

A Folk Festival Above the Clouds

by Lyn Wolz

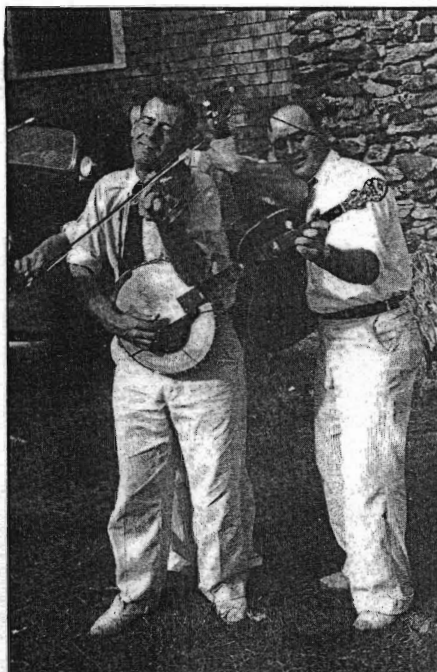
The Blue Ridge Folklife Festival is part of a continuing tradition of folk festivals in the Blue Ridge. One of the nation's first major folk festivals centered around White Top Mountain in Smyth County, Virginia. The White Top Mountain Interstate Folk Music Festival was held from 1931 through 1939 (except 1937). It drew traditional musicians, singers, and dancers from all over the region and spectators from all over the country. In its eight years of existence, it influenced a varied and widely dispersed group of people. It not only affected the style and repertoire of regional performers but also reinforced for many "outsiders" the prevailing romantic stereotypes of mountain culture.

Ike Sturgill of Konnarock was the person who proposed that a fiddle contest be held on White Top Mountain over the Fourth of July weekend in 1931. He approached the majority stockholder of the White Top Land Company, John A. Blakemore, an attorney from Abingdon who was in favor of any activity that would increase the company's revenue. Blakemore happened to mention the idea to Anabel Morris Buchanan, his cousin's wife. A composer and musician herself, Buchanan was also an amateur folklorist who had begun collecting folk music around Marion, Virginia, the year before. She was inspired by her reading about folk festivals in Canada and suggested that the event become a regional folk festival, a way to showcase the talents of traditional mountain performers in music and dance. Because of its "hybrid" beginning, the White Top Folk Festival was the only event billed as a folk festival that was run as a contest. This format caused some problems that festivals usually do not engender, but it was actually more in keeping with the old tradition of fiddle contests.



Jess Johnston (fiddler with plaid tie) and Eleanor Roosevelt (seated with white hat) with other White Top contestants and spectators.

The White Top festival was one of four early folk festivals that set the pattern for most folk festivals for many years to come. By 1931, the first year of White Top, two other festivals had become well-known. Buchanan later



A stringband from Harrisonburg, Virginia, hamming it up with a musical stunt.

met the founders of these festivals — Bascom Lamar Lunsford, who started the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1928, and Jean Thomas, whose American Folk Song Festival began in Kentucky in 1930. Buchanan was also good friends with the founder of the National Folk Festival, Sarah Gertrude Knott, director from 1934 until 1954. The National Folk Festival, which is still produced every year, had an enormous impact on traditional musicians as well as on the general public who attended it. The regional festivals like White Top, Lunsford's, and Thomas' also influenced later festivals like the Blue Ridge Folklife Festival. Today's festivals, however, usually include many aspects of folklife besides music, such as foodways and crafts.

Ideas about folklore and how it should be presented have gone through many changes over the years. For example, most folklorists today believe that a group of musicians who are asked to play for a festival because

Photo Courtesy Virginia State Library

Photo Courtesy Virginia State Library

they learned their music by traditional methods — that is, mainly by word of mouth and example rather than through books and records — should play whatever music is in their repertory. The goal of the White Top organizers was quite different. Buchanan and her mentor, composer-pianist John Powell of Richmond, believed that American music should be preserved in a nearly pristine state as close as possible to its British roots. These beliefs were motivated by ideas of racial superiority and purity on Powell's part, but also by Buchanan's romantic ideas of traditional music as a survival of a mysterious past. Unfortunately these two primary figures behind the White Top Folk Festival shared with many spectators a romantic and unrealistic view of the barefoot mountaineer. These notions were made overt in publicity photographs and in stories written for newspapers by Buchanan and other writers. For example, although none of the existing photos of the festival site show any wagons or horses, references were often made to participants who made their way to the festival by horse and wagon. Though there may have been



Photo Courtesy Virginia State Library

Inside the Festival pavilion (left to right, front row) John Blakemore, John Powell and Annabel Morris Buchanan.

one or two wagons used as transportation during the eight years of the festival, to mention them as common methods of transportation in publicity was to perpetuate the stereotype of backward hillbillies.

