

FOLKLIFE CENTER NEWS

April 1981

Volume IV, Number 2

YELLOW RIBBONS:

Ties with Tradition

If folklore were an exact science, we might have predicted the blizzard of inquiries about the traditionality of yellow ribbons—the ribbons that blossomed in January to welcome the American hostages home from Iran. Instead, the media storm caught us by surprise.

David Kelly of the Library's General Reference Reading Room was the first to notice the gathering force and frequency of press inquiries on the subject. On January 22nd he made the rounds of the various public reference units to see if anyone knew anything about the yellow ribbon symbol. He drew a blank everywhere except in the Archive of Folk Song. There he found a file folder containing a two-year-old reference letter concerning the song "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree," and a certain skeptical willingness to study the matter further. Not the stuff of which doctoral dissertations are made, to be sure, but enough to certify the Archive as the Library's single voice on the matter. For the next two weeks the calls poured in and the reference staff of the Manuscript Division, General Reference Reading Room, Music Divi-



Sheet music cover.

sion, and Information Office directed them to the Archive of Folk Song.

The basic question which the news reporters had in mind was how the symbol came into being. Many callers had ideas of their own on the subject. Some had interviewed the authors of relevant popular songs. Others had spoken to historians of the Civil War. Still others had talked with the wives of hostages. Reporters often called the Archive and then called back later with a new hy-

Continued on page 9

KORSON CELEBRATION

On March 11 the Board of Trustees of the American Folklife Center hosted a reception to pay tribute to the many professional and personal contributions made by Rae and George Korson to folklife studies. The keynote address for the evening was delivered by Angus Gillespie, whose recent book *Folklorist of the Coal Fields*, published by Pennsylvania State University Press, traces George Korson's life, work, and scholarship. Additional remarks were offered by Wayland Hand and Alan Jabbour. In their reminiscences they described the inception of Korson's interest in documenting coal miners' lore and praised Rae Korson's unstinting support for scholars young and old during nearly three decades of association with the Archive of Folk Song.

In a particularly warm statement read on behalf of Sam Church, President of the United Mine Workers of America, Press Secretary Eldon Callen reminded the guests of the work George Korson did to reveal the personal and expressive side of miners' lives. "He showed that American coal miners are a proud and warm people

Continued on page 3



FOLKLIFE CENTER NEWS

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DIRECTOR'S COLUMN

For weeks the air has been full of talk about money. Our office, like others in Washington, has been deluged by anxious queries about budget cuts, elimination of funding categories, and the like. For many people, both here in Washington and around the country, levels of governmental funding are indeed of immediate and urgent relevance to the work they do. Yet, at the risk of sounding perverse, I feel impelled to suggest that it is a good time to reflect on ideas, policies, and structures in the cultural arena. Funding is of course critically important, but ultimately it is simply the means to ends for which there is a

broad consensus—the grease for the wheel of policy, one might say. In a time when budget-talk dominates public and private conversation, it is always worth reminding ourselves that ideas come first.

The Folklife Center itself seems to be moving into a period of what might be called reflection and deliberation. A series of Center projects in the field, which have experimented with the efficacy of organized team fieldwork, are drawing to a close, with staff efforts directed at producing publications from the fieldwork projects and organizing the project materials for future public access through the Folk Archive. Now—due in part to issues raised by those very field experiments, but also because of the dictates of the times—the Center finds itself called upon to help give focus to certain intriguing (or perhaps vexing) questions of policy that are insistently asserting themselves at the national level.

First among these issues is the mandate from the recently enacted historic preservation law for the Department of the Interior and the Center to produce a study of “the intangible elements of our cultural heritage,” reporting to the President and the Congress with recommendations for actions by the Federal Government which will better preserve those aspects of our heritage (see *Folklife Center News*, Vol. IV, No. 1, January 1981). I have learned from my conversations with people that the issue, as expressed by the law itself, seems a bit abstruse and takes some explaining. What it indicates is that the historic preservation movement, long devoted to preservation of tangible expressions of our heritage such as historic buildings, is showing strong signs of broadening its vision of cultural preservation. As that movement pays more attention to the whole spectrum of cultural expression, tangible and intangible, it begins to converge with other movements and networks interested in cultural preservation—particularly with

people interested in American folklife. This chemistry of convergence is already at work around the country. I have encountered example after example where historic preservation projects have addressed not only buildings but community cultural traditions in the broadest sense. What our study calls for, in a sense, is bringing the structures and policies of the Federal Government up to date so that they assist and encourage, rather than ignore or inhibit, this chemistry of convergence among cultural preservationists.

Plans are already under way for inaugurating the “intangibles” study. If it fails to articulate and build upon the national chemistry I have just invoked, it will simply take its place among other reports clogging governmental offices and library shelves. If it succeeds, it will help build a consensus for useful Federal actions which foster the nation's broader aspirations for cultural preservation. We shall keep you posted.

