

A Tennessee
Folklore Sampler



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Foreword



It is interesting to reflect on how folklore shapes the idea of a state and defines its identity both for its residents and for those who live outside the state. I grew up on a farm near Vicksburg, Mississippi, and have fond memories of George and Clara Ramage, an elderly couple in their seventies and sixties respectively, who moved from Tennessee and bought a farm adjacent to ours in 1927. My family affectionately referred to the Ramagees as Aunt Clara and Uncle George. Uncle George was a timber man who bought and sold timber when he came to Mississippi and later grew sorghum cane, which he made into molasses each fall using a mule-powered machine to crush the cane.

As a child, I rode my horse three miles to their home each afternoon after school, gathered their eggs, and enjoyed a piece of Aunt Clara's delicious yellow cake with chocolate icing sprinkled with crushed pecans. Uncle George loved to tell me how he grew up in Hornbeak, Tennessee, fished on nearby Reelfoot Lake, and always voted for Estes Kefauver, a progressive Tennessee senator who was friends with his fellow Tennessee senator Albert Gore Sr. Because of my love for his stories, Uncle George considered me an honorary Tennessean, and to this day I associate the state with the colorful tales he shared with me.

The first question a southerner asks a stranger is "Where are you from?" We need to know the place a person calls home, the city or state with which he or she identifies. The state in which we grow up and/or live defines our identity and our voice both as southerners and as Americans in profoundly important ways. Today, we are increasingly drawn to local foods, economic resources, and culture as an anchor for our daily lives. We understand places through the stories, music, and material culture that celebrate them, and this is the world that folklorists know so well. Folklore studies of ballads, blues, gospel, folk tales, dogtrots, and baskets paint a rich portrait of Tennessee that allows us to understand the soul of the state. These are iconic worlds, close to the heart, that have mythic associations with the state.

The study of local folkways is an ancient, revered tradition in the American South. In the nineteenth century, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet celebrated his state's colorful worlds in *Georgia Scenes*, a collection of essays about horse traders and storytellers. A century later, these stories inspired William Faulkner's

fictional Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi. Generations of southern writers, artists, and musicians have focused on the local, that highly personal place in which memories reside most deeply.

The publication of *A Tennessee Folklore Sampler* is a welcome resource for folklorists and a special treasure for citizens of Tennessee and the nation. Compiled and edited by Anthony Cavender and Ted Olson, the volume offers a rich sample of the state's folklore that has been documented and published in issues of the *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* since the society was founded in 1934. Prominent members of the society over the years have included Eleanor Roosevelt, Estes Kefauver, Mrs. Cordell Hull, and Albert Gore Sr.

In their excellent introduction to this book, Cavender and Olson explore the history of the Tennessee Folklore Society and the evolution of Tennessee folklore studies, noting that few articles on black folklore appeared in the *Bulletin* prior to the 1970s. Materials in the volume cover the "three states of Tennessee" (East Tennessee, Middle Tennessee, and West Tennessee) and their respective capitols of Knoxville, Nashville, and Memphis. Linguist Michael Montgomery explores linguistic differences in these worlds in his fine article "Does Tennessee Have Three 'Grand' Dialects?" (1995). While music and folk tales have received extensive attention in the *Bulletin*, there has been far less attention given to material culture.

The articles included in the volume offer rich, colorful descriptions of Tennessee folkways. In his piece on "Illicit Whiskey Making" (1946), Charles S. Pendleton explains that when the mash ferments, it creates a "beer" that some locals drink. But Pendleton warns his readers that "to an outsider it is as vile a concoction as can be thrust down a throat."

