

FILLING IN THE



BY MAGGIE HILLIARD

NANCY DISHER BAIRD IS NOT YOUR CONVENTIONAL LIBRARIAN.

Since 1975, Baird has been the Special Collections Librarian and Kentucky History Specialist for Western Kentucky University. However, her years at Western have not been spent only inside the Kentucky Building. Her knowledge and experiences stretch throughout Kentucky, the United States, and the rest of the world. "It's wonderful to see the places you've studied and to walk in the footsteps of people from the past," she said. "I'm nosy and curious. I love it!"

Baird's curiosity led her to find gaps in history. Where there was little information about a subject, Baird picked up where other historians had left off. Her first two publications were *David Wendel Yandell: Physician of Old Louisville* (1978) and *Luke Pryor Blackburn: Physician, Governor, Reformer* (1979). She felt that there wasn't enough history written on 19th century Kentucky physicians, so she researched and filled in the cracks. "Historians tend to write about the same old thing," she said.

Baird feels that when a researcher concentrates on a single research topic for great periods of time, information

begins to narrow. She says that is why one topic leads her to another. Her curiosity on a subject grows and she becomes attached to the topic until she finds what she is looking for.

A journey to Washington, D.C. to visit one of her two daughters led Baird to another topic of interest. The United Service Organization caught her attention and took her all over the country and then to Europe. Civilian volunteers and celebrities joined together in the USO to benefit members of the United States Armed Forces prior to U.S. involvement in WWII.

Baird was originally interested in why there was little information regarding scandal in the USO records. She said that all she read was "the USO is great." What began as a search for scandal, turned into a curiosity about the USO in general.

Nancy went to 16 American states and visited three other countries while researching the USO. Her writings regarding the USO can be found in the *World War II Times* 1992 August - September edition. Baird presented her USO research papers at professional conferences. Those research papers included Baird's "From the Heart of

America: The USO" (1985), "Soldiers in Greasepaint: Camp Shows in the Foxhole Circuit" (1988), "The USO: A Cultural Bridge" (1986), and other research documents.

Baird did not stop there. She found another interesting research subject while on a safari with her husband, a hunter, in South Africa. "I wasn't going to spend all my time chasing animals. I wanted to see parts of the countryside," she said.

On their second trip to South Africa, Baird decided to dig in the South African archives in Cape Town. She found that Great Britain acquired the land at the southern tip of Africa following the Napoleonic period and sent 4,000 English men, women, and children to settle there in 1820. After talking with the head of archives, she found a gap in history. Women during the English Colonial movement were inadvertently left out of previous research on the settling of South Africa.



PHOTO BY MAGGIE HILLIARD

The couple slept in a grass hut in Mozambique with natives for two weeks, and even ate crocodile. There was no electricity or running water in the hut and she admits she is not an outdoor enthusiast.



Baird was eligible for sabbatical and decided this would be her project. Upon returning to America, she began to gather information on the English colonial movement in South Africa and to plan her return to the beautiful country.

Baird received a Library grant from the Faculty Research Grants fund with specifications to study the diaries and private papers of British women and colonists on the South African frontier. The grant was for \$1,000, which would not cover the trip in its entirety. Baird said jokingly, "I'm spending my children's inheritance."

After researching as much as she could in America, Baird and her husband flew to South Africa for the third time for a four-month adventure. The couple slept in a grass hut in Mozambique with natives for two weeks, and even ate crocodile. "It tastes fishy," she said. There was no electricity or running water in the hut and she admits she is not an outdoor enthusiast. She said the experience was

