

# A Lifetime of Achievement in Arts for Social Change

*Artist's statement, community involvement and other reflections*

By Michael Nobel Kline

## VOICES AND REFLECTIONS AS SPOKEN ARTS

My passion for listening to the voices and reflections of West Virginians spans more than sixty years and the tapestry of my audio and radio creations is woven from the fabric of thousands of such recorded voices. As a seventy-four year old folklorist, performing musician and audio producer of locally recorded music and spoken reflection, I have combined a number of creative roles in my pursuit and teaching of arts for social change. In West Virginia *how* people put words together becomes just as important as *what* they say. I have heard expressive spoken arts on many levels: improvised performances of life stories, vibrant use of telling dialogue as disclaimer, and an unconscious sense of oral poetics, rich in cadence, imagery, irony, and humor, all of which tickle my soul and haunt my imagination.

I have been driven to record and preserve spoken voices through a desire to get beyond the limitations and deceptions of the printed page, which have always left me hungry for more. Reaching beyond the scope of traditional scholarly history and journalism, this work focuses on the narrative perspectives of individuals as eye witnesses to moments and events in their own lives, who are speaking from first-hand experience with all the emotion and drama of some one who has been through it, or bearing witness to stories learned and remembered from earlier generations.

Preserving such accounts dignifies not only the event, but validates those who lived it and told it, as well as those who heard it and preserved it. Listening to these recorded voices in the context of reflections by neighbors and the wider community generates empathy on the part of the listener and widens public understanding of local stories and issues. The absence of video imagery helps the listener focus on the content and emotion of what is said, rather than the complexion, age, or body-type of the speaker. It levels the playing field in radio productions featuring many voices and points of view.

These spoken testimonials from southern mountain people have little overlap with written accounts *about them* by missionaries, sociologists, regional planners and feature writers, whose stereotyping and baseless assumptions often work against progressive human development in the region.

The post-interview photographic evidence suggests a great unburdening on the part of the interviewing subjects as a result of intimate sharing. In finding their own voices through a process of open-ended interviewing, the subjects know that they have been heard, which has its own therapeutic value. They know that their recorded narratives are part of a larger archival document which enriches the public record and becomes a cherished aural text for succeeding generations, especially family members, when the subject is silenced by death or dementia. The recorded voice is an auditory window into the soul. The way we speak is the most integral detail of who we are.

### TAINTED VISUAL DEVELOPMENT

My on-going preoccupation with spoken language makes more sense in the shadow of an undiagnosed dyslexia in my childhood which tainted my development as a reader of both texts and musical notation. Nonetheless I grew up with a strong, innate sense of harmonics and love of hearing people talk about themselves. As a child I could sit and listen by the hour to the ramblings of older neighbors, whose memories stood in stark contrast to the children's classics my parents read aloud to us boys during our growing years, which I also loved. At five I was intuiting and singing barbershop harmonies with my dad and younger brother and tenoring my mother at the piano from *The Fireside Book of Folk Songs*. Later as a choirboy at the Washington Cathedral in Washington DC, my “ear training” continued through high school.

### MAKING A CULTURAL CHOICE EVEN AS A CHILD

In my frequent visits to my family home in Hampshire County, West Virginia, I was blessed with music-playing neighbors immersed in fiddle and banjo tunes, peerless tale-telling, and old-time church singing. The vivid contrasts between these two settings kept my head and heart spinning. When

in Washington DC, I longed for our West Virginia home, its deep woods and clear stream, and cool country kids growing up on nearby farm. All my childhood fantasies were of being there. I felt as though I dangled between two worlds, urban and rural, classical and folk, written and spoken. Sensing even in my early years that West Virginia was itself a national embarrassment, I empathized because of my own poor performance in school, and the shame I imagined that brought upon my family. In Hampshire County none of those personal issues mattered. It had its own measure of social standards which reached beyond academic excellence.

By the age of seven I had made my choice about which culture I would pursue. I chose the one with a powerful oral tradition and endured the other as long as it was necessary. That early choice had a powerful effect on my development as a critical thinker and activist. I was a pugnacious young advocate for my beloved adoptive home. Since finishing school, I have devoted much of my professional career to tracking down, befriending, documenting and promoting local musicians and their traditional music throughout the state of West Virginia and beyond, and generally espousing the values, arts, and causes of mountain people the world over.

As an Anthropology major at George Washington University in Washington, DC (1960-64), I formalized my interest in ethnomusicology and Appalachian folklore. By my mid-twenties I was steeped in authentic Appalachian roots music and visited a wide variety of sources, from the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains of Virginia and West Virginia over into the Cumberland Mountains of eastern Kentucky and Tennessee.

### COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: SINGING MY WAY THROUGH THE POVERTY WAR

During those formative years I was also writing songs, many of them parodies, of what I saw going on during the mid-1960s as an Appalachian Volunteer, an anti-poverty worker in the coalfields of Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia. Strong songs were a way of affirming local struggles and recognizing courageous strivings for positive change and collective purpose. I wrote and sang on back porches, in public gatherings, class rooms and on

picket lines, in the spirit of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and produced my first long-playing record, *The Poverty War Is Dead*, in 1970.

## DON WEST AND THE PIPESTEM CULTURAL VISION

I was in the late 1960s singing coordinator at the Highlander Research & Education Center under the direction of Myles Horton in Knoxville, Tennessee, a job that had me focused on leadership development through cultural organizing in the coalfields of southern West Virginia and beyond. In that capacity I frequently visited poet Don West at the newly established Appalachian South Folklife Center in Pipestem, West Virginia, and helped him bring together the early authentic folk life festivals in the late 1960s and early '70s featuring the best of old-time musicians in the region. It has continued over nearly half a century to be a performance venue for my own music.

From Don West I was learning the importance of poetic icons as cultural weapons of the spirit in a war against cyclical poverty and oppression, in other words, if we could get people singing together they might begin organizing for stronger communities and better public health and education in those regions left high and dry in a fluctuating coal economy. Don dreamed of informed, unified, proletariat voices and votes bringing about more responsive government. He had seen the arts and poetry of the region inspire and inform the labor movement over his life time, and he knew the power of song in consciousness raising. Peer group education would lead to a process of prioritizing social issues, participating in a decision-making process, and budgeting limited resources. His summer youth programs emphasized his desire to cultivate early leadership through literacy and the arts.

The Appalachian Folklife Center has asked me to serve on a planning board for the Fiftieth Anniversary Festival in July, 2015. What an opportunity to re-examine the vision that launched this beautiful, rural learning center with its incredible mountain vistas and neighbors still devoted to memories of rich music festivals and leadership workshops through the 1970s and into the present. The Center still has a critically important role to play in community and cultural education in southern West Virginia.

## “THEY CAN'T PUT IT BACK:” A SINGING COMMENTARY

By 1971 I was collaborating with photographer Doug Yarrow to produce and perform a multi-media slide-show, *They Can't Put It Back*. It featured a title song written by West Virginia native Billy Edd Wheeler, exploring resistance to industrial excesses in the coalfields through projecting stunning images of Yarrow's photographs on two screens, with my own live musical commentary off to one side. After scores of performances in churches, community halls, college campuses and back porches around the region, we played under the stars to an audience of seven thousand at the 1974 Appalachian Folklife Festival at Pipestem. Decades later I still run into people who tell me their political consciousness was shaped by that performance. With Rich Kirby I recorded a companion album of the same title, my second recording, featuring more than a dozen coal mining songs. It was the first such anthology of coal mining songs in the region and became something of a cult recording, later re-released on June Appal Records in Whitesburg, Kentucky.

Living back at my home in Hampshire County through the 1970s I continued to participate in local old-time instrumental music with my neighbors, while playing guitar in a trio with Sam and Joe Herrmann as the Critten Hollow String Band, mostly east of the Allegheny Mountains. We arranged and performed many old ballads, work songs and dance tunes. I only left the band in 1978 to take a job as assistant to the editor of *Goldenseal Magazine*, a State Folklife quarterly published by the Department of Culture and History at the Cultural Center in Charleston, West Virginia.

## CULTURE IN THE CHEMICAL VALLEY

The move to Charleston was like being parachuted into the lap of state government at the Capitol Complex. I saw sides of political life I could not have imagined and suffered the Kanawha Valley's chemical toxicity while driving to and from work. I made contacts during my brief tenure at *Goldenseal* that have been crucial to my work ever since. I also conducted my first recorded interviews and edited my verbatim transcripts for publication in the spring issue of *Goldenseal* in 1979. I was further asked by

Norman Fagan, Commissioner of the Department of Culture and History, to take on research to enrich the offerings of the Vandalia Gathering, the Department's annual festival of West Virginia folklife at the state capitol. Over the next three years this research took me to communities in the coalfields I had never previously visited and I identified a number of musicians, many of whom were subsequently invited to perform at the festival. My most memorable “find” was the Heavenly Sunlight Chapel Choir near Kermit in McDowell County led by Bishop Almeta Price and the Profit Johnson. Folk musician, scholar, and critic Tracy Schwarz of the New Lost City Ramblers called their rocking appearance at the 1981 Vandalia Gathering “truly remarkable.”

