233.
14Ibid., p. 80.
15Ibid., p. 89.
one. "School Butter, Chicken flutter" is a teasing call common in some localities of East Alabama as well as central and eastern Kentucky. Ralph Walker, Adair County farmer, who attended a two-room school in the Gradyville community in the 1930's, testifies that these were "fighting words" to any school boy in his neighborhood. According to Still's narrator, "A man might as well hang red on a bull's horns as yell that taunt passing a Baldridge County schoolhouse." The first time Uncle Jolly passes the school, he hollers, "Fool stutter!"

A child cried, "He yelled school butter!" Scholars leaped to their feet, angry and clamorous. They would have raced after Uncle Jolly had not Duncil flashed a new pointer—a hickory limb as long as a spear.

"School butter wasn't mentioned," I said.

"The next thing to it."

Duncil brandished the pointer.

Later, in order to empty the school house so he could throw all of the old worn out textbooks in the well, Uncle Jolly shouts the taunt:

"School butter, chicken flutter, Rotten eggs for Duncil's supper." On other occasions, boys in Still's stories tease each other with taunts which have the ring of tradition:

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17Still, The Virginia Quarterly Review, XXII, 561.
18Ibid., p. 566.
19Ibid., p. 568.
"Yore pappy steals money off dead men's eyeballs," and "your folks feeds on carr'n crows."  

Story telling as a mountain tradition was described for Leonard Roberts by Dave Couch:

My parents would call us in the house and tell us riddles or yarns till along up in the night. . . . I can't say they was any set time for any kind of thing. It would be just what my daddy got started on, and if it suited her, my mother would give us a story or two. They would set and tell mostly of a night, tell half the night, or till we got sleepy and went to bed.  

Dave Couch's brother Jim added:

If my mother was just entertaining us kids . . . she would tell us some mild fireside story. But if she wanted to scare us, or we wanted scared, she would get into them ghost and witch tales. And if we had company around, just us men would go into them big tall tales. . . .

One feels almost a kinship between the Couches and James Still's mountain families. In On Troublesome Creek the family has moved into a newly built, still windowless, house. Father has gone to haul window frames and night falls with Mother and the children alone. All are uneasy in the strange place and little Fern is almost in tears. To cheer them up, Mother suggests they sing a ballad or play a game. Lark suggests that they play "Bloody Tom," a dramatized version of the legend of Bloody Tom, who roams the hills, stopping at homes

20 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 95.
22 Ibid.
for a coal to "tetch his pipe" and carrying off "sheeps or chaps."\(^{23}\)

Another legendary figure who roams the hills is Walking John Gay, who was "traipsing and trafficking, looking the world over." John had "walked all the days of his life; seen more of creation than any living creature. A lifetime of going and he's got nowhere, found no peace."\(^{24}\) Uncle Jolly Middleton and Grandma have actually seen and talked with John Gay. Uncle Jolly recollects:

"Oh, I've seed Walking John a dozen times over, meeting him places you'd never expect to see a body. Once I went a-courtin' on Redbird River, and I come on him walking along pitching pebble-rocks, keeping six in the air, catching and a-pitching. And I says: 'Looky here, John Walkabout, where air ye forever going? What air ye expecting to see you've never saw yet? Hain't the head o' one hollier pine-blank like the next un?'\(^{25}\)

Grandma Middleton recalls a winter day when John Gay visited in her home:

"Once he come walking along Lean Neck Creek, . . . I recollect it was Ruling Day in February, years ago. John Gay was might nigh froze teetotal. We punched the cannon-coal fire till it was white hot, and he set there groaning while he thawed. Boone got him to eat a snack at the table. He wiggled in the chair, not being broke to taking ease, punishing to go. 'Now just hold your horses,' Boone told him. 'I got a bundle o' questions to ask you who've traveled these mountains.' And he 'gin to ask a sight: 'What about them bee-gum rocks in the breaks

\(^{23}\) Still, *On Troublesome Creek*, p. 47.

\(^{24}\) Still, *River of Earth*, p. 52.

of the Big Sandy? Tell where's that beech tree standing Dan'l Boone whittled his name on? I'm blood kin to ol' Dan'l. Have you seed a single pair o' wild pigeons the earth over?

"Boone asked questions till dark. I fed the stock and milked. I done all, and when I went in they was still talking. I remember how John Gay walked back and forth before the fire, me and Boone listening; Alpha and Jolly drinking every word. I recollect things he said: 'They's a world o' dirt flowed under my feet. I never crawled when I was a baby. Just riz up and walked at ten months. I'm a-mind to see every living hill against I die."