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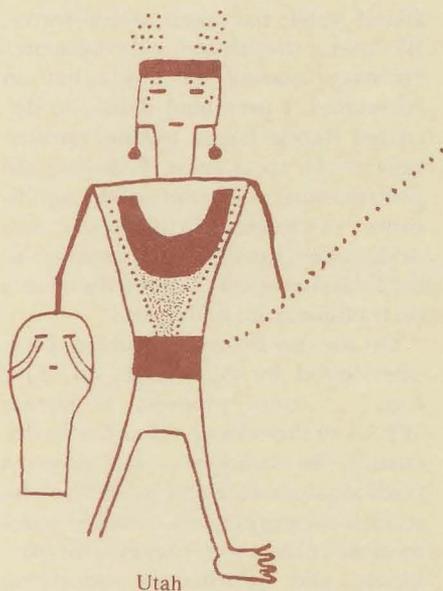
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HERITAGE ON ROCKS

It is estimated that there are only seven states in the country that do *not* have some examples of petroglyphs and pictographs ("rock art")—the sometimes massive, often diminutive drawings and designs executed on cliff faces, cave walls, boulders, and desert floors by many of the continent's pre-historical and historical indigenous cultural groups. But portions of this invaluable aesthetic and cultural record



are quickly being obliterated due to random violence, modern graffiti, natural erosion, and the expansion of communities and cities. The questions of what rock art is and what can be done to preserve it were addressed by JoAnne Van Tilburg and C. William Clewlow, Jr., research associates at UCLA, during a presentation arranged by the Folklife Center for its staff. For further information on the subject, contact them at the Institute of Archaeology, UCLA, Los Angeles, Calif. 90024, or write the American Rock Art Research Institute, P.O. Box 1536, El Toro, Calif. 92530.

OUTDOOR CONCERT SERIES

The Center's 1981 Outdoor Concert Series will be held on the first Thursday of each month between May and October. The series will begin with a concert by the Johnson Mountain Boys playing bluegrass on May 7, continuing on June 4 with a performance by blues players John Cephas and Phil Wiggins. On July 2, Roberto Borrell y Su Kubatá will give a performance of Afro-Cuban music. Subsequent concert dates are August 6, September 3, and October 1. Performances will be held on the Neptune Plaza between 12 noon and 1:30 p.m. In the event of rain, concerts will be moved indoors.

AUTOMATED ARCHIVING *Conference Planned*

Folklore archivists from the United States and Canada met at the Library in March to plan a conference tentatively titled "Washington Conference on Folklife and Automated Archives: Interdisciplinary Approaches." Participants in the planning meeting were Beverly Boggs, University of North Carolina; Janet Langlois, Wayne State University; Richard Thill, University of Nebraska at Omaha; Neil Rosenberg, Memorial University of Newfoundland; Holly Cutting Baker; and staff members from the Archive of Folk Song and the Center.

During the two-day gathering the group listened to guest speakers from the Library of Congress and discussed such issues as the location, date, scope, and objectives of the proposed conference. Current plans call for the conference to take place in April 1982 and for the co-sponsors to include the Univer-

sity of Nebraska at Omaha Folklore Archive and the Archiving Section of the American Folklore Society. The Folklife Center will host the conference. For further information contact Joseph C. Hickerson, Head, Archive of Folk Song, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540.

KORSON

Continued from page 1



Rae Korson.

who have fun, play games, tell jokes, go to church, and raise families—as well as mourn for their dead and fight for their rights.”

After Rae Korson spoke to her assembled friends and colleagues, the event closed with Joe Glazer's performance of a tune recorded by George Korson during his years in the coal fields.

The reception provided a special opportunity for the Center and members of the folklife discipline to acknowledge Rae Korson's unique contribution to the Archive of Folk Song. First coming to the Archive in 1941, she was an assistant to both Benjamin Botkin and Duncan Emrich before serving as Head of the Archive from 1955 to 1969. She has always maintained a kind and watchful eye over the work of the Folklife Center and of the Archive of Folk Song, for which she has labored longer than any other individual.

SURVEY OF TRADITIONAL LIFE IN RHODE ISLAND CONTINUES

Initiated in the summer of 1979 under the direction of the American Folklife Center, the Rhode Island Folklife Project is continuing for a second year with major funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities through the Foundation for the Promotion of State Cultural Heritage. Uniting the efforts of individuals, communities, and state organizations, the Folklife Project draws upon the assistance of its original co-sponsors, the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, the Rhode Island Heritage Commission, and the Rhode Island Historical Society. The American Folklife Center is providing recording and photographic supplies and equipment.

Whereas the project's first phase was devoted to a general survey of Rhode Island's folk culture, the overall objective of the current phase, under my direction and with the assistance of Mary-Louise Haas, is to create a sensitivity to the importance and value of traditional life, art, and occupations in the state, especially in relation to community planning and education. Five ancillary objectives specify more detail: (1) to document and interpret the role of traditional life in the three communities of Glocester, Pawtucket and Central Falls, and the Wickford-Saunderstown area, communities which are representative of the rural, urban, and maritime folklife of the state; (2) to make available to these local communities the information accumulated during fieldwork and to assist them in using this information in meeting various community goals, as well as to explore, generally, how a knowledge of folklife can benefit the community; (3) to work with state-wide agencies, suggesting a variety of uses for and values in understanding Rhode Island's folklife; (4) to suggest and justify a framework for exhibits and performances of folklife; (5) and to establish information sources for folklife in

Rhode Island and to develop a model for public-sector folklife research which can be used throughout the state.

The plan of work for the project calls for nine months of extensive fieldwork and local workshops—three months in each of the target communities—followed by three months of working with state agencies through workshops and presentations. During the fieldwork phase, local folklife is to be documented, collected, analyzed, and interpreted via interview reports, sound recordings, photography (color slides and black-and-white negatives), and field notes. Although the project's format specifies a fieldwork phase to be followed by a period of working with state agencies, we have been in close contact with several agencies throughout the project, laying the groundwork for further joint efforts in the folklife of Rhode Island.