### SWEPT AWAY BY AUGUSTA

During the summer of 1978, I attended my first Augusta Heritage Arts Festival at Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, West Virginia, and was swept away by the artistic energies of the town, the beauty of the Allegheny Mountains, and the rich traditions of music and folk art to be found in the surrounding region. My sudden decision to move my family to Elkins to take a position as Artist in Residence (funded by the Department of Culture & History in Charleston), with oversight from the Randolph County Creative Arts Council and Davis & Elkins College, opened all the doors I had been longing to enter. I realized my desire to take my folklife research into Randolph County classrooms at the College and public schools and later at Huttonsville Medium Security Prison.

My goal was to present an alternative view of West Virginia highlighting intrinsic, natural values of this region and giving voice to the arts and culture of its people. I visited every elementary school in the County and sang a lively program of West Virginia folk songs. At the same time I was learning a vast repertoire of ballads and old tent-meeting songs from a couple of local singers, Currence and Mintie Hammonds, in their early eighties, who lived in nearby Huttonsville. These songs and stories greatly enriched my own offerings as a teacher, and I struggled to absorb their singing techniques as well, though I finally concluded sadly that you have to be a Hammonds to really sing like one.

## DOCUMENTING LOCAL MUSICIANS

The local Creative Arts Council directed me to spend ten hours a week documenting local musicians, including Woody Simmons, Ernie Carpenter, Blackie Cool, Boyd Phillips, and Dewey Hamrick. It was a compelling pursuit, learning their life stories and fiddle tunes, and arranging recording sessions and performances.

My harmonious friendship with Currence and Mintie Hammonds soon led to visits with a number of their legendary, singing cousins in Pocahontas County. Maggie, Burl, Ruie, Emmie and Sherman Hammons (two spellings of the family name) were made famous through field recordings of family tales and tunes released in a package of two long-playing records with extensive notes and photographs by the Library of Congress in 1973. *The Hammons Family* was for me a landmark study of local culture, and I had used it as a text in my Appalachian Studies class at Davis & Elkins College before I ever met these memorable cousins. Meeting them opened a floodgate of new material. I was soon making my own recordings, and was in a position to program Currence and Mintie and a number of their adult children into the Vandalia Gathering in Charleston. Their oldest son, Verle Hammonds, brought down the house with his humorous songs and flat-foot dancing. Currence and Mintie also appeared at the Augusta Festival with Sherman Hammons in 1979. The other cousins were no longer able to make the trip.

The State Arts and Humanities funded my Artist's Residency for a second year as I extended my circuit of schools. The response was golden. The musical gifts of Randolph County children flowed like pure water, and many of the teachers were equally enthusiastic. I taught everyone "Bangum and the Wild Boar," a fresh acquisition from the Hammonses, which scholars have traced to the time of *Beowulf* in the Ninth Century. The school children soon figured out that, reckoning five generations to the century, this song had passed from grannies to young ones through sixty generations before it reached my ears from Currence Hammonds. This continuity provides a staggering revelation about the dogged staying power of oral tradition. Our

students are the children of that tradition, starved for its nourishment, and for its rightful place in their school curriculum.

## THE FOXFIRE MODEL

My Artists Residency with the State Arts and Humanities was largely inspired by my friendship with Elliot Wigginton and the model of *Foxfire*, and I worked to show and suggest ways in which Randolph County could serve as a unit of study for grades three through six, recognizing its culture as important as its history and environment. In studying features of local traditional culture, young students will quickly learn and affirm the inventiveness and interdependence of their ancestors in gaining a foothold in the Alleghenies, and the kinds of expressive arts that were just as important to survival in the wilderness as the plow and gun. The songs make it clear that earlier generations sang to survive the isolation and loneliness of the frontier, to stave off insanity in the face of unspeakable hardship, to imprint their adventures and exploits on local memory.

## STUDENTS FINDING THEIR OWN PLACES IN HISTORY

A child who gains this sort of academic vantage point with regard to assessing her own social past, develops a much deeper sense of her family and its role in shaping local history and culture. This child will be much more ready to tackle broader historical, artistic, and humanistic concepts after developing a stronger sense of her own place in history, vision for the future, and appreciation of what it means to be a West Virginian in the here and now.

Old songs as social history—as well as folk art—are a crucial ingredient of this hands-on, voices-on, approach to liberation through the arts: liberation from perpetuation of stereotypes and bigotry, from a shameful past, or from a baseless belief that the company always knows best and that you should remain silent. Songs ignite imaginative participation, provide a fertile atmosphere for exploring meanings, which are at the root of critical thinking. Critical thinking begins with questions. Songs can give you permission to ask them. Learning a song can provide a friend for life. By the conclusion of the school residency I felt like I knew every kid in Randolph County, but sadly,

had effected few, if any, changes in the school curriculum.