In River of Earth the children "tale-tell" together. Favorite local legends include the pigeon-birds.27 The flight of these swarms of passenger pigeons through eastern Kentucky during the last half of the nineteenth century is a well documented event. "Dock" Pratt of Hindman, Knott County, related to Thomas D. Clark that his father had told him of the birds:

He said the elements'd be darkened fer half a day when they'd be passin' over. Well, I've been in pigeon roosties myself. The pigeons roosted thar like a swarm of bees, until the timber'd break down. Some'd root up; some'd break down. And he said you could go next morning whar them pigeons roosted and pick a slackful whar they'd get crippled whar the timber'd fall.28

Grandma in River of Earth recollects the pigeon swarms that "mighty nigh" took the country in 1868.

Hit was early of a May morning when the pigeons came . . . A roar got up across the ridge . . . but nary a cloud we saw. The sound got bigger and nearer. "Hi, now, you git inside,"

26Ibid., pp. 140, 141.
27Ibid., p. 172.
28Clark, The Kentucky, p. 115.
Boone said, and I did. I looked through the wall-crack and saw the first pigeons come down the swag. Light brightened their wings; wings rock-moss gray, and green underside. Then they came in a passel. The sun-ball was clapped out, and it got nigh dusty dark. Boone, he took a kindling-wood stick, knocking at them that flew low, drapping four. After a spell they were gone. ..

Grandma tells of a neighbor who planned to salt down a barrelful of the pigeons using a sulfur smudge to cause them to drop from the roosts into his bag. Then she continues her own experience:

Hit was the next day the birds came a-thrashing through the hills. ... I was setting in my garden, guarding it against the crows, when I heard a mighty roaring like a tide on Troublesome. ... In a spell they come over the ridge, flying low down, a-settling. A passel sat down in my garden, and began to eat and scratch. I run up and down hollering, throwing clods and crying. Hit was like trying to scare a hailstorm. The birds worked like ants, now. I run and hollered till I couldn’t, then set me on the ground, feeling sick to die.

The frontier tradition of the "tall tale" still flourished in Still's mountains. Like the riddles and legends, they were told primarily to amuse the children. Grandpaw in "Snail Pie" spins one "lie-tale" after another, much to the consternation of Mother. According to Grandpaw, he has eaten rattlesnake steak, pickled ants, and fried snails. He tells one "fish story."

29 Still, River of Earth, p. 116.
30 Ibid., p. 117.
31 Ibid., pp. 117, 118.
32 Still, On Troublesome Creek, pp. 161-172.
Years ago when I lived in the head o' Jumpup Holler I went a-fishing on Shikepoke Creek. Caught so plagued many I had no place a'tall to put 'em. Jist shucked my breeches, tied knots in the legs, and filled 'em topful o' the prettiest reed-eyes and big-mouths. So many fish I packed, a button popped off, and be-dabs if hit didn't kill a bob-white.33

One winter in Jumpup Holler, according to Grandpaw, there was a ninety-day snowfall and food was scarce. He shot a buzzard with his hog-rifle.

"Did you cook that thar buzzard?" Leaf asked.
"Now, no," Grandpaw replied. "I gathered the hungry smell out o' the meat box, mixed it with frost bite, and fried it in a smidgen o' axle grease. Hit made good victuals, too."34

One of the few coarse stories used by Still is Grandpaw's account of some "fellers" who "started a mole in a bull yearling" with the result that "that bully run a mile, taking on terrible, and fell down stone dead."35

In a tradition of imaginative accounts of far off places as old as Hakluyt's Voyages or the travels of Sir John Mandeville is the account of Biggety Creek referred to in "Mrs. Razor."36 Biggety Creek is the "Nowhere Place" described by Father for the amusement and sometimes the instruction of the children.

Biggety Creek where heads are the size of water buckets, where noses are turned up like old shoes, women wear skillets for hats, and men

33 Ibid., pp. 168, 169.
34 Ibid., p. 171.
screw their breeches on, and where people are so proper they eat with little fingers pointing, and one pea at a time. 37

Folk songs are a part of Still's mountain life. Mother and children sing an Elizabethan ballad to pass the time while Father is away. Uncle Jolly, who sings for the sheer joy of it, has a wide repertoire which includes frontier songs, traditional ballads, and local ballads.

In "The Proud Walkers" the children sing "Old Rachel."