Ben S. Austin writes about "The Vanishing Art of Cooking Table-Grade Sorghum Molasses" (1992) with mouth-watering prose. "When the bubbles are about the size of a silver dollar and burst in the middle, it is ready to be drawn off." At that point, all the reader needs "is a large pan of hot 'cathead' biscuits and a bowl of freshly churned sweet butter." Austin recalls a preacher who while speaking to a large congregation said he felt like the boy who fell into a barrel of molasses. "The youngster lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed, 'Lord, make my tongue equal to my opportunity.'" He warns the reader to avoid the dark "blackstrap" molasses in the supermarket because it is only good for "hoot and holler cake."

For the past seventy-five years, an important network of scholars based in major universities throughout Tennessee have devoted their careers to studying, writing, and teaching about the folklore of their state. David Evans (Memphis State University); Charles Wolfe (Middle Tennessee State University); Donald Davidson, George Pullen Jackson, and Bill Ivey (Vanderbilt University); John Work (Fisk University); Jim Akenson (Tennessee Technological University); and Tom Burton, Richard Blaustein, Ted Olson, and Anthony Cavender (East

Tennessee State University) are but a few of the folklorists who have deepened our knowledge of Tennessee folklore. These scholars and their academic institutions constitute a critical infrastructure that supports and affirms the state's folklore traditions.

In addition, individuals in institutions outside the academy have done outstanding work in preserving Tennessee's folklore traditions. These leaders include Judy Peiser (Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis), Charles Seeman (Country Music Foundation, Nashville), Bobby Fulcher (Tennessee State Parks, Nashville), and John Rice Irwin (Museum of Appalachia, Norris).

That the richest folklore traditions are often found in the poorest economic areas is a familiar pattern. In his study "Basketmakers of Cannon County: An Overview" (1986), Lawrence Alexander explains that the basketmakers "were subsistence farmers who occupied some of the poorest land in the county." And within the county, basketmakers were considered "the lowest level in the local social hierarchy." Tennessee's folklore thrives "on the edge," both geographically and economically, like weeds along the roadside. With the authority of their university positions, folklorists have long reached out to such worlds to affirm their value and to help preserve them.

The 1982 World's Fair, which was held in Knoxville, featured an important Folklife Festival that was organized by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Endowment for the Arts. The event drew visitors from around the world and provided an important stage for Tennessee's folk traditions. During the fair, John Rice Irwin showcased his fifty-two-acre Museum of Appalachia in nearby Norris, Tennessee. Irwin struck up a friendship with his fellow Tennessean Alex Haley and convinced Haley to build his impressive home and conference center just down the road. Joined by Lamar Alexander, Tom T. Hall, and Will Campbell, they formed the "Fellowship" and traveled in Hall's bus to communities throughout Tennessee to celebrate their folk traditions.

For music lovers, Nashville and Memphis are the heart of country music and blues, respectively. Nashville's Grand Ole Opry has supported generations of country music performers, and Memphis's Beale Street was home to W. C. Handy, B. B. King, and many other celebrated blues artists. Tennessee's leadership in these musical worlds is clearly unique.

Storytelling has an equally impressive presence in Tennessee. Both the International Storytelling Center and the National Storytelling Festival are located in Jonesborough. Each year thousands of fans come to hear storytellers from throughout the world tell their tales. The success of these programs grows out of studies folklorists have done on traditional storytelling in Tennessee.

A Tennessee Folklore Sampler features impressive articles by early scholars such as Donald Davidson, who was part of the celebrated Vanderbilt group known as the Fugitives. Davidson underscores both his interest in traditional Scottish ballads and his dislike for collectors such as Alan Lomax in "Current

Attitudes toward Folklore” (1940). A decade later, the distinguished folklorist Herbert Halpert published “Riddles from West Tennessee,” which included the riddle “What goes up the chimney, but won’t go down the chimney?” and its answer, “Smoke.”