### *THE HOME PLACE, FIRST RADIO PRODUCTIONS*

In 1980 I won a West Virginia Humanities Foundation Media Award to record and produce for West Virginia Public Radio a series of programs exploring the place of music in the lives of traditional families: how music was passed down, how it was shared with neighbors and what it said about the struggles and adventures of earlier generations. I equipped myself with my first professional field recorder and hit the road.

From Charlie Blevins, a Mingo County coal miner and tavern keeper, to Etta Persinger, an eighty-year-old African American shape-note singer in Beckley, I covered the state visiting old contacts from my Appalachian Volunteer days and more recent acquaintances from my field research for the Vandalia and Augusta festivals. One of the old-time singers, Oliver Sines was a ninety-year-old retired teamster from the log woods of Spruce Mountain. He was my next door neighbor, a fine gentleman, a powerful singer and memorable raconteur.

Each of the thirteen, eight-minute programs in *The Home Place* series recreates the ease and intimacy of a back porch visit with an old friend. The final piece, featuring songs associated with the Mannington Mine Disaster in Farmington, West Virginia, captured a widow's recollection of her last day and evening with her husband who died in the November 1969 explosion, along with 77 other coal miners. The program was aired on NPR's *All Things Considered* in November, 1982 to commemorate the thirteenth anniversary of the tragedy.

### JOINING THE AUGUSTA STAFF

In 1982 Director Margo Blevin invited me to join the central staff at the Augusta Center as a folklife specialist and I continued my field research and programming for the annual five-weeks of summer workshops exploring southern mountain arts from weaving, basket making and ballad singing to log house construction. It was a vibrant program with input from old-time

artists and musicians and all night jam sessions at the Ice House and the rambling porches of Halliehurst Mansion on the beautiful D&E College campus. You could sit in and play until dawn with the Red Clay Ramblers or Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong, or get in a late night fiddle jam with Melvin Wine and Gerry Milnes. Three hundred, fifty students attended that summer, many of them for two and three weeks.

## EVICTION'S FOR THE STONEWALL JACKSON DAM

Among the summer students was Michael Frisch, Ph.D., who headed up the American Studies Department of SUNY Buffalo and was possessed of a desire to learn old-time fiddling. Frisch invited me, based on my research of regional music, to join his non-residential, Masters Degree program to further formalize my research, scope and methods, and gain access to the University's faculty and library. D&E's president agreed to underwrite tuition costs and I received my MA in American Studies in 1984.

The focus of my thesis was the removal of Lewis County farmers for the Stonewall Jackson Flood Control Dam, then in its early stages of construction near Weston by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I recorded thirty-five testimonials with residents, planners, politicians and lawmen, to create an audio documentary, "We're Here To Take You Out," exploring the impact and collateral, human cost of such projects on rural life, arts, and values. It was aired on WVMR in Frostburg, West Virginia, and, though the dam was finally built, came to serve as an audio handbook for people struggling to preserve their communities from take-over by external forces. *The Oral History Review* (Vol. 15, No. 2, Fall, 1987) published the radio script, which found its way into college classrooms and libraries in many parts of the region and beyond.

## WRITING A FILM FOR THE WELSH BBC

At the same time a remarkable stroke of good fortune brought me in contact with a visiting BBC-TV Cardiff, Wales producer who wanted to film a documentary about old music in West Virginia and people who still play it. He wanted to adapt my research as grist for the film. He also enlisted my help with a documentary he was scheduled to make about a serpent-handling

church in the coal fields near Beckley. I visited the church and laid out the groundwork for the arrival of the film crew. In Besoco I found a most hospitable and cooperative community. I attended church and enjoyed Sunday dinner with the preacher's extended family. On other visits I observed the imaginative, affirming style of my new producer friend, Brynmor Williams (Welsh spelling), as he drew out, in a meeting with ten of the church elders, their profound understandings and interpretation of scripture and their justification for the handling of poisonous snakes in religious services. Other interviews conducted in homes of the congregants were equally direct and transparent and the final production of *They Shall Take Up Serpents* was both revealing and respectful in ways that the community found satisfying.

For the other, old time music film, *Play It for the Trees*, I lined up a dozen musicians living in central and southern West Virginia. At Williams' request I wrote detailed profiles of each and submitted annotated maps of the places the film crew would visit, with travel times between each and accommodations for the crew. We spent a week together and all became friends. In the end, Williams flew me to Cardiff, Wales to write and record the narration, though that role was normally filled by in-house professional narrators. The (visually) stunning film was a winner of the 1984 Everyman Award and shown in festivals all over Europe.