Old Rachel nobody could do a thing with; Old Rachel going to the Bad Place with her toenails dragging and a bucket on her arm, saying, "Good morning, Mister Devil, it's getting mighty warm." 38

After each stanza one child speaks the refrain: "Now listen, Little Rachel, please be kind o' quiet." 39 "Old Rachel" is a version of the motif seen in "The Farmer's Curst Wife," recorded in Child's English and Scottish Popular Ballads (No. 278). 40 In the Ballad Book of John Jacob Niles it appears as "The Old Woman and the Devil" (No. 60 A). 41

The song relates the story of the Devil taking the wife of a farmer. She treats his imps so badly that they return her to her husband.

37 Ibid., p. 52.

38 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 48.

39 Ibid.


"The Rich and Rambling Boy" of Uncle Jolly in River of Earth is "The Rambling Boy" (No. 121) of The Brown Collection which documents its presence in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and Missouri. Uncle Jolly sings of the impending death of the young highwayman who blames his luxury-loving young wife for his life of crime:

I know I am condemned to die
And all the girls for me will cry;
But all their cries won't set me free,
For I'm condemned to the gallows-tree.

Child's version is very similar:

And now I am condemned to die.
For me a many a poor girl will cry;
But all their tears can't set me free.
Nor save me from the gallows-tree.

Two songs of the American frontier appear in Still's works: "Old Dan Tucker," known as early as 1841 and credited to Dan C. Emmett, and "Old Joe Clark" known in 1842. Uncle Jolly sings one stanza of "Old Joe Clark" at the top of his voice while plowing:

Oh, I had a little gray mule,
His name of Simon Brawl,
He could kick a chew terbacker out o' yore mouth
And never tetch yore jowl.

42 Still, River of Earth, p. 143.
44 Still, River of Earth, pp. 143, 144.
47 Ibid., p. 324.
48 Still, River of Earth, p. 135.
Ballads also commemorate local events. Roberts observed that "murder ballads are continually made up and sung by folk." Uncle Jolly sings of "Old Talt Hall," who is jailed for killing Frank Salyers. Talt Hall and Claib Jones carried on a famous war along Troublesome and Carr Creeks, two major branches of the North Fork of the Kentucky. Talt killed more than twenty men and was finally hanged for murdering Frank Salyers. Along the North Fork local "bad men" frequently became the subjects of primitive song, and Talt Hall became a hero in one of the local ballads. The following version is recorded by Thomas D. Clark.

Come all you fathers and mothers,  
And brothers and sisters all,  
I'll relate to you the history  
Concerning Old Talt Hall.

He shot and killed Frank Salyers,  
The starter of it all;  
He's breaking up our country,  
He's trying to kill us all.

They arrested him in Tennessee,  
And placed him in Gladeville jail;  
He had no friends nor relations,  
No one to go his bail.

He heard the train a-coming,  
Got up, put on his boots;  
They're taking him to Richmond  
To wear the striped suits.

He heard the train a-coming,  
He heard those Negroes' yells;  
They're taking him to Richmond,  
To hear the Richmond Bells.

49Ibid., p. 177.

50Ibid., p. 143.

51Clark, The Kentucky, p. 138.
He wrote his brother a letter,
To his own home country,
Says "See your satisfaction, brother,
Wherever you may be."

He wrote another letter,
Saying, "Brother, now farewell";
Says, "see your satisfaction, brother,
Or send your soul to hell."

He got upon the platform,
He wrung his hands and cried,
Says, "If I had not a-killed Frank Salyers,
I would not have had to died." 52

Another local ballad sung by Uncle Jolly includes "Going Down to Jellico to See Rafe Shanks" 53 and Uncle Samp in River of Earth speaks of a woman in the mining camp who "goes a-traipsing all hours, selling broadsides with verses writ on them." 54 When asked what the verses say, he replies that "they're writ about her man getting killed in the mines... I forgot how the lines run, but they've got rhymy words on the ends. Hit's music not set to notes." 55

Hymns sung at a funeralizing are chosen to stir the religious fervor of the congregation rather than to comfort the bereaved.

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,
With all thy quickening powers,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
In these cold hearts of ours.

............... .............................

52 Ibid., pp. 138, 139.
53 Roberts, p. 152.
54 Still, River of Earth, p. 195.
55 Ibid., p. 196.
Dear Lord, and shall we ever live
At this poor dying rate?
Our love so faint, so cold to Thee,
And Thine to us so great. 56

Folk beliefs and superstitions in James Still's fiction reveal the efforts of a people whose lives are closely bound to natural phenomena to explain the forces that surround them and to exert some manner of control over those forces through an explanation of them. There are beliefs related to the life cycle of man, birth, growth, illness, and death; weather predictions and explanations for weather conditions; and a strong flavoring of superstitions involving Satan in various guises.

Traditional beliefs about childhood are expressed in a number of Still stories.