The most devious way that the organizers of the White Top Folk Festival manipulated mountain culture was in the rules and regulations concerning what kind of music the performers could play in the contests and pro-



Photo Courtesy Virginia State Library

Performing a dance on the Festival grounds.

grams. Buchanan and her hand-picked panels of judges, always people from outside the culture such as academic folklorists, composers, conductors, and classical musicians, strictly enforced her rules. No "hillbilly," jazz, or blues music was allowed. Contestants were rewarded for the oldest and most beautiful versions of songs and tunes. Although a traditional singer might have enjoyed singing "When You and I Were Young, Maggie" as much as he enjoyed singing "Lord Lovel," his or her own choice of songs was labeled inappropriate. After only the first year the canny performers learned which tunes and songs would be accepted by the judges and changed their repertoires exclusively for the festival contests. This practice was encouraged by the festival organizers. Blakemore sent a letter to all former contestants in 1934 encouraging them to come to the



Jess Johnston, "The Fiddlin' Fool" (second from left) and his group from Wolf Pen, West Virginia.

Photo Courtesy Virginia State Library



The Cruise family of Damascus, Virginia, who, as a group and individually, participated in all of the Festival contests.

Photo Courtesy Virginia State Library

festival so they could learn good old-time tunes from musicians who would be arriving from Pennsylvania. And one of the semi-professional fiddlers, Jess Johnston from West Virginia, wrote to Blakemore that he had found many tunes among traditional musicians in his area that he thought the judges would like.

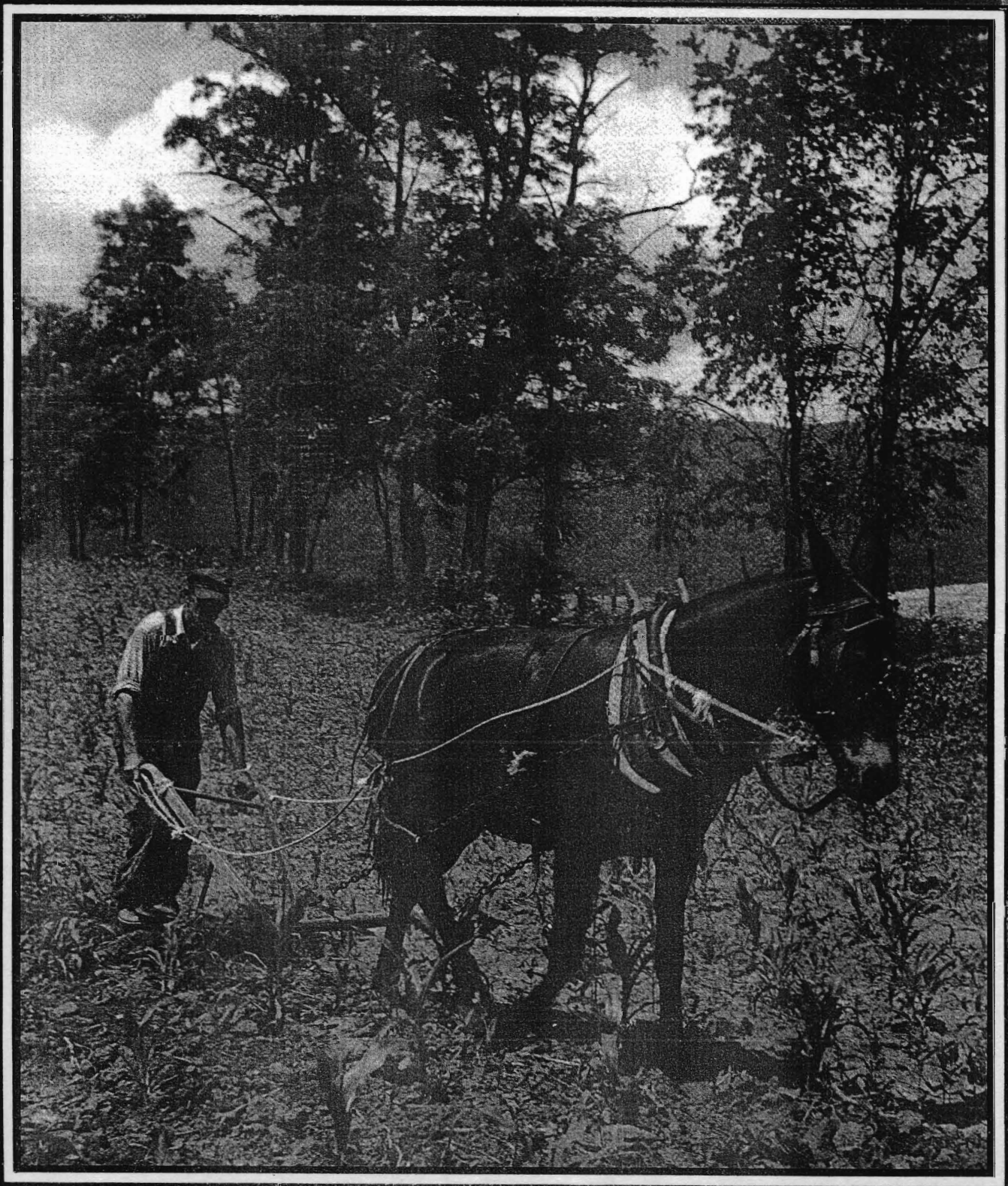
An even more blatant example of what American Studies scholar David Whisnant calls "cultural intervention" occurred during the later years of the