The experience of collaborating with such consummate professionals was a source of considerable anxiety for me, with lessons to be learned at every hand. But I felt touched by the fates to participate in the making of two such beautiful films in which West Virginians were presented as thoughtful, artistic and articulate people with solid family values and compelling traditions. Any negative judgements felt by the production crew were nowhere apparent. Coming from coal-producing Wales, they were at home in this West Virginia mining community, snakes in the church, or no.

## A MASTER OF DOCUMENTARY ARTS

Both films fly in the face of the kinds of stereotyping and sensationalism usually enlisted to explain away this region and its people. In contrast, Producer Brynmor Williams taught me how to elicit the best from his sources

by approaching them as experts on their own experience. He was very humble about his own relevant experience, and invited the confidence of others by appealing to them as teachers, to help him understand the significant meanings underlying their narratives. By telling him what they *knew*, his sources discovered what they *thought* about their own lives and work. These films treat such revelations and reflections by the subjects with affection and dignity. My friendship, visits, and hand-written correspondence with Williams enriched me for many years, until his untimely death in the late 1990s. He was truly a master of documentary arts.

## EXPANDING THEMES AND CULTURES AT AUGUSTA

Meanwhile back at the Augusta office we continued to energize the program through authentic offerings, even reaching out to the folk cultures of other regions. Director Blevin was enamored with Cajun music and culture after attending a Mardi Gras celebration in rural Louisiana. After Dewey Balfa came to Augusta as a master artist in 1983, Cajun Week was off to a roaring start, with Michael Doucet, both musician and scholar, as a presenting coordinator.

Blues Week and Irish Week joined Blue Grass and Old Time Weeks to round out the season, with two concerts weekly to showcase the teaching staff, and dances every night. Dance Week, Vocal Week and Swing Week overlapped the last two weeks. And master craft artists taught an extensive variety of crafts every week. It was truly a convergence, a scheduling challenge, and offered a model for other arts and crafts camps in the region.

The enrollment in 1985 was nearly a thousand. And the summer of 1988 saw 1500 students with 150 offerings to choose from over the five weeks. By that time we had expanded the “Old Masters” program to include evening panel discussions featuring the wisdom and reflections of these remarkable, elderly artists in addition to their individual appearances in various classes. They were always well attended. Funding for the Old Masters Program came from the West Virginia Arts & Humanities.

We had also launched Augusta Heritage Records with long-playing

recordings of Woody Simmons, Blackie Cool, John Johnson and Harvey Sampson. Each of these early LPs with extensive liner notes was included in the “Select List of Folk Music Recordings” an annual listing published by the Library of Congress in the 1980s.

## GRADUATE STUDIES IN FOLKLORE

In the mid-1980s Dr. Tony Barrand, English folk singer and dancer and professor of Psychology and Anthropology, invited me to enroll as a doctoral student in the non-residential University Professors Program at Boston University in Boston, Massachusetts. We designed a direction for my studies based on my Appalachian research projects at the time, and I made periodic visits to the University, where I also studied and shared research with the legendary Dennis Tedlock, Ph.D., linguist, ethnographer and Social Anthropologist. Access to the Boston University faculty, fellow graduate students, and library facilities was invaluable over the next seven years. I completed my Ph.D. Degree in Folklore in May of 1991.

For me it was never enough to teach traditional arts without also considering the artists and where they lived and worked. I wanted to understand the interplay between art forms and the landscapes in which they flourished, and the continuity of traditional arts. How had they been expressed or made in earlier generations? I also wanted to document external pressures on Appalachian communities and landscapes where folk arts were practiced and preserved, to espouse these artists and the creativity they passed along to younger folks. It all seemed so fragile, this local knowledge of “how to make something from nothing,” or make a child smile with a rag doll, or remember a fiddle tune that dated to the French and Indian wars in the wilderness. Without these contextual meanings, the arts seemed commodified, uprooted, dislocated and vulnerable to co-option: merely something to purchase at the Augusta store, a cultural trinket.

## RECORDING INDIAN SINGING IN CHEROKEE

I left West Virginia in December of 1988 to serve for three years as staff folklorist at Western Carolina University's Mountain Heritage Center in

Cullowhee, North Carolina, in the shadow of the Great Smokey Mountains. Once again I was back to field research, this time in the Native American community of Cherokee, North Carolina, which produced a dazzling array of artists, painters, potters, sculptors, carvers, blow gun makers, weavers, singers and dancers, as well as a vibrant bi-lingual oral tradition. I focused mostly on traditional song and dance by the Walker Calhoun family of Big Cove. By the time I left I had incorporated most of these art forms into the Mountain Heritage Festival at Western Carolina University and successfully nominated Walker Calhoun for both State and National Heritage Awards. And though my position at the University was rich with opportunity and security, I was missing my children who at the time were living with their newly, remarried mother in Amherst, Massachusetts.