One belief expressed by one of the children is actually an explanation designed by adults to shield children from facts believed not suitable for the ears of the young. Little Lark in "Locust Summer," weary of hearing the baby cry, says, "Wust I come on a little 'un nested in a stump, I'd run far and not go back." 57 In "The Proud Walkers" when Fern wishes "it was allus day," Mother reminds her, "A body gets their growth of a night. I'd not want the baby a dwarf." 58

56 Ibid., p. 75.
57 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 73. The Brown Collection, I, 230, records that in the North Carolina mountains "children were taught that babies are found in hollow stumps or sugar barrels."
58 Ibid., p. 48.
answer to Euly's continual questions in *River of Earth*, Mother Baldridge reminds her that "chaps too knowing are liable to die before they're grown."59

A second cycle of beliefs concerns health and preventive medicine. "Wild fruit's pizen as strickynine when locusts swarm. . . ."60 Berry pies, however, are safe to eat during locust season if every berry is split.61 Floors should not be swept too often since "... it's not healthy, keeping dust breshed in the air, and a-damping floors every day."62

A third group of beliefs explain and predict the weather. Many are based on close observation of natural phenomena. "When it 'gins to blow around the north points of a morning ... sign it's going to weather."63 Grandma observes:

"Even come spring . . . we've got a passel of chills to endure: Dogwood winter, redbud, service, foxgrape, blackberry. . . . There must be seven winters, by count. A chilly snap for every time of bloom."64

The influence of the moon is strongly felt. After struggling to save a calf choking on a corn box, Saul Hignight announces:

60 Still, *On Troublesome Creek*, p. 66.
63 Still, *River of Earth*, p. 44.
"Hain't a grain of use trying any more... She's bound and be damned to die. Born wrong cast o' the moon, I reckon."^{65}

Superstitions about the dead are exemplified in *River of Earth* when Old Bartow, the family cat, sits down under Grandma's coffin. Uncle Jolly "jumped to his feet, stamping the floor. 'Kill that robber cat!' he shouted."^{66}

Widely diffused throughout Still's works are allusions to "Old Scratch," "the devil," "Old Bloody Tom," "boogers," "the beggar man," and other euphemisms for the Devil. Unexplained sounds in the night, a man whose identity is unknown, or a trickster who uses sleight of hand are looked upon as Satanic in nature. When the family in "Burning of the Waters" move to an abandoned lumber camp, eleven-year-old Holly protests, "I'm scared to go outside. Every night I hear a booger."^{67} Cass Tullock, who has moved the family in his truck, twitted Father about the isolated location, "Don't stay till Old Jack Somebody carries you off plumb."^{68} In "The Proud Walkers" Lark suggests that the children play "Old Bloody Tom" to pass the time while Father is away overnight. "I be Tom, coming for a coal to tetch my pipe. You

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^{65} Ibid., p. 62.

^{66} Ibid., p. 239. The belief that cats gather to rob the dead is listed in Thomas and Thomas, *Kentucky Superstitions.*


^{68} Ibid., p. 56.
be sheeps or chaps." 69 The following morning when a stranger appears in the yard, Lark suggests, "Hit might be Old Bloody Tom, come for a coal o' fire." 70 In "School Butter" when Uncle Jolly Middleton appears "riding barebones, his mare-mule wearing a hat between her ears and a Sunday tie around her neck," a little one breathes, "Hit's the De'il," and the smaller children huddle together in fright. 71 The popular belief is that the Devil, in some guise, roams the hills and will "carry off" the unwary.

Diffused throughout the fiction of James Still, the lore of the mountaineer not only lends verisimilitude but interpenetrates with plot and theme so that the wit affords an interpretation of mountain life and the character of the mountain people. The genial nature of the mountain people, their enjoyment of family and friends, their gentleness with their children, as well as their fatalism are revealed through their lore.

69 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 47.
70 Ibid., p. 55.
CHAPTER V

SPEECH

James Still's careful selection of speech patterns and phrases in the dialogue of his characters has produced a prose that is highly poetic in nature and has reproduced the mountain dialect in such a way as to emphasize its musical qualities and its metaphorical nature. Katherine Craf observes that Still makes no attempt at a completely accurate reproduction\(^1\) but rather

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\ldots \text{has wisely screened and controlled the language of his characters until there remain the speech patterns and phrases, as well as some of the phonetic representations, that make this dialect distinctive. The rhythms of the conversations are completely true to the region, and this combines with the archaic quality of the speech to become akin to poetry.} \quad 2
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The nature of that mountain dialect has been the subject of a number of philological studies beginning with that of Dr. Josiah Combs in 1916.\(^3\) In these early studies Dr. Combs traced the survival of Early English in southern mountain