Important recent studies on Tennessee black folklore in the *Bulletin* include Elizabeth Peterson and Tom Rankin’s “Free Hill: An Introduction” (1985), which describes an upland black community in Clay County, Tennessee, near the Tennessee-Kentucky border. Kip Lornell’s “Successes of the ‘Spirit’” (1991) traces the history of the Spirit of Memphis gospel quartet. And Bruce Nemerov’s “John Wesley Work III: Field Recordings of Southern Black Folk Music, 1935–1942” (1987) traces the career of Work at Fisk University and his relationship with Alan Lomax. Nemerov later developed this article into a book, *Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University–Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, 1941–1942* (2005), and an accompanying CD of Work’s recordings, *John W. Work III: Recording Black Culture* (2007).

While the essays in *A Tennessee Folklore Sampler* tell us much about the folklore of Tennessee, they also remind us that the folklore of the state’s rich, diverse ethnic community is largely missing from the pages of the *Sampler*. The worlds of Tennessee’s Jewish, Lebanese, Hispanic, Irish, Italian, German, Hmong, and Chinese communities, and of many other groups, await study. Future editions of this fine work will track the evolution of all families that call Tennessee home. Their respective cultures constitute the steadily broadening folklore worlds that enrich the state and make it a central part of the global South.

William Ferris
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Acknowledgments



The idea for this anthology originated with the recently deceased Charles K. Wolfe, professor of English and folklore at Middle Tennessee State University, long-time editor of the *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin*, and nationally recognized scholar of traditional and popular music. The tremendous demands on his time as a prolific author, music producer, and consultant prompted Charles to turn the anthology project over to us. We hope that it successfully fulfills his vision.

The Department of Sociology and Anthropology at East Tennessee State University deserves special mention for its generous support of this project. Dorothy Harville, executive aide for the department, and departmental support staff Melody McPeak and Ankita Mithaiwala provided able assistance with manuscript preparation. We also thank the following individuals for their help with the identification and preparation of some of the historic photographs that appear in the anthology: Ned Irwin and John Fleenor, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University; Paul Wells, director, Center of Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University; Lisa Pruitt, director, Gore Center, Middle Tennessee State University; James Akenson, Tennessee Technological University; Tom Rankin, director, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University; and Sandy Conatser, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

We express our genuine appreciation to the following members of the Tennessee Folklore Society who thoughtfully and enthusiastically responded to an invitation, extended to all society members, to participate in the process of selecting articles from the *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* for inclusion in the anthology: Donald B. Ball, Thomas Burton, Robert Cogswell, Edwina Doran, Bobby Fulcher, Walter Haden, Benita Howell, Tess Lloyd, Ambrose Manning, Michael Montgomery, Robert Rennick, and Ken Townsend. We are, however, ultimately responsible for the anthology's content. Lastly, we would like to note that the essay in Appendix A, "A Brief History of the Tennessee Folklore Society," builds on a presentation by Bobby Fulcher delivered at the fiftieth annual meeting of the society in 1984.

Finally, the editors and the press gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Tennessee Folklore Society in producing this volume.

A Note from the *Tennessee State Folklorist*



For seventy-five years, the *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* has been a remarkable publication. But its circulation has been so limited that even many well-read Tennesseans will be surprised, in opening this anthology, to discover that the *Bulletin* exists, much less to learn that it may be the oldest state society folklore periodical in America. All of us associated with the society know that this sampling of riches from the *Bulletin's* back issues will be a valuable and eye-opening addition to the available library of Tennesseana. We also hope that it will generate new appreciation and respect for the subject matter in which we share interest and that it will attract new members to our ranks.