### FINDING A BRIDE AMONGST FOLKLIFE TREASURES

When a job as folklorist at the Pioneer Valley Folklore Society came open in Greenfield, Massachusetts, I soon relocated to be closer to my children and conduct a four-county folklife inventory funded by the National Endowment for the Arts through the Massachusetts State Arts Council in Boston. The Connecticut River Valley in which I found myself must be as diverse as anywhere in the world, and to take on the task of documenting these cultural riches, I enlisted the help of local interns from Amherst College and The University of Massachusetts at Amherst, as well as the local community. With a grant from the Mass Council on the Humanities we produced two hour-long radio documentaries featuring the multi-cultural arts of the region for air play on WFCR, Public Broadcasting in Amherst. We also produced a major festival concert of Valley musicians and dancers for the National Folk Festival at Lowell, Massachusetts in 1992. But a sudden reversal of politics and state budgets put an end to the project, and in 1993 I came back to West Virginia with one of the interns, Carrie Nobel Kline, as my new bride and professional partner.

### WHEELING NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

My new partner and I had just been hired by the National Park Service to carry out an ethnographic survey for the rust belt City of Wheeling, then on

its way to becoming a National Heritage Area. Over the next two years, with direction from a local advisory group, we conducted 160 open-ended, recorded interviews with signed releases. These included every neighborhood, religions congregation, downtown businesses, including major department stores, restaurants, factories, breweries, mills, mines, rails, river, locks and dams. We also looked at ethnic social clubs and *other* evening entertainments, as well as singing societies, jazz bands and old Wheeling Jamboree radio musicians.

From this rich archive we wrote thirty-three *Wheeling News Register* Sunday newspaper features (1992-93) based on interweaving the verbatim transcriptions of our recorded interviews as conversational reflections on various aspects of the Wheeling's culture, arts, work, and history. These lengthy articles, illustrated with archival photographs, read like radio scripts. We also produced audio versions of the City's spoken history for museum play.

Our work was resonating with Wheeling's cultural dynamics in ways we never could have foreseen. It became the face of the Wheeling National Heritage Area Corporation and its approaches to downtown redevelopment through cultural tourism and the arts, culture and history of the Upper Ohio River Valley. The Spoken History Project demonstrated the power of getting the story straight by listening to citizens whose voices had never before surfaced in the arena of public policy and planning. It turned a research project into a public forum on issues driving the new development, and in some cases produced citizen action.

For example, after a Wheeling Citizens' Task Force publicly rebuked WWVA-FM for broadcasting a series of programs based on Neo-Nazi, racist propaganda in 1994, the Wheeling National Heritage Area Corporation commissioned us to produce a twenty-two part series of fifteen-minute programs, *Talking Across the Lines*, giving voice to human rights issues which surfaced in our spoken history project, for air on WWVA-FM. The shamed Wheeling Jamboree Station, broadcasting with 50,000 watts over the northeastern United States and eastern Canada, was now granting equal prime time to the Citizen's Task Force, with leadership from the local YWCA, to mitigate the Nazi nonsense. Once again, our public research and

listening project had laid groundwork for a public forum. *Talking Across the Lines* was re-aired in the same season.

Nonetheless, priorities within the Wheeling National Heritage Area Corporation seemed to be refocusing on preservation of downtown structures and the development of an Artisans' Center, and our project wrapped up after a one-year extension.

## A QUAKER SCHOOL AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

We found ourselves briefly free to pursue a listening project on the Underground Railroad in the upper Ohio Valley, a subject that had previously come up during the Wheeling interviews. A performance of our singing at the Olney Friends School in nearby Barnesville, Ohio led to an invitation to teach a class on documentary arts and focusing on songs and stories of the Underground Railroad and the roles of various groups and individuals who were active local “conductors.” A retired Olney School teacher and his sister, who were raised in a family that had been associated with the school for four generations, told vivid stories of their ancestors' involvement with the Abolitionist movement. With the help of the students we were able to identify and record other local stories and songs. From these materials we scripted and produced “Riding Freedom's Train” along with a companion recording of twenty-five related songs, “I Believe in Angels Singing.” Both recordings were aired over West Virginia Public Radio during African-American History month of 1997 and 1998, and were recognized with the 1999 Fellowship Award for excellence in the field of Media Arts from the West Virginias Division of Culture & History.

