

Review

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## Oral History

*Don't Go Up Kettle Creek: Verbal Legacy of the Upper Cumberland.* By William Lynwood Montell. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983. Pp. ix + 247, preface, introduction, appendices, biographies of narrators, bibliography, notes, index, photographs, map. \$16.50)

Lynwood Montell has produced a body of scholarly work demonstrating the value of oral traditions in the reconstruction of local history. His work now spans more than a decade and includes *The Saga of Coe Ridge* (1970), *Ghosts Along the Cumberland* (1975), *From Memory to History* (1981; with Barbara Allen), and now *Don't Go Up Kettle Creek* (1983). For each book Montell draws upon his years of fieldwork in the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains in Kentucky and Tennessee.

In *Don't Go Up Kettle Creek*, Montell reconstructs the history of the Upper Cumberland River region "as it is perceived from the vernacular point of view, relying on personal reminiscences, oral traditions, balladry and song, and printed materials (which were themselves derived from oral history data) as primary sources of information" (p. 1). Although these oral sources provide the substance of the book, Montell corroborates the oral information wherever possible using more standard historical and folkloristic printed resources. Continuing a tradition he has established in his own work, Montell early on sets forth his sources of information, his methodology, his motives, and his philosophy for this study. On all these points, he appears careful in his approach to oral history research and is unusually clear in making his approach known to the reader.

A problem for any oral history researcher is how to organize the vast and varied array of oral information gleaned from even a small local area into a coherent picture of a region and its inhabitants. Montell, committed to the esoteric principle, rejects standard historical topics such as education, religion, and politics in favor of topics "which had the most impact on the daily lives of the people, topics they still discuss among themselves with fervor" (p. 9). Montell uses the topics most salient for his narrators as his chapter divisions; arranged in a loose chronological frame, these topics include the evolution from frontier life to farming; the Civil War era; the logging, rafting, and sawmilling activities of the post-Civil War economy; the steamboat empire on the river from 1830 to 1930; and, finally, changes in lifestyles brought on by modernity. Interesting photographs illustrate each topic discussed.

In each chapter Montell weaves together a variety of materials related to the topic at hand, following the tenets he and Allen advocate in *From Memory to History*. Sometimes he provides summaries of oral information from several narrators at once; at times, he includes full verbatim texts. He offers conflicting points of view in oral testimonies, indicates corroborative information either in the main body of the text or in explanatory notes, and puts editorial comment in the notes rather than bias the historical account. Some chapters include texts of local folksongs or folk poetry. Montell's chapter on the Civil War makes particularly good use of diverse oral materials, and his chapter on the little-documented lore of river rafting makes a distinctive contribution.

As with all oral history, much is lost between performance and print. What is lively and vivid in the face-to-face interview, and to some extent on tape, becomes less compelling on the page. Personal and place names have little meaning for the nonlocal reader (Montell's map is indispensable), and much that would be clarified through paralinguistic and descriptive gesture remains ambiguous. In spite of these difficulties, many of the narratives spring off the page and provide delightful or poignant moments of shared humanity, as in the following example. A narrator discussing the lack of indoor plumbing in his Depression childhood recalls:

And you got up of a night and it was too cold to go outside; so most of the time when the kids slept upstairs, they'd use a window. And when they would pee out of the window (most of the time the house was weatherboarded and painted), you could go by the house and all the paint would be off below the window in these two-story houses, or it had turned yellow, if they had children (p. 178).

Although Montell's specific purpose in this book is to reconstruct the region's history through oral sources, his more general intention is to illustrate that folklorists, because of their sensitivity to the oral tradition process, are especially well equipped to deal with oral history (p. 1). Indeed, by virtue of his training as a folklorist, Montell makes of "stories" and other artistic verbal materials, which might be discounted by nonfolklorists, important pieces in history's puzzle. He selects the materials for his book with skill, and he recognizes and identifies migratory legends, folklore motifs, traditional beliefs, and vital bits of folk speech in the oral information he receives. In short, he has worked out a system for testing the validity of oral sources.

Still, I finished the book feeling my expectations had not been wholly fulfilled. I support Montell's claim for the special sensitivity of folklorists in oral history research, having recently completed three years myself as folklorist for a large oral history project in rural Virginia. But his claim led me to expect, perhaps erroneously, something beyond historical reconstruction and identification of folkloric elements in the oral testimony. I wanted to know even more about why certain stories persist in the region, how these stories embody current values and present concerns of the narrators, and whether there are structural and symbolic relationships among the narratives.

In the final chapter, for example, on the coming of modernity to the region (the chapter I found most interesting though least developed), Montell remarks: "By understanding the causes and effects of change, one can better understand the changing nature of folk traditions" (p. 162). In my own oral history work, I found it equally profitable to examine changing and unchanging folk traditions for what they reveal about the tradition user's attempts to cope with or resist social and economic change. I suppose what I'm asking for is a keener understanding of how the oral traditions of the Upper Cumberland function for their narrators in the here-and-now as well as how much information they provide about the there-and-then. Montell may want us to draw our own conclusions about these matters as we read the narrator's words, but it seems to me that providing such insights about traditional oral materials is precisely the special talent of the folklorist.

Another of my doubts would be eased by inclusion of a sample set of questions Montell used in the interviews. I wondered as I read the book whether the types of questions asked evoked particular topics more than others from the narrators, especially since the narrators make up a largely homogeneous age group according to Montell's biographical sketches. What is the "history" of the region in the oral narratives of the region's young people? Are the region's young claiming their inheritance of the verbal legacy of the Upper Cumberland?

My longing for this kind of analysis reflects my personal biases and should in no way diminish others' interest in this good folk history. For those like myself who work in Appalachian Studies, Montell's book is a satisfying complement to Ron Eller's fine new *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (1982). In his more traditional history, Eller bemoans the lack of good oral history work that reflects the attitudes and experiences of mountain people to social and economic change. Montell's book, about an Appalachian border region undergoing industrialization, takes a solid step toward filling that gap in historical research.

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