

OLD SONGS AS SOCIAL HISTORY

An Arts Bank Offering to Randolph County Classrooms

By Michael Kline

To Randolph County School Principals and Classroom Teachers
From Michael and Carrie Kline, Artists in Residence through ArtsBank.

As an artist in residence in the late 1970s, I carried musical offerings to all the Randolph County schools and had a good response everywhere I went. At the time I was actively involved in collecting and singing old ballads and found a treasure trove of ancient songs and folklore particularly among various members of the Hammons Family nearby, and among other families throughout the region.

My work at the time was greatly influenced by the emerging Foxfire approach (<http://www.foxfire.org/>) to place-based learning developed by West Virginia educator Eliot Wiggington in north Georgia. In the early 1990s Carrie Nobel Kline joined me as a singing and life partner, and together we have brought old-time singing to campuses and classrooms in many corners of the State and beyond.

The old ballads, rich in story and old language, are windows into the social and occupational history of the Allegheny Highlands and good preparation for grasping West Virginia history. The singing unit is also a way of re-seeding a number of endangered local ballads among a new generation of singers, to instill a sense of past values and places whose stories have been lost over too much time and TV.

Our presentations of songs and stories are energetic and upbeat, encouraging students to reconstruct the story or sentiment embodied in each of the songs as a first step in memorizing the words. We emphasize that the melody is essential in conveying the full meaning and emotion of the story and how the rhyming scheme can be used as building blocks for remembering a text. And we dwell on the people who sang these old songs and the place of singing in the oral traditions of West Virginia.

In the classroom the students sit in a semi-circle. We stress good posture for good listening and deep breathing. Each class begins with student introductions, loud and clear, and a focus on positive identity and good energy. And then we launch into singing and teaching some old local ballad.

The first we always tackle is “Bangum and the Wild Boar,” which I learned 40 years ago from a local singer living just a mile and a half south of Tygarts Valley Elementary School in Mill Creek. “They are a wild boar in these woods/ He'll eat your meat and suck your blood . . . ,” the song moans, and the wide-eyed students look to one another for reassurance. Scholars have traced this song to the period of Beowulf. It's reckoned to be one of the oldest in the English language—and it offers a vivid window into Ninth Century food ways. Some of these ways of gathering food still ring true for students living in the upper end of Randolph County.

Allowing 20 years per generation, the students figured that this song had been passed down through sixty generations of the oral tradition to old man Currence Hammonds, from whom I learned it at his home in Huttonsville in the early 1980s. “Bangum” is the best example I know of the vitality and sustainability of the oral tradition in West Virginia.

The next song, “Molly Bender,” is about a hunting accident in which young Molly, with her apron pinned round her, was “shot for a swan” by Jimmy, her true love. The song evokes the whole culture of

hunting, and weapons, and family traditions of bringing home the bacon.

Further modeling the Foxfire approach, we play episodes from our audio history productions (<http://dev.folktalk.org/merchandise/cds/voices-of-the-staunton-parkersburg-turnpike-7-cd-set/>) featuring the voices and testimonials of older West Virginians recalling their own childhoods growing up in local communities.

The audio histories are rich in old songs and fiddle tunes, which form bridges between the stories or underscore what is said. The students listen to Jacob Currence, 101 year-old resident of Cassidy in Randolph County at the time of recording, describing the big virgin timber he saw as a child and his work as a young man in the timber camps working with an axe and cross-cut saw. Other episodes describe local Civil War battles and raids, along with memories traced to the aftermath of the War and the Industrial Revolution in the new state of West Virginia.

In each of these themes, old songs and tunes are a link with the past. Family stories transport listeners from the hardships of the Civil War to the cutting of virgin forests, building of railroads, and opening of coal mines over the past century and a half. The discussions that follow heighten class awareness of West Virginia's historical themes, without presenting them as history, per se.

If we were presenting this material as West Virginia history, I sense that these particular students would react in a very different way. By focusing on stories and songs we have so far managed to keep the attention of most of the students most of the time. That does not mean that they are all enthusiastic singers. But they seem to somehow find their own level of engagement with the material presented as a whole.

For homework assignments, we ask students of all ages to sit down with older family and community members to learn more about their own roots and legends. This approach to place-based learning through the acquisition of local family lore, along with the language and imagery of ancient ballads, offers an opportunity for satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment among students who may not have found their stride academically in other areas of the school's curriculum. This approach to learning social history through song engenders a connection with the past for our students, and new ways of thinking about and celebrating what it means to be West Virginians.

We are happy to speak further with teachers and principals about this offering at your school. We thoroughly enjoy watching students come alive as they engage in learning old Allegheny songs.