## CHRONICLING AN OLD HISTORIC TURNPIKE

Our return to my old home in Elkins in 1995 coincided with an opportunity to do an extensive documentary project for the Rich Mountain Battlefield Foundation located in Beverly, West Virginia, on the Staunton/Parkersburg Turnpike. Now designated as U.S. Routes 250, 33 and 47, the old road was completed from the Valley of Virginia across the Alleghenies to the Ohio River in 1847. Once again we began interviewing in earnest for a four-part production looking at the pre-history, pioneer settlement, the American Civil

War, Reconstruction and the Industrial Revolution, the coming of paved roads and automobiles, and The New Deal along the historic pike. We also recorded hours of local music to serve as a backdrop for the sixty and more voices, and ambient sounds of everything from battlefields to steam locomotives and early cars, falling water and raging storms. Our work is flavored more like audio art than like investigative reporting. These productions, each of full CD length, are invaluable teaching materials, affirming the richness of local speech and memory, and the authentic imagery that such a bank of voices can provide.

When the Rich Mountain Battlefield Foundation acquired more funding from the Federal Highways Administration in 2005, they commissioned us to produce three additional spoken histories of transportation, the discovery of oil and natural gas, and slavery and early statehood along the Turnpike in the region between Buckhannon and Parkersburg. We recorded another forty testimonials and as many local music makers. Now the total series of seven CDs featuring 100 local voices and a rich diversity of local music bears compelling witness to the spoken and expressive arts, courage, wit, humor and inventiveness of the region. We are currently dealing with a proposal to repackage the series in much shorter segments for public radio play.

### AFRICAN-AMERICAN SINGING IN SOUTHERN MARYLAND

Between 2000 and 2004 Carrie Kline and I became documentarians at Historic St. Mary's City near the mouth of the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay in Southern Maryland, and worked on a number of fascinating projects to record and celebrate traditions of African-American church singing and preaching styles forged in that region over three and a half centuries.

### DECLINE OF TOBACCO-GROWING AND THE MARYLAND STATE BUYOUT

The Historic District Commission of Calvert County, Maryland, also commissioned us to record and produce a spoken audio history of tobacco farming over the same historical period. The Oral History Association at its

2005 annual meeting conferred national recognition on our seventy-eight minute production, “Born and Raised in Tobacco Fields,” with a media award and citation. The citation read in part,

. . . This work is illustrative of the unique value of oral history – the inflection of voices, the first-person stories, the sounds specific to a region – in creating a rich and layered aural portrait. Using a methodological approach that fosters the speaker's remembrance and reflection, each individual voice and perspective is clearly heard, . . . [This is] a model use of oral history to preserve the voices and sounds of the region and tell a substantive and complex story of a changing culture and its effect upon individuals, family and community.

PENDLETON COUNTY'S AUDIO DRIVING TOUR:  
“ THE SPIRIT OF WEST VIRGINIA ” AWARD

Back home in Elkins in late 2004 we took on a project funded by the West Virginia Division of Travel & Tourism to produce an audio tour for the Pendleton County Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber selected sixty amazing and diverse residents to tell the story, and we conducted interviews in a quiet church basement in Franklin, the County seat. The final product is a four-part audio tour in which the CD track numbers correspond with numbered signs at historic sites along mapped routes through each of three river valleys and in Franklin, including memories of a devastating fire that destroyed most of the town in 1923, for on-site listening. The series was recognized by the Division of Travel & Tourism with “The Spirit of West Virginia” Award in 2006, both for its content and the quality of its collaboration with local people.

From our home base, our contract work and musical performances have taken us to many distant venues between Maine, California, Guatemala, Germany and Italy over the years. We've had an on-going contract with the Free Public Library in Concord, Massachusetts to record the reflections of local residents, many of them historians, artists and authors, for the William Munroe Special Collections. We will soon pass the one hundred mark with these recorded voices.

## OWING OUR SOULS (AND BODIES) TO THE COMPANY STORE

In July, 2010 Carrie Kline and I visited the Whipple Company Store Museum near Oak Hill in Fayette County and recorded nearly five hours of interpretive discourse from the Museum owners, who were then in their third year of leading tours of the iconic old building. Built in 1893, the old company store serves as a lightning rod for local memory, and the owners' interpretation, based on revelations of local visitors, casts a different spin on coal industry history than any I've previously heard.

I returned to the community many times for interviews with neighbors and visitors to the museum, and in 2011 published "Esau in the Coalfields: Owing Our Souls to the Company Store" in *Appalachian Heritage*, a quarterly journal of Berea College in Berea, Kentucky. The piece was based on new research exploring forced sexual servitude among coal camp women, in order to satisfy debts incurred at the Whipple Company Store to feed their children during the illness or injury of their husbands, and to avoid eviction from company houses. The despicable practice referred to as "Esau" was also prevalent during labor disputes and strikes when husbands took to the picket lines and women were left to fend for their children as best they could.