Space limitations prohibit a detailed description of the rich and varied strands that make up the fabric of Rhode Island folklife. One example will provide an introductory taste. Stanley Flynn and his wife, Cora, live in West Glocester, a small village near the Connecticut border, centered around the remains of a once-thriving sawmill. Some of the older residents, such as the Flynn's, however, refer to the village as "Skeeterville" because, as Mr. Flynn says with his eyes twinkling, "Mosquitoes got so thick that you take and hide under an old, big iron kettle and the mosquitoes would bore a hole right through to get at you."

Mr. Flynn exemplifies some of the traditional values cherished by the rural Rhode Islander: independence and self-sufficiency. Frugal and shrewd in his dealings, he is honest and fair; hard working and innovative, he takes pride in a job well done.

For most of his seventy-seven years, Mr. Flynn has been either self-employed or nearly so. For the past

thirty-five years he has whitewashed the insides of dairy barns and chicken coops with a spraying rig he purchased second-hand in 1945. Even though Mrs. Flynn believes Mr. Flynn is a bit old to still be working at such an arduous task, Mr. Flynn enjoys the whitewashing and the freedom it gives him; he has the opportunity to "get out of the house" and, at the same time, provide some "beer money."

Beyond fieldwork, involvement of the project's personnel with the Rhode Island public has taken several forms. We held a workshop for the Glocester Heritage Society in Chepachet in November. I presented slides and discussed Rhode Island folklife, particularly of the rural areas. Following the presentation, a discussion of the significance of folklife in Glocester was undertaken, during which members of the local community offered their views on traditional life in the area.

On the day before Halloween, I was interviewed by Pam Watts on "Live Line," a radio program at Station WEAN in Providence. After briefly discussing the traditions of Halloween (a traditional media event in itself), I described the project and invited listeners to make contact with suggestions, comments, and information concerning local folklife. Topics phoned in ranged from family traditions to local legends, particularly the "vampire scare" in South County during the late nineteenth century. Just prior to the Christmas break, I addressed Eleanor Wachs's American folklore class at Brown University on the topic "Folklore in the Public Sector: The Rhode Island Folklife Project."

As a result of the project's work, several state agencies are pursuing goals with a folklife component. The Rhode Island Historical Society has established a folklife archive which will house all of the photographs, sound recordings, fieldnotes, interpretive re-

ports, and other data generated by the project to date. The Rhode Island State Council on the Arts is working with the folklife project to augment its Artists in Education program by bringing folk artists, craftsmen, and performers into the schools for short-term residencies and workshops.

To involve a wider public audience, a series of videotapes depicting folklife in Rhode Island is projected. The initial

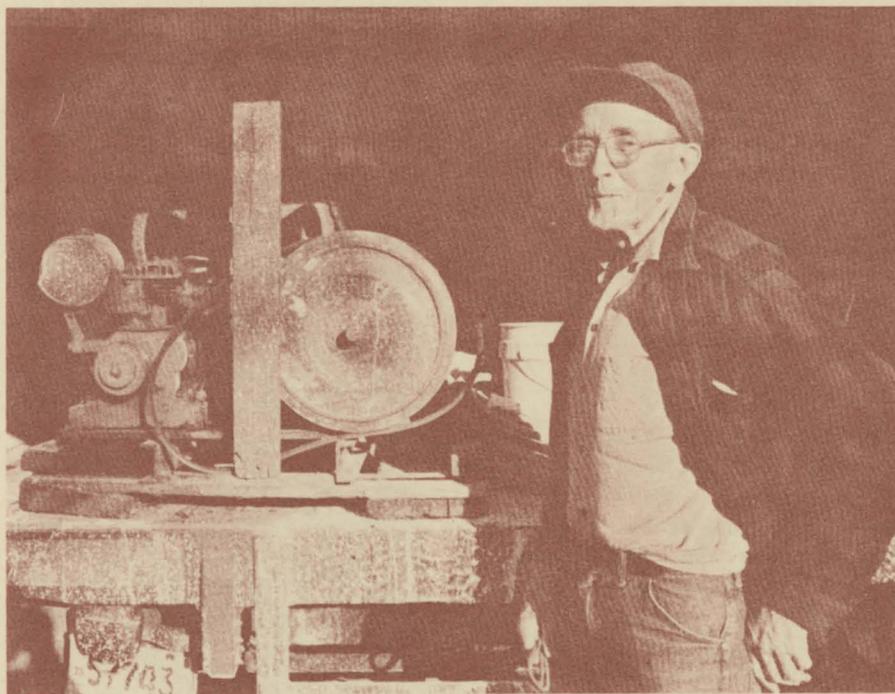
Community Affairs has been particularly interested in how a knowledge of the state's folklife can assist them in making policy and interacting effectively with local communities. Community Affairs is working with the project staff to develop fact sheets, brochures, and pamphlets which deal with various subcultural areas and populations of the state; this material would be used by the personnel of the state's so-

project, supported by funds from the Rhode Island State Committee for the Humanities, the Rhode Island Heritage Commission, and the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, focuses on occupational stories in the state. With the assistance of several other folklorists throughout the country, "Working Tales" addresses such questions as the functions and meanings of working stories, their historical contexts, and the aesthetics involved in their telling.

Our project is providing assistance to the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society on two projects with a folklife component. One, supported by a National Endowment for the Humanities Youthgrant, involves young people in researching, documenting, and interpreting the records of several black churches in the state, with the goal of tracing the development of black spirituals over the past 115 years as they reflect the social, political, cultural, economic, and religious development of the state and of the nation. The folklife project is lending its expertise in sound recording and in interpreting folklife data. The other project is a display of quilts made by blacks in Rhode Island. This exhibit will be enhanced by having members of the quilting club at the Martin DePorres Center (a large community retirement center in South Providence, the state's major black neighborhood) demonstrate the art of quilting as it exists today among members of the black community.