festival. After the death of her husband in 1937, Buchanan no longer had the time or money to spend organizing the festival. Richard Chase, known for his publication of *Jack Tales* and his book *American Songs and Singing Games*, was one of the people who took over part of Buchanan's job as director. In his zeal to teach the old ways to mountain folk, he imported folklore that had never been part of traditional culture in America. Before the festival he taught English country dances, even Morris dances, to teams of recruits from the area. He also performed Punch and Judy shows during the festival itself, promoting another form of folklore that was not traditional in America. The only genres that he was involved with that were presented at the festival in a fairly traditional manner were the children's songs, singing games, and the folk music performances.

Despite these practices, which would be considered unethical now, the organizers of the White Top Folk Festival did manage to showcase local talent, bringing many outstanding

musicians and singers to the attention of the region's traditional music lovers as well as to the attention of other folklorists. Some of those who sang and played at White Top, such as Texas Gladden, "Sailor Dad" Hunt, C.B. Wohlford, and Horton Barker, were later recorded for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. Their music was preserved partly because they had appeared at White Top. Another positive effect of the festival was the genuine appreciation that many of the spectators from outside the immediate area gained for Appalachian music and musicians. Also, the exchange of songs and tunes among the musicians themselves was an important by-product of the festival. The White Top Folk Festival, an ancestor of today's Blue Ridge Folklife Festival, had its negative aspects and idiosyncracies, but more important were its positive legacies to those interested in traditional music. ★

BLUE RIDGE FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL



**Blue Ridge Institute
Ferrum College - Ferrum, Virginia - October 22, 1983**

Table of Contents

Music

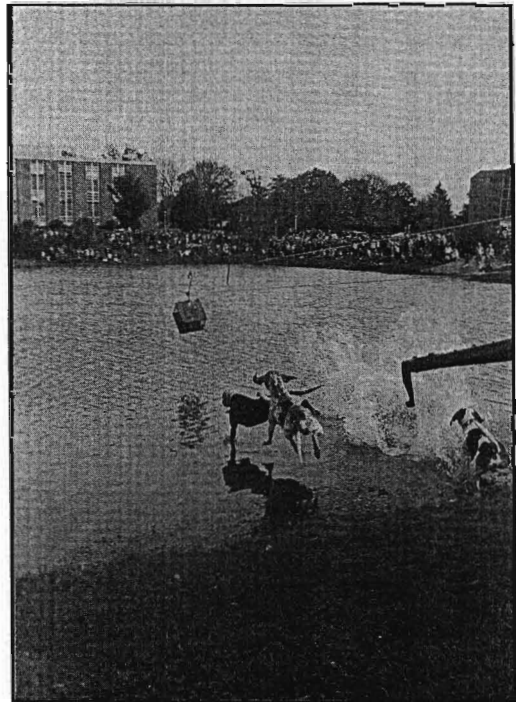
"Music from Carroll and Grayson Counties"
By Vaughan Webbpage 1



"A Folk Festival Above the Clouds"
By Lyn Wolzpage 4

Coon Dog Contests

"Coon Dog Contests: A Brief Guide"
By Vaughan Webbpage 9



Storytelling

"The Folk Tales of the Eastern Blue Ridge"
by Rex Stephenson and Jody Brownpage 7



Music Schedule

When and where performers will be appearing
.....page 10

Festival Map

What's happening wherepages 11-12

Crafts Locations & Event Schedules

Where and when to catch your favorites
.....Page 13