\(^1\) Craf, p. 60.
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 61.
speech. Thomas D. Clark, however, has protested what he sees as a search for exceptional words to prove that mountain speech is Elizabethan. Clark acknowledges the kinship of Kentucky mountain dialect with earlier Anglo-American speech, but classifies it as American frontier dialect rather than Elizabethan. H. L. Mencken found the dialect of the main Appalachian range similar to that of the Ozark speech studied by Vance Randolph. According to Randolph the pronunciation of this dialect is very similar to vulgar American with the exception of its preservation of earlier forms no longer in use elsewhere. The tendency to exaggerate these remaining forms emphasizes their survival.

Two distinct qualities of spoken speech in the mountains serve to identify the mountain dweller. W. Cabell Greet observed that "it is often slower than the speech of the lowlands, where rapid speech is more common than slow speech" and that it is "often nasal and high pitched."

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4 Clark, The Kentucky, p. 115.
5 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
Thomas D. Clark also notes a characteristic sharpness in tone. Neither of these characteristics are, of course, adaptable to reproduction in written dialogue.

Janice Holt Giles, in the foreword to *The Enduring Hills*, reminds her readers to "remember that... [the speech of the hill people] is a lazy speech, softly spoken, with no wasted motion... that it is as liquid as song" and that "it falls from the lips with a honey sweetness."

Although it is, in some respects, more highly selective, the dialect of Still's characters has much in common as to grammar and vocabulary with that of the characters of his fellow Kentucky writer, Jesse Stuart. A study of Stuart's use of dialect is included in a chapter entitled "Kentucky Hill Speech" in the dissertation of Mary Washington Clarke, "Folklore of the Cumberlands." This investigation of mountain speech in the writings of Still follows closely the organization of Mrs. Clarke's chapter on hill speech.

In pronunciation, perhaps the most common variant from general American is found in vowel substitution and variation of vowel sounds within a particular word. Often this consists of raising and fronting vowel sounds. For

10 Clark, *The Kentucky*, p. 115.
example, "drove" becomes "driv" (OTC, p. 26); "fought," "fit" (OTC, p. 28); "get," "git" (OTC, p. 21); "just," "jist" (OTC, p. 19); "can," "kin" (OTC, p. 22); "cover," "kiver" (OTC, p. 31). This fronting sometimes flattens the vowels: "are" changes to "air" (OTC, p. 56), "crop" becomes "crap" (OTC, p. 141), and "yonder" is pronounced "yander" (OTC, p. 29). In still other words the vowel sound is lowered and rounded: "your" to "yore" (OTC, p. 24); "fetching" to "fotching" (OTC, p. 41); "there" to "thar" (OTC, p. 20); "whip" to "whoop" (OTC, p. 20); and "sure" to "shore" (ROE, p. 29); "set" to "sot" (OTC, p. 155). In some words the vowel is lowered but not rounded, as in the pronunciation of "certain" as "sartin" (ROE, p. 58); "queer" as "quare" (ROE, p. 44); "real" as "rail" (OTC, p. 14C); and "took" as "tuck" (OTC, p. 10). Fronting the first part of the diphthong oi in "poison" produces the i sound in "pizen" (OTC, p. 61), and "point-blank" as "pine-blank" (ROE, p. 26).

Milton in seventeenth-century England would have pronounced "roil" as "rile." Finally, the substitution of short i for a final unstressed a changes "Alabama" to "Alabamy" (OTC, p. 29), and in combination with a slight lowering of the vowel "ne'er a" becomes "nary" (OTC, p. 40) and "e'er a" becomes "airy."

A second variant in pronunciation is the substitution of one consonant sound for another, often as a result of assimilation or dissimilation. An unvoiced ɹ may be substituted for the standard voiced d on the end of verbs in the past
tense. "Earned" becomes "earnt" (OTC, p. 116) and "hold" becomes "holt" (ROE, p. 30). In less regular consonant substitutions "chimney" is pronounced "chimley" (OTC, p. 41), "turtle" is pronounced "turkle" (OTC, p. 46), and "handkerchiefs" is pronounced "handkerchers" (OTC, p. 157).

One consonant substitution common to the Appalachian region is absent in the writings of Still. He has chosen not to substitute a soft n for -ing.

Loss of syllables by elision is yet another characteristic of mountain speech in Still's dialogue. "Always" is elided to "allus" (ROE, p. 23), "open" to "ope" (OTC, p. 72), "misered" to "mized" (OTC, p. 27), "perhaps" to "hap" (OTC, p. 47), "hastened" to "hasted" (OTC, p. 98), and "happened" to "happed" (OTC, p. 157).