Although this listing of the activities of the Rhode Island Folklife Project is not exhaustive, it does serve to indicate the many directions which public-sector folklife can take. In Rhode Island the combination of fieldwork and public involvement is not only providing a pool of folklife resources for the state, but also laying the groundwork for incorporating a sensitivity to local heritage and tradition into a variety of state programs, policies, and projects.

—Michael E. Bell



Stanley Flynn of West Glocester, Rhode Island. (Photo by Michael E. Bell)

thirty-minute program, which is being planned by the folklife project in conjunction with the American Civilization Program and Media Services at Brown University, will explore the acquisition and use of maritime resources from boatbuilding to clambakes. We are also consulting with the Providence Parks Department and the state's Department of Environmental Management concerning the initiation of summer programs in city and state parks utilizing local traditions and folk artists and performers.

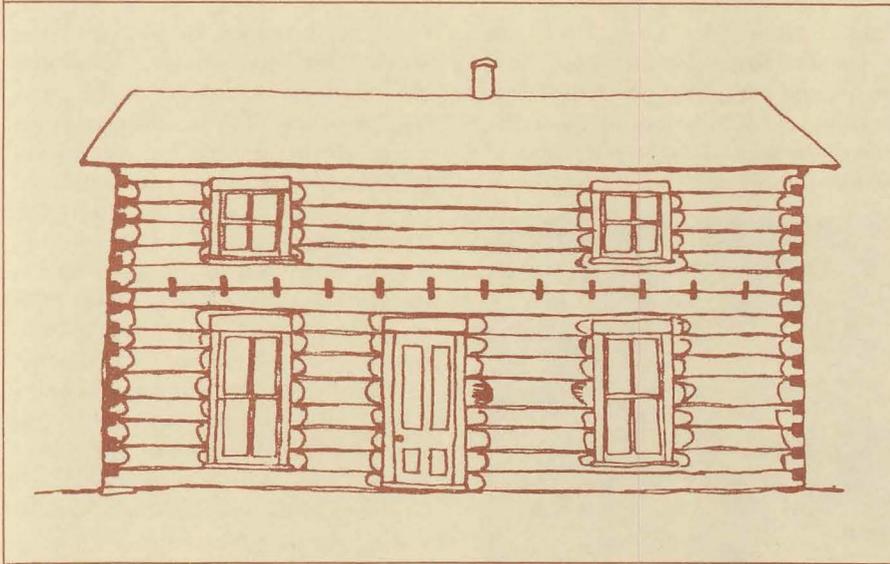
The Rhode Island Department of

cial service network who deal directly with the people and therefore need to have a thorough understanding of those who are affected by the policies and plans of the Department of Community Affairs.

In addition to broadening the extent of participation in folklife-related activities by the public serving agencies, the Rhode Island Folklife Project works in a consulting and coordinating capacity for other projects concerning folklife in the state. We are assisting in the preparation of a series of thirteen radio programs entitled "Working Tales." This

JOTTINGS FROM THE ROCKIES

*The Transmission of Cultural Phenomena, and
A Message in the Stairs*



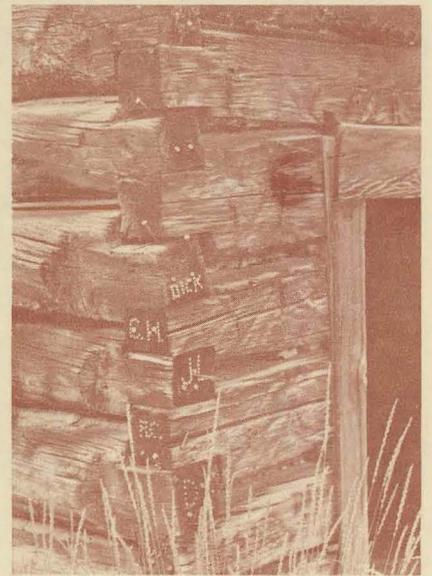
Dave Doig house, built c. 1915.

These jottings from the field concern the process of mediation that occurred in the building of traditional houses in the lower Blue River Valley of Summit County, Colorado, a high alpine landscape just west of the Continental Divide. The houses are ranch dwellings from the turn of the century, built of round, square-notched pine logs without weatherboarding. They are part of the architectural recording that was a central feature in an exploratory field trip conducted by the Folklife Center in August 1980. The visit comprised a consultancy with the Rocky Mountain Continental Divide Foundation, a new organization devoted to creating an outdoor museum of the cultural and environmental history of the southern Rocky Mountain region (*Folklife Center News*, Vol. III, No. 4). The museum plans interpretation of traditional life and work in contextual "living" presentations of ranching, hardrock mining, logging, and tourism, coupled with separate research, curatorial, and com-

munity service facilities. Elke Dettmer (University of California, Berkeley), Barbara Orbach (University of California, Los Angeles), and I studied material culture on several pioneer ranches in the 9,000-foot Blue Valley, and interviewed local residents in such areas as family history, hay meadow irrigation techniques, homemade snow skis, German cooking, and community dances. Products of the pilot study include the nucleus of a research archive in Colorado, a project report, and recommendations for further work by the Foundation.