My article received the *Plattner Award* for Creative Non-fiction for 2011, and was subsequently published in *Dead Ringers*, an anthology of censored details of coal industry history, edited by Wess Harris and published by Appalachian Community Services in Gay, West Virginia. In the fall of 2013 it rose to sixth best seller in Tamarack's book section, just behind *When Miners March*, also edited by Wess Harris. These works challenge interpretations offered in the Coal Exhibit at the Culture Center in Charleston, which paint coal history in a much more pro-industry light. My on-going research of this story continues to reveal horrific details from early coal and timber camp life, and I have found institutional efforts to censor these stories an additional blot on West Virginia's current intellectual and political atmosphere.

Despite the controversy of exploring the dark underbelly of our state's

industrial past, I have continued to write and present my findings at annual Appalachian Studies Conferences over more than thirty years, blending the fields of traditional music and labor history in an effort to widen the context of traditional arts in a fast-changing world. I will be presenting “Esau in the Coalfields” at the Oral History Association Meeting in Madison, Wisconsin in October.

## STATE AND REGIONAL PUBLICATIONS

Since my brief tour of duty at *Goldenseal Magazine* in 1978, I have published in those pages a score of articles on West Virginia arts and culture. My written contributions also appear in *The West Virginia Encyclopedia* published by the West Virginia Humanities Council (2006), and *The Goldenseal Book of the West Virginia Mine Wars* (1991), both edited by Dr. Ken Sullivan. *Mine Wars* features my 1979 article on the early life of Arnold Miller, “Growing Up on Cabin Creek.” A number of my articles on traditional musicians appear in *Mountains of Music*, a compilation of *Goldenseal* stories of traditional music making, edited by John Lilly and published by the West Virginia Department of Culture and History (1999). A lengthy article on the traditional Cherokee song and dance of Walker Calhoun appeared in *Old Time Herald* magazine in 1991.

## FOOTBRIDGE AWARD AND CONCERT

We were astounded in 2011 when FOOTMAD, a state-wide folk music and dance organization based in Charleston, honored us with *The Footbridge Award*, “for outstanding efforts in preserving Appalachian music,” and a September, 2011 concert at the Culture Center Theater in which we were joined by Sam and Joe Herrmann, David Norris, John Lilly and Angie Richardson.

## EMERGING CRISIS AWARD

Most recently we won The Oral History Association's Emerging Crisis Award for 2013 to document the natural gas rush in western West Virginia and beyond. We have been conducting interviews with residents and industry representatives from a wide spectrum of involvement with the drilling fields

in an effort to widen local conversations and find some level of common ground for an approach that respects local landscapes and public health and safety.

Meanwhile back in Elkins we have been enjoying teaching evening singing classes at Augusta and bringing our music and stories to Middle School students around Randolph County, sponsored by the Arts Bank program. Singing lights up the whole brain. It connects all the synapses. We have just begun a new season of classroom visits at Valley Head Elementary School, and look forward to both entertaining and challenging a new wave of youngsters, far and away West Virginia's most valuable resource.

### ARCHIVING A LIFE LONG COLLECTION

This award opportunity comes at a time when my life-long, at-risk collection of tapes, CDs, and photographs stored on shelves and in drawers, along with boxes of documents and full file cabinets related to decades of field work, all cry out for organization, preservation and an archival, institutional home. It is mind-boggling for me to try and fathom the extent of our personal archive and what it will bring to light about the arts and human condition of this region. Contained in this collection are spoken texts from two generations past, full of local knowledge, wit and folklore, as well as strategies for better neighboring and community-building. These recorded interviews are much more than individual trips down memory lane. Rather, they go to the heart of what it has meant to be a West Virginian in the face of both challenges and opportunities. The recorded voices continue to inspire those of us facing similar struggles in our own time.

Many of my field recordings date back to the late 1970s and are in fragile condition as are older photographs and negatives. In the hands of capable librarians and archivists, these voices and images will build bridges between present and past generations, both human and technological, as well as strengthening families through personal access to their own histories.

To that end we have selected the archive at Berea College Library in Berea, Kentucky as the new home for a life time of recorded work: audio, photographic and written coverage of our documentary travels from Maine to

Guatemala and throughout the Appalachian region. Harry Rice at the Archive is organizing the material for online accessibility in the near future.

The memory of all these voices will continue to fuel the fire in my belly for social justice, a dawning of public health and safety, universal access to appropriate public education, economic autonomy, historical preservation and an artistic flowering in our beloved West Virginia. May the voices preserved here play a part in that dawning of social change. So be it.

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