These aspirations are far from new to the folklore cause. They've been continually voiced since the earliest years of the society and never fully met, due in large part to a subtext that ties together all of the topics and articles in this book. In the course of advocating for folk culture as state folklorist for over two decades, I've more than once noted in jest—and sometimes in frustration—that one of our state's major industries is being ashamed of ourselves. Tennessee has always been abundantly rich in folklore, reflecting, as this anthology attests, wide-ranging genres as well as geographic and cultural diversity. Folklore has long been close to the surface in Tennessee, closely interwoven with our identity. Yet rather than being regarded in an entirely positive light, that fact has often been taken by many, especially those in official and institutional capacities, as an index of our backwardness, as a perception by outsiders that should be corrected, as a blot to be expunged. In very real ways, pieces of Tennessee's traditional culture have been routinely targeted for condescension, criticism, and displacement under such assorted agendas as progress or modernization, scientific thought, social betterment, agricultural reform, education, cultural sophistication, artistic excellence, and civic boosterism. In their most benign varieties, less-than-supportive attitudes about Tennessee's folklore portray it as comprised of quaint but irrelevant oddities from the past, subsume it to superficial or stereotyped explanations, or simply dismiss it as trivial.

The authors in this anthology, like other members of the Tennessee Folklore Society throughout the organization's life, would probably all admit not only to some degree of unconventional and antiquarian intellectual interest but also, more importantly, to a fundamentally sympathetic view of folklore, folklife, and folk arts, and of the expressive and intangible material these overlapping areas encompass. Informal folk culture, passed down by word of mouth or customary example among various groups of people, indeed upholds myriad values, meanings, levels of truth, functions, and tenets of identity among those who share it. In regard to that which is passing, the society has always sought to document such culture and to preserve it in ways appropriate to changing times. The *Bulletin's* contributors have often characterized folklore as a living as well as dying thing, showing respect and validation for the communities and individuals that continue to give it life and acknowledging excellence among bearers of tradition and master folk artists. Many further recognize that the process underlying folklore is fundamental to human life and experience, continuing to sustain the culture of new immigrant groups in Tennessee and to generate new varieties of folklore in urban and other changing contexts.

One particularly commendable emphasis of the *Bulletin* throughout its history, which has kept it so strongly rooted to Tennessee people, has been the journal's welcoming policy toward publication of field collections and similar documentary reports. Its pages are refreshingly free of the conjectural constructs and double-talk that have passed for theory in many other publications in the field in recent decades. The society has made no apologies for its openness to presenting descriptive accounts and folklore texts framed in basic commentary. Those who are enticed by this anthology will discover in its pages how deep a record this policy has created. It underscores a belief in the inherent value of primary folklore materials. It also embodies the society's egalitarian spirit of inclusiveness.

That spirit is a guiding principle as the Tennessee Folklore Society now seeks to expand its membership and its outreach. Publication of the anthology comes at a time when the society is retooling for a new era, moving from a university affiliation into independent status as a contemporary nonprofit organization. Its membership has always included both academics and lay folklorists, but in coming years it seeks still broader representation by interested Tennesseans of all stripes, including teachers, arts and history programmers, traditional music and craft enthusiasts, community heritage advocates, and cultural activists of color and ethnicity. The society invites readers to join in building a stronger network in support of Tennessee's folk heritage.

Robert Cogswell
Folklife Program Director
Tennessee Arts Commission

The Tennessee Folklore Society

A Short Remembrance



In 1966, my wife Betty, our three children, and I became Tennesseans. I was appointed assistant professor that year at what is now Belmont University in Nashville. That year, too, I heard Harry Harrison Kroll speak at a professional meeting in Jackson. I invited the novelist-folklorist to Belmont to hold a workshop in Tennessee traditions. At his invitation I soon became active in the Tennessee Folklore Society.

Unable to attend a 1968 meeting at Knoxville because of my class work at Vanderbilt, I received a call from TFS president Tom Burton. The news astounded me: I was now president-elect of the Tennessee Folklore Society.

It was at a music party at Tom Burton's home in Johnson City that I met Tom Morgan and sang harmony with him and his wife Mary. Tom Burton and his colleague Ambrose Manning helped me plan the program of the first TFS meeting I would be responsible for. At that fall 1970 meeting at East Tennessee State University, our performers included Doc Watson and his son Merle, Jeanette Carter of the Carter Fold, as well as surviving members of another pioneer group of RCA recording artists, the Fiddling' Powers Family. (If members of the Tenneva Ramblers had still been around Bristol, I don't doubt Burton and Manning would have managed to book them.) From West Tennessee's UT Martin, where I had taught since September 1967, I brought a twelve-passenger vanload of expert and, at that time, exotic folk dancers enrolled at UTM, bongo drums and all.