In architecture, as in other realms of cultural expression and behavior, certain customary ways of arranging and ordering things follow the course of settlement and regional history. But it is no simple process of uprooting and repotting. In the transplantation dynamics, an old living thing often shows a complicated pattern of movement and variation as it modifies and rejuvenates itself in the ecology of a fresh land-

scape. There is simple retention, often visible in obvious traits of surface structure such as the neighborly, formal exterior of houses. But there are also alterations that develop in new environments or new ethnic configurations, often in the deeper structure, the interior and personal spaces. It is like that in the case of the traditional Anglo-American house type scholars call the "I house" when found in our fieldwork in the Rocky Mountains. The I house (an essential folk house form consisting in plan of a house one room deep, two or more rooms wide, two stories high, with the main entry in the long side aligning parallel to the ridge of the roof) is a principal house type where recorded



Detail, square-notched southwest corner, Dave Doig house.

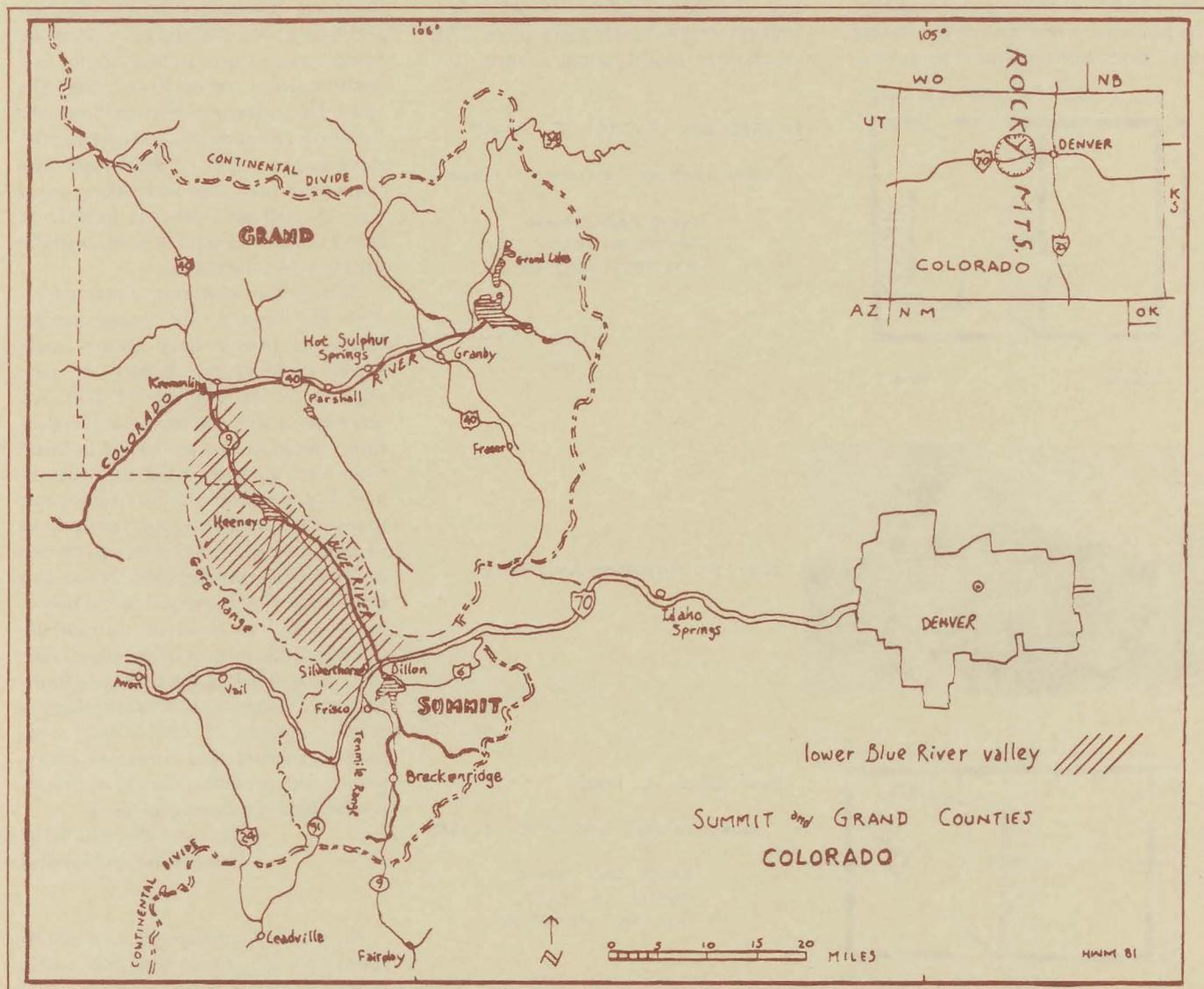
and analyzed in the east, south, and midwestern U.S. Geographer Fred Kniffen is responsible for its name, and Henry Glassie's writings made it familiar in the repertoire of American folk house types. In preparing a book on architecture in Missouri (a principal source of Colorado migration), I came to think of the grandly executed central-hall I house as the mansion of the farmer's world.

The character of the I house when carried into the high Colorado valley we visited surprised me. That is, some of the details of its personality were surprising. In houses documented in the eastern areas, there are hundreds of examples of I houses, but most have their stairs positioned near the center of the house, usually at the core in a central hallway or on a central partition wall. Based on the small sample recorded in 1980, the case seems to differ

in Colorado's Blue River valley. Here, in houses which appear from the outside to be "normal" two-room-wide I houses, the stairs are positioned not in the middle but off on the edge. Two examples out of a half dozen observed (remembering that two larks do not make a spring) were intimately recorded by Orbach, Dettmer, and me. In the Guyselman-Knorr house, the stairs are placed against the north wall. They may have been relocated (after the

house was moved from the nearby Green Mountain reservoir site in the 1940s) from the west wall. In the Dave Doig house, the stairs are against the west wall. Both stairways are enclosed "boxed-in stairs" in the larger room of the two-room I houses. Both dwellings are made of horizontal round pine logs 8-11 inches in diameter jointed by the square-notching method. The corners are locked with 6-inch spikes in dia-

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Colorado field study area.