In another word group, intrusion, often as ephenthesis, is present. Perhaps the most common intrusion of sound, however, is the prefixed a-, as in "a-gaping" (OTC, p. 16), "a-liable" (OTC, p. 11), "a-Aind" (OTC, p. 12), "a-plenty" (OTC, p. 13), and "a-searching" (OTC, p. 73). Sometimes this intrusion a has been substituted for the auxiliary verb "have" as in "mighta-been seen" (OTC, p. 31), "wouldn't a-come" (OTC, p. 51), and "had I a-died" (OTC, p. 42). The intruding -en suffix can be found in such terms as "beholden" (OTC, p. 52), "belongen" (OTC, p. 56), "bounden" (OTC, p. 72), and "boughten" (OTC, p. 11). Many of these dialectal variations reflect real-life language developments through phonological conditioning.
In grammar Still's use of dialect has many characteristics in common with that of Kentucky writers Jesse Stuart and Janice Holt Giles. There is a characteristic freedom in the use of verbs. Some strong verbs are given the weak ending; "saw" becomes "seed," for example, and "grown," "grewed." Other irregularities include "clem" for the past tense of "climb" (OTC, p. 159), "heered" for the past tense of "hear" (ROE, p. 16), "et" for the past tense of "eat" (ROE, p. 26), and "driv" for the past tense of "drive" (OTC, p. 26). Singular verb forms may be used with plural subjects, often in sentences introduced with "There," as in "There's curs a-plenty" (ROE, p. 54), and "There's ships riding the waters . . ." (ROE, p. 50). Obsolete dialect forms are occasionally found; "darst" for "dare not," for example (OTC, p. 62). "Ain't" is used frequently, and "hain't" appears at the beginning of sentences and in positions in which it receives emphasis in the sentences. "Hit" is substituted for "it" under the same conditions.

A marked peculiarity of Elizabethan speech that has remained longer in mountain speech than in General American English is the use of almost any part of speech for another. In Still's works this is evidenced in such coinings as "funeralizing" and "pleasuring." "Jaw" is used as a verb to mean "talk" (OTC, p. 148), "crop" (or "crap") is used as a verb ("I'm doing slim cropping this year," OTC, p. 17), "keen" is used as a verb ("He keened his eyes" ROE, p. 43), "have to," spelled "haft-to" is a noun ("I hain't going to
kill nobody less it's haft-to," ROE, p. 42), and "readies" is a coined noun used to announce preparation ("... getting his readies on," OTC, p. 155). In On Troublesome Creek when Mother hesitates to name the thing she wants most, Father impatiently says, "Come riddle, come riddle." This interesting use of the term riddle in the sense of "explain" is very old. Vance Randolph cites the ballad of "Lord Thomas and Fair Annal":

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Come riddle us, riddle us, father dear
Yea both of us into one;
Whether shall I marry Fair Annie
Or bring the brown bride home.
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Double negatives are numerous; for example, "now nor no time coming" (ROE, p. 31), "He won't neither" (ROE, p. 38), "... hain't been school taught neither" (ROE, p. 45), and "Not to be Tillet neither" (OTC, p. 41). An even more prevalent redundancy in Still's works, however, is the double noun use as in "sun-ball" (OTC, p. 76), "girl-baby" (OTC, p. 61), "earth-ball" (OTC, p. 139), "lie-tale" (ROE, p. 31), "name-word" (OTC, p. 41), "moon-ball" (OTC, p. 36), "man-person" (OTC, p. 145), and "cot-bed" (ROE, p. 42).

In syntax, irregular placing of sentence parts, inversion, and ellipsis lend a rhythm to the speech of Still's characters: "Had Poppy been at home..." (OTC,

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13 Still, On Troublesome Creek, p. 13.
14 Randolph, p. 82.
15 Child, p. 152.
"Was she mine" in place of "If she were ..." (OTC, p. 72); "Come that time ..." (OTC, p. 25); "A late start I've got ..." (OTC, p. 36).

The use of "be" in the sense of "should" or "if" is one of the most common variants in Still's works: "I be not to play with water-heads" (OTC, p. 39), "... be they go to the world's end" (OTC, p. 45), "Be they boys among them ..." (OTC, p. 36). Sometimes it infers intention: "I be to go" (OTC, p. 71) and "I be to tell" (OTC, p. 171).