Soon Ambrose and Mary Manning invited me for a three-day stay at their Johnson City home. Long-time TFS secretary and *Bulletin* editor Ralph Hyde was entertaining me at his home a few miles out of Murfreesboro. The following October, Professor Hyde helped me arrange a program of folk talent that included not only Jeanette Carter but also Kentucky folk singer Yvonne Belmont Gregory, French folk singer Sonia Malkine, Grandpa Jones's "better-half" Ramona and their son Mark, a black spiritual duo, the Courthouse Gang

bluegrass band from UT Martin, the Rutherford County Square Dancers, and an expert handsaw player.

Though I came to the Tennessee Folklore Society too late to know such pioneers in our field as former presidents Donald Davidson and Charles Faulkner Bryan and their musical production *Singin' Billy*, I found Vanderbilt graduate students were still discussing the ideas of these professors. Some English faculty and students recalled Davidson's seating himself on the edge of his classroom desk and punctuating his ballads course with traditional texts and tunes he accompanied on his guitar. Between 1969 and 1971, I became acquainted with TFS contributing members Professor Paul Brewster and Professor William Griffin, chatting with them in their offices on the nearby Peabody campus.

Now, forty years later, it is an honor to be working with TFS treasurer Tony Cavender, past-president Ted Olson, President Evan Hatch, past-president and *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* editor Brent Cantrell, TFS secretary Tom Morgan, and each member of our organization's executive board. I thank Tony and Ted for editing this anthology of articles from the *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* and the University of Tennessee Press for publishing this representative anthology.

I wish I could thank also my late, longtime friend Dr. Charles K. Wolfe for asking whether I would serve again as president of the society. And I wish I could let him know this second tenure is enough like our "junking" together for old 78s and then finding our way backstage at the Opry, that most of the work has been challenging but fun.

Walt Haden
Immediate Past President
Tennessee Folklore Society

Introduction



Today, people around the world think of the United States as a singular entity, and when Americans refer to their nation as a whole, they use singular verbs, such as in the sentence “The United States is a world power.” Before the Civil War, however, Americans—and especially southerners—used plural verb forms when discussing their connection to a larger political unit. “The United States are a big country,” they might have said. As would be revealed later in the “War between the States,” antebellum southerners garnered their deepest sense of identity from their home communities, states, and regions, and their loyalties would only conditionally be directed toward their nation. Famously upon the outbreak of the Civil War, when faced with the choice of serving his nation or his “country,” U.S. Army general Robert E. Lee decided that he could not turn against his home state of Virginia.

When the Confederacy surrendered at Appomattox Court House in 1865 and the northern states were reunited with those of the South, the nation moved closer to truly being the *United* States of America. And yet, while increasingly interdependent politically after the Civil War, U.S. society was far from homogeneous, and Americans remained a culturally diverse population. Even as the United States forged ahead at the vanguard of international modernization, many individuals and groups across the nation remained primarily dedicated to local communities and regional cultures, and as a result such people continued to practice cultural traditions strongly influenced by Old World folkways as well as by folkways associated with the early years of European settlement in the New World. This cultural conservatism was more evident in the southern states during the postwar industrialization than elsewhere across the United States. Tennessee in particular became nationally, even internationally, known for possessing a remarkable range of traditional culture. Indeed, generations of Tennesseans have proudly proclaimed some of their traditions as among their state’s most significant cultural assets.

Granted their respect for traditional culture, Tennessee’s residents have not always used the internationally accepted scholarly term—folklore—for such traditions. Nor have those residents necessarily valued more than a few