JOTTINGS

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gonal toenailing. The log bearing walls are chinked but uncovered and unpainted on the exterior; various wall-paperings insulate, cover, and dress up the interior walls. Both houses are topped by gable roofs originally protected by rived shingles. There are no room additions, and no front porches. Side or rear doors were used in the daily round of comings and goings. The houses are now vacant but in fine shape. Both were intended as perma-

nent, substantial family dwellings on growing ranches founded by European immigrants. They are preeminent examples of Rocky Mountain folk housing.

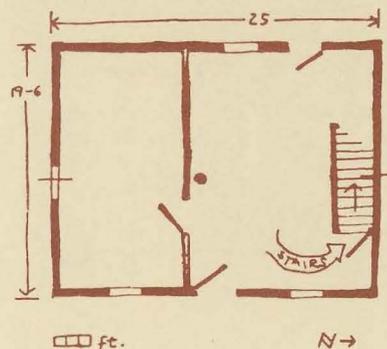
A simple thing like the placement of stairs, far from incidental or reckless, could be thought of as a result of the provocative interaction of people settling into a harsh environment. Mind you, this is not "environmental determinism," but an instance of the interaction of man and nature. An old design process was situated in a new place. The result was modification, control, at-

tempts at comfort, like changing the motifs in a tale, place names in a legend, the shape of finials on a chair. At 8,500 to 10,000 feet, in the cold, snowy vale of the Blue River where winters under the Gore Range last seven months, people tinkered with their materials, tools, and built environment in order to make a better fit with the natural one. They shoved the stairs over against the coldest outside walls. They put the brick flue on the interior common wall (between downstairs rooms—kitchen and living room) so the same chimney could service stoves in both rooms and so the stairway (an enclosed, closet-like space for passage only) would not absorb heat radiating out and up from the stove in the center of the house. The stairs were furnished with doors to seal the stairwell and prevent heat from being sucked up (and wasted) into the upstairs sleeping rooms.

This simple relocation of stairs in alpine log houses, not unlike similar variations people have always made when constructing homes in new regions, is an instance of how the machine of life, the house, undergoes fine-tuning in the course of cultural time. Such glimpses inside the ordinary world of tradition and innovation are, to my mind, important parts of the kind of field research folklorists do. Details of regional personality (like the location of stairs or the shape of types of homemade skis) draw together, forming the ethnographic picture of the place. Further, such details in the Colorado foundation's research will strengthen a worthy attempt at establishing a regional museum that conserves, interprets, and presents workaday history on the land in meaningful ways.

—Text and illustrations by
Howard Wight Marshall

Dr. Marshall, a folklife specialist with the American Folklife Center since 1977, will be leaving the staff in July to join the faculty of Kansas State University.



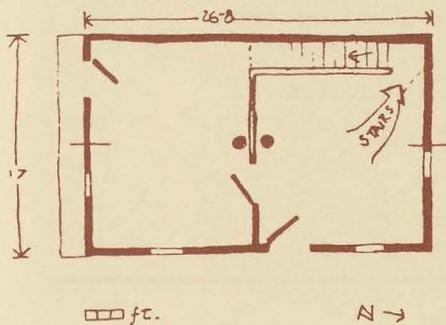
GUYSELMAN - KNORR I HOUSE

SQUARE-NOTCHED LOGS, PINE. C. 1900.

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Rear view, Guyselman-Knorr house.



DAVE DOIG I HOUSE

SQUARE-NOTCHED LOGS, PINE. C. 1915

KNORR BROS. RANCH
SUMMIT CO. COLO.
AUG 1980 / HWM, ED

YELLOW RIBBONS

Continued from page 1

pothesis, a new historical fact, or a new lead to a book reference. Very quickly a kind of collegial feeling grew up between the Archive and some of the more persistent researchers. We found ourselves functioning not so much as authorities on the subject as members of an informal team of harried investigators.

In a few frenzied days, what our journalistic colleagues called "the story" was gotten out. As it has come back to us courtesy of the Library's clipping service (informally assisted by a number of devoted friends and relatives), we see that we have been liberally quoted in it. In fact, we were quoted even on the nationally televised CBS Evening News, which had the Archive's Reference Librarian associating the color yellow with "prostitution, disease, and cowardice." Mercifully, CBS permitted him to return later in the program with a more positive comment.

How *did* the yellow ribbon symbol become associated with the hostages? On the CBS broadcast of January 28, Penelope Laingen, wife of the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires in Tehran, Bruce Laingen, was shown outside her home in Bethesda, Maryland. "It just came to me," she said, "to give people something to do, rather than throw dog food at Iranians. I said, 'Why don't they tie a yellow ribbon around an old oak tree.' That's how it started."

Mrs. Laingen's source of inspiration was a popular song by Irwin Levine and L. (Larry) Russell Brown, copyrighted in 1972 under the title "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree." Recorded by some thirty different vocalists in the late 1970s, it sold millions of copies. The hit version was recorded by the popular vocal group Dawn featuring Tony Orlando. The song sketches the story of a convict riding the bus homeward after three years in prison. He tells the bus driver that he

has written to his sweetheart asking her to tie a yellow ribbon on a roadside oak tree if she will have him back. The driver relates the story to other passengers and as the bus nears the tree everyone is on the edge of his seat. As the tree comes into view, the convict, unable to bear the sight should there be no ribbon in its branches, hides his eyes. Then a cheer goes up and he looks to see that, in fact, the tree is covered with yellow ribbons.