In vocabulary the speech of Still's characters retains numerous survivals from earlier English which are no longer common in Standard American speech. The verb "to hie" is used frequently: "... I hied to the house" (OTC, p. 81), "... but I hie at daybreak to Tillet's ..." (OTC, p. 40). "Traipsing" is often used in the sense of wandering on foot or merely traveling from place to place afoot. One character eats "a mort of victuals ..." (OTC, p. 93), and another "ate a sight" (OTC, p. 117). "Sacks" are "pokes" (OTC, p. 23) and a mirror is a "looking glass" (OTC, p. 121). In a jesting lament in "Locust Summer" Father moans, "Woe, woe ..." (OTC, p. 73), and "Hark" or "Hark-o!" (OTC, p. 57) quiets the children.

Many of the irregularities in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary used by Still's mountain characters would sound familiar on the streets of sixteenth-century London. The following are among the ones which can be found in the
plays of Shakespeare: "a-doing" (Richard III, II, vi, 7); "a-going" (Henry VIII, I, iii, 50); "thoughten" (Pericles, IV, vi, 115); "tetchy" (Troilus and Cressida, I, 1, 99); "afcre" (Henry IV, II, iv, 153).

Elizabethan oaths are the basis for many of the expletives used by Still's characters. "Bye gonnies" (OTC, p. 62) and "Be-doggies" (OTC, p. 98) are Elizabethan "cuss" words with euphemisms substituted for God. Variations include "by jukes" (OTC, p. 67), "be jibs" (OTC, p. 39), "Be-dabs" (OTC, p. 71), "by jakes" (OTC, p. 159), "by grabbies" (OTC, p. 141), "by gollyard" (OTC, p. 25), "by juckers" (OTC, p. 13), "God-dog" (OTC, p. 120). A second group of expletives have a frontier flavor: "Jonah's Whale" (OTC, p. 40), "Land o' Gravy" (OTC, p. 107), "Hell's Fangers" (OTC, p. 141), "Boodle Zack" (OTC, p. 122), and "Coon my dogs" (OTC, p. 152).

The many proverbial expressions in On Troublesome Creek have been the subject of research by Archer Taylor, who recognizes that "... knowledge of this proverbial genre (simile) is too scanty to permit an easy separation of tradition and invention." He notes one simile, "as pale as

16 Dialect Notes, V, 259.

17 Archer Taylor, "Proverbial Comparisons and Similes in On Troublesome Creek," Kentucky Folklore Record, IX (July-September, 1962), 87-95.

18 Ibid., p. 87.
any blossom," which was standard usage more than two centuries ago. A sampling from River of Earth includes:

"... hearts as black as Satan" (p. 7); "a big house draws kinfolks like a horse draws nit flies" (p. 7); "empty as last year's bird nest" (p. 17); "poison as rattlesnake spit" (p. 29); "keen as a brier" (p. 34); "Brown as buckeyes" (p. 36); "Bright as blue grass lawyers" (p. 43); "Swift as granny hatchets" (p. 57); "Tender as snail horns" (p. 53); and "slick as owl grease" (p. 61). He suggests the possibility that proverbial compounds, "man-tall," "turtle-slow," "mud-fat," may be more prevalent in local Kentucky speech than that of the country in general. Examples from River of Earth include "rain-fresh" (p. 7), "tallow white" (p. 48), "tick-tight" (p. 50), and "graveyard dead" (p. 31).

Biblical allusions are frequent but almost always they are generalized and not used in a religious or moral context: "You couldn't save enough by Kingdom Come" (OTC, p. 28), "... they're the earth's salt" (OTC, p. 37), "... can be trusted to Jordan River and back ag'in" (OTC, p. 38), "It would take Adam's grands and greats to rid that ground in time for planting" (OTC, p. 45), medicine "... strong as Samson" (OTC, p. 76), "till Judgement" (OTC, p. 102), "... scream like something fleeing Torment" (OTC, p. 126), "... wouldn't believe ... [him] on a steeple o' Bible-books" (OTC, p. 148), "... oldest man

19 Ibid.
this side o' Genesis" (OTC, p. 150). Occasionally there is a moral lesson involved: "They's Scripture ag'in a feller hauling off the innocent . . ." (OTC, p. 176). At least once the allusion is a joke: "... buried in a chestnut coffin so he'd go through Hell a-popping" (OTC, p. 190).

Combined with Elizabethan survivals, proverbial expressions, and Biblical allusion is a flavoring of technical slang from the mining industry. Terms such as "gob heap," "pay pocket," and "draw sack" remind the reader that superimposed on the traditions of the region is the industrialism of the coal mine.

A final peculiarity of the dialect of Still's characters is the frontier coinage represented by such terms as "hard-scrabble skimming" (OTC, p. 11), "doughbeaters" (wives) (OTC, p. 141), "clodhoppers" (OTC, p. 11), "clodbusters" (OTC, p. 18), and "barebones" (OTC, p. 14).