The authors of "Tie a Yellow Ribbon" have been asked frequently about the origin of their song. "'Larry had heard the story in the Army,'" said Levine in an interview reprinted in the *Washington Post* on January 27, 1981 (page B2). "'I liked it, so we tried it. We wrote it and put it on a cassette. But then we didn't like it—it just didn't work—so we threw it away. I wish I would have kept it so I could compare it to the other one, but I recorded over it.' But three weeks later, Levine said their song idea font had run dry, so they decided to take a second stab at 'Yellow Ribbon.' They rewrote it, rewrote the music, and were pleased."

In the Army story, according to Brown, the symbol was a "white kerchief," but "white" will not scan in the melody to which Levine and Brown set their lyric. *Post* staff writer Sandra Saperstein also talked with Levine, and her story on the front page of the January 27th issue quotes him as saying that they made the ribbons yellow because the color seemed "musical and romantic."

At least one person has come forward to challenge the origins that Levine and Brown claim for their song. On October 14, 1971, *New York Post* writer Pete Hamill published in a syndicated column a story based on the returning prisoner theme. The convict had been away for four years rather than three, and he tells his story not to the bus driver, but to friendly college students on their annual migration to the Fort Lauderdale beaches. Otherwise, the story is much like that given in the pop-

ular song. Hamill sued Levine and Brown whose attorneys turned to University of Pennsylvania folklorist Kenneth S. Goldstein for assistance. Goldstein, together with his student Steven Czick, looked for prior versions of the story which would invalidate Hamill's claim to authorship. They found several such examples, and the suit was dropped. When *Reader's Digest* printed a condensed version of the Hamill column, "Going Home," which appeared on pages 64 and 65 of the January 1972 issue, he introduced it with the following headnote:

I first heard this story a few years ago from a girl I had met in New York's Greenwich Village. The girl told me that she had been one of the participants. Since then, others to whom I have related the tale have said that they had read a version of it in some forgotten book, or had been told it by an acquaintance who said that it actually happened to a friend. Probably the story is one of these mysterious bits of folklore that emerge from the national subconscious to be told anew in one form or another. The cast of characters shifts, the message endures. I like to think that it *did* happen, somewhere, sometime.

Hamill's story became the basis of a segment of the "Perpetual People Machine," an ABC-TV magazine-format program produced by Alvin H. Perlmutter and aired in 1972. James Earl Jones played the part of the returning prisoner.

To summarize the ground covered thus far: it appears that the *plot* of the song that inspired Penny Laingen is drawn from modern urban oral tradition, while the choice of the yellow ribbon as *symbol* is conditioned by requirements of versification. But be-

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YELLOW RIBBONS

Continued from previous page

yond these requirements, there remains another possible source for Levine and Brown's adoption of the yellow ribbon. In 1949 Argosy Pictures released a motion picture starring John Wayne and Joanne Dru which was called *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. The picture was popular and the theme song, "(Round Her Neck) She Wore a Yellow Ribbon," became a song hit. The composers for the movie were M. Ottner and Leroy Parker. Not surprisingly, their lyrics make reference to the characters and events in the film. But, in one form or another, this song long predates the movie. It has been registered for copyright a number of times, the earliest claim for it being the composition of George A. Norton in 1917. Norton gave as his title "Round Her Neck She Wears a Yeller Ribbon (For Her Lover Who Is Fur, Fur Away)." It has been reported as a college song in the 1920s and 1930s, in which environment it displayed much variation, both in its symbology and in its suitability for public expression. Frank Lynn's *Songs for Swingin' Housemothers* (San Francisco: Fearon Publishers, 1963, p. 42) provides a verse typical of the college type:

*Around her knee, she wore a purple
garter;
She wore it in the Springtime, and
in the month of May,
And if you asked her why the Hell
she wore it,
She wore it for her Williams man
who's far, far away.*

Other emblematic appurtenances of the young lady include a baby carriage and a shotgun wielding father. The color of her ribbon or garter could be varied in order to implicate a student of an appropriate college: crimson for Harvard, orange for Princeton, and so on. It was a slightly refined version from this college tradition, rather than

the movie theme song, that became a great favorite on the early 1960s television show "Sing Along with Mitch." It appears on pages 22 and 24 of the *Sing Along with Mitch Songbook* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1961), where an accompanying headnote describes it as an "old army marching song (based on a traditional theme)." Although the second verse is essentially the "purple garter" type, the first verse begins "Around her neck, she wore a yellow ribbon."

It seems likely that Mitch Miller's popular printing a decade after the motion picture helped to foster the perhaps mistaken idea that wearing a yellow ribbon as a token of remembrance was a custom of the Civil War era. Letters expressing personal recollections and family stories of ribbons being displayed by wives and sweethearts of men in the U.S. Cavalry have reached the Archive of Folk Song. It is curious, however, that the half dozen anthologies of Civil War songs in our reading room do not offer "Round Her Neck" as a popular song. Furthermore, Civil War historian Shelby Foote was quizzed on the subject, but could not recall any reference to the practice of wearing yellow ribbons (*Washington Post*, January 27, 1981). Although it is perfectly plausible that the families of Union army troops did adopt such a token, prudent historiography would demand evidence from a diary, photograph, or source contemporary to the war. So far, no such evidence has come to our attention, and we must keep open to the possibility that the distant recollections of the Civil War have been grafted onto the symbolism of a much later popular motion picture. Occurrences of this sort are often noticed in the study of folk balladry in which the anachronistic combinations are among the more interesting features of the genre.

Whether Levine and Brown were consciously or unconsciously influenced by "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon" is not known. But if they were, it would be

worth noting that the song that influenced them has a pedigree in tradition that stretches far beyond the college environment of the 1920s. In *A History of Music in America* (New York: Random House, 1948, p. 83-84), Sigmund Spaeth writes that a similar song was heard in minstrel shows in this country around 1838:

About this time there appeared from the press of George Endicott ("Lithographer, Pianofortes, Music") a strange dialect song called *All Round My Hat*, which is unquestionably the ancestor of the later Round Her Neck She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, with all its variants and imitations. The original, "written by J. Ansell, Esq." (John Hansell) and "composed and arranged by John Valentine," "as sung by Jack Reeve, with the most Unbounded Applause," pictures an English vegetable-peddler, with an overloaded little donkey, pictorially on the cover and almost as vividly in the text. The chorus, with its familiar close, runs as follows:

*All round my hat, I vears a green
willow,
All round my hat, for twelve month
and a day;
If hanyone should hax, the reason yv
I vears it,
Tell them that my true love is far, far
away.*

(The temptation to repeat "far away" in the modern style is almost irresistible.)

The Philadelphia printing is evidently copied from a British source. In his annotation of "All Round My Cap" in the *English Journal of the Folk-Song Society* (vol. 8, no. 34, 1930, pp. 202-204), A. Martin Freeman describes the above chorus as "the sole relic of an earlier song, seized up, together with its engaging tune, to provide sport in the music-halls and be whistled by every

errand-boy, for it became one of the most popular street songs of a hundred years ago" (the 1830s). That "earlier song" to which Freeman alludes can be traced almost three centuries further back into English tradition. It was printed in Thomas Proctor's *Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions*, published in 1578 (pages 83 to 86 in the 1926 Harvard University Press printing

edited by Hyden E. Rollins), and Shakespeare has Desdemona refer to it as an old song (*Othello*, Act IV, Scene 3).

In its long descent from Tudor lyric to Cockney ballad to American minstrel ditty to ribald college song to motion picture theme to popular recording, it may be seen that green willows have faded into garters and ribbons of every hue and that the symbol of constancy in

love has been anything but constant itself. Peter Kennedy remarks in his *Folk-songs of Britain and Ireland* (London: Cassell, 1975, p. 343):

Wearing a flower or, as in *All Round My Hat*, a green willow, were demonstrative symbols of faithfulness and chastity, and many of our love songs make use of the symbols of flowers and trees. Over the years the early significances have been forgotten and the symbols have sometimes changed their meanings. Green laurel has stood for young love, or fickleness, but **also** faithfulness, and has even been associated with Irish political loyalty.

In that flickering light, the transformation of a willow garland into a yellow ribbon seems natural enough. At the same time, it would be difficult to argue on the basis of evidence in the history of the song that the yellow ribbon has any claim to being a traditional symbol.

Folklorists who have had occasion to discuss the matter with the Archive staff have been bothered by two decidedly *untraditional* aspects of the yellow ribbon. First, the color seems expressly contrary to tradition. We have already noted that yellow seems to have appeared in the two popular songs that bear on this for reasons of scansion rather than to evoke ancient associations. The discussion of color symbolism in Charles Platt's *Popular Superstitions* (London: H. Jenkins, 1925) suggests that white might have been a more appropriate choice, and indeed, in at least two versions of the returning prisoner story taken from oral tradition the symbol is a white ribbon or kerchief.

The second aspect that makes folklorists reluctant to view this as a traditional expression is the matter of structural inversion. In the song "Tie a Yellow Ribbon. . .," the theme is that of a returning prodigal begging forgive-

SEP 16 1943

(ROUND HER NECK)

SHE WORE A YELLOW RIBBON

Pub 40055

(ROUND HER NECK)

M1508

Theme Song From
The Argosy Picture

"SHE WORE A YELLOW RIBBON"
Presented by JOHN FORD and MERIAN C. COOPER
and starring
JOHN WAYNE • JOANNE DRU • JOHN AGAR
BEN JOHNSON • HARRY CAREY, JR.
with
VICTOR McLAGLEN • MILDRED HATWICK
GEORGE O'BRIEN • ARTHUR SHIELDS
COLOR BY TECHNICOLOR
DIRECTED BY JOHN FORD

Story by James Warner Bellah. Screen Play by Frank Nugent
and Laurence Stallings. Distributed by RKO Radio Pictures, Inc.

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1619 BROADWAY NEW YORK, N. Y.

Sheet music cover.

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RIBBONS

Continued from previous page

ness—and receiving it. The former hostages, however, returned home as heroes.

For all the journalistic interest in it, the yellow ribbon story yields few facts of the sort we would like to find on page one of the morning edition. To be sure, the dates and title of the various printings can be reported with confidence, but the relevance of these publications to the spectacular expression of welcome that occurred this past January remains unclear. The account given above cannot be regarded as more than a preliminary statement focused on the genetic relationship between the ribbon symbol and two songs that moved back and forth, as we have seen, between folk and popular culture. It omits many suggestions and references to other, and perhaps even more interesting, lines of inquiry that have come to us from far

and wide. For all of the effort of the dozens of people who have furthered the research on the subject, the viability of the yellow ribbon as a traditional symbol is still an open question. The Archive of Folk Song eagerly solicits further comments and will be most happy to share our files with anyone who wishes to study the matter in depth.

—Gerald E. Parsons

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John Cephas (R) and Phil Wiggins (L), a Washington-area blues duo, scheduled to perform at the Library on June 4 for the second concert of the Center's 1981 Outdoor Concert Series. (Photo by Axel Küstner)

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