In Still's combination of earlier English survivals in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary with frontier and mining terms, the Elizabethan nature of the language is emphasized. The result is a highly lyrical and metaphorical speech. Like lines of poetry, passages linger in the reader's mind: some for their quaintness ("Allus ago we fit and nary a one could whoop"), some for their poignancy (Little Lark, halfway to the settlement school and already homesick wails, "I ought ne'er thought to be a scholar"), still others for their lyric quality ("a place certain and enduring").
Leonard Roberts recalls Still's assertion that he "never uses a term of local dialect without at least once hearing it."  

Roberts' "only friend's quarrel" with Still has been that "he lets so many quaint and poetic items pour from one character's mouth." 

Still's later stories show the effect of modernization on the speech patterns of the Kentucky highlands. A comparison of dialogue in the chapter in River of Earth (1940) which relates an incident at Flat Creek School (pp. 82-98) with that of "School Butter" (1946) and "The Fun Fox" (1953) affords an interesting progression in speech: "This speller's not belongen to me," says Euly in River of Earth, while in "School Butter" the narrator wished for a book "belonging to none but me." And the "air" for "are" and "nary" of "School Butter" are absent in "The Fun Fox." The old ways are changing and Still recognizes those changes in his use of dialect. A goodly number of survivals remain; "agoing," "Upon my word and deed and honor!," "It's untelling," (and others) are still found.

When one considers the far-reaching effect of the mass media, improved highways and educational facilities, one wonders how long present survivals of earlier speech patterns will last. James Still has preserved in artistic form a part of the heritage of American regional language.

20Roberts, Kentucky Folklore Record, p. 142.

21Ibid.
CONCLUSION

In an investigation of the relationship between folk culture and literature in the South, Howard W. Odum writes:

The folk culture is ... fabricated of a number of threads with their multiple qualities of interaction between the folk and nature, between the folk and their own cultural environment, and between the folk of one culture and of other cultures. First, the folk culture is identified with nature with reference to natural laws, time, climate, geographical environment, close to the soil ... by primary relationships and institutions, kith and kin in ethnic relationships, and primary occupations ... it conforms essentially to rural and religious institutional character reflecting primarily the solidarity of a moral order ... derives its social character from societies that are small, isolated, reflecting love of liberty, loyalties, homogeneities of structure. The folk culture is closely knit, cohesive, non-organizational, with behavior primarily spontaneous, personal, traditional, yet strongly integrated through its community of growth and moral order.\(^1\)

Used creatively and imaginatively by the literary artist, folk culture transcends the particular and assumes a universality far beyond its own narrow boundaries.

This writer suggested that a degree of universality is achieved in the authentic presentation of folk culture by one regional writer, James Still.

In his descriptions of material culture, Still affords his reader an intimate picture of family life of the miner and the mountain farmer. Always these descriptions are integrated with character, plot and theme. The reader comes to know through action and dialogue the folk architecture of four mountain homes, the traditional mountain diet, traditional clothing worn by mountain families, their folk medicines, and the toys with which their children play.

The social gatherings in which Still's characters participate define another side of mountain character. The joyous and high-spirited fun accompanying such workings as "hog-killing" and "molasses making" as well as the combining of social and religious custom at the "funeralizing" illustrate well the closely knit social order of the mountain community.

The lore of the people--verbal lore such as riddles, legends, "tall tales," taunts, and song as well as beliefs and superstitions--further define folk community. This folklore pervades Still's stories. Like a bright piece of calico in a patchwork quilt it becomes an inextricable part of an artistically patterned whole.

Similarly, Still's use of folk speech contributes to total effect in his fiction. He uses the mountain dialect in such a way that survivals of Elizabethan grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation are emphasized, thus illuminating its traditional nature.
The significance of regional writers in American literature has been recognized increasingly during the first half of the twentieth century. Certainly, if one function of folklore is "to reconstruct the spiritual history of man," a regional writer who makes conscious use of folk elements in the culture of his region makes an important contribution to his native literature. And when that conscious use of folklore is integrated with character, plot, and theme in an artistic and imaginative way, that writer must be considered a truly important voice.

James Still is such a voice. Into the warp and woof of his fiction he has woven the customs and lore of the mountains in such a way that his characters take on the universality articulated by Brother Sim Kobberly in \textit{River of Earth}: "Oh, my children, where are we going on this mighty river of earth, a-borning, be-getting, and a-dying--the living and the dead riding the waters? Where are it sweeping us?" This is the story of Still's world and of mankind.


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