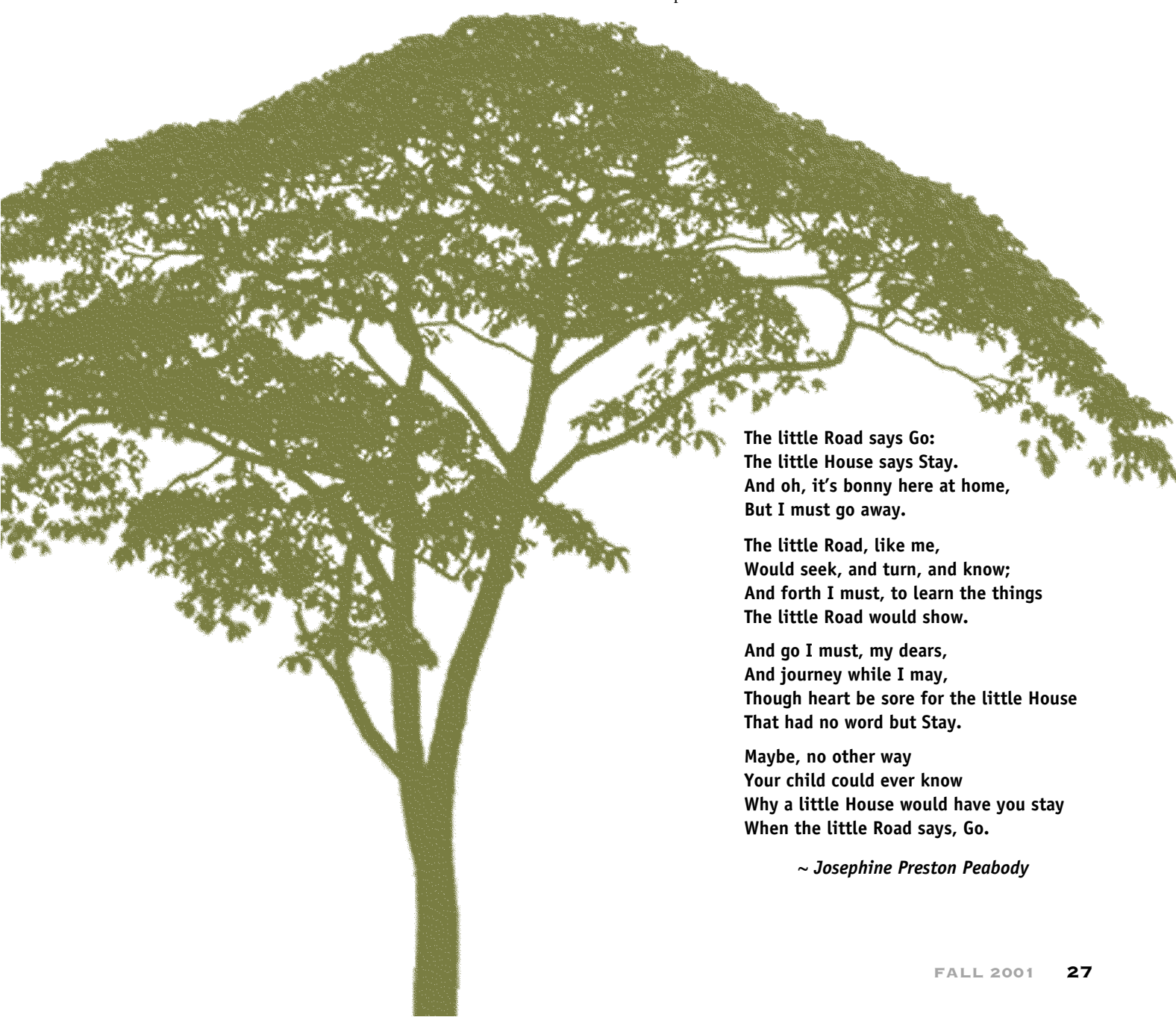
quite interesting and that she would never take a shower or stove for granted again.

Their next five days were spent watching animals and exploring along the Zambezi River before her husband returned to the United States. After her husband left, Baird spent the next three months as a historian and librarian. "The absolute best thing in the world to me is to sit and read the letters and diaries of people of long ago," she said.

That is what she did in Grahamstown for one month. She said it was like being a kid in a candy shop. She read the personal journals and letters of the first English settlers in South Africa and found many parallels with the settlement of the American West.

After visiting Grahamstown, Baird flew north to Johannesburg for two weeks and spent a few days in the nearby city of Pretoria. On her journey, she stayed in guesthouses and bed and breakfasts, which were still different from American homes. She did research at the Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg and the University of South Africa in Pretoria.

She describes Johannesburg as a city which experiences violence and crime. Baird said the home where she stayed was surrounded by a tall barrier wall to prevent break-ins and to protect it from the violence that was so prevalent in the city. She was fortunate enough to find a friend of a friend to live with who drove her to the library for her protection.



**The little Road says Go:
The little House says Stay.
And oh, it's bonny here at home,
But I must go away.**

**The little Road, like me,
Would seek, and turn, and know;
And forth I must, to learn the things
The little Road would show.**

**And go I must, my dears,
And journey while I may,
Though heart be sore for the little House
That had no word but Stay.**

**Maybe, no other way
Your child could ever know
Why a little House would have you stay
When the little Road says, Go.**

~ Josephine Preston Peabody



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For the next month, Baird did further research at the National Library and archives and the University of Cape Town. “The University of Cape Town sits on a hill right at the base of a mountain. It makes Western’s hill look like flat land,” she said. “By the time I walked to the top, I truly thought I was going to die.”

Before leaving South Africa, Baird’s daughter came to visit and they went on a tour of the Northern Transvaal, Swaziland, Kruger Park, and spent three nights in a Zulu village. “I learned the Zulu dances and tried Zulu beer,” she said.

The two also toured Zimbabwe and Victoria Falls before coming back to the United States. “Victoria Falls makes Niagara Falls look like a drippy faucet,” she said.

Baird claims that some research projects never get finished. And, that is why she is going back at the end of May this year.

Baird has also visited many other countries throughout the world. Her journeys have led her far away from Western. She has been to all of the European nations except Spain, as well as to Greece, Turkey, Russia, China, Japan, Brazil, and Argentina. She has even been to the Arctic Circle three times.

Baird’s accomplishments are never-ending, and her research is not complete. She presently has five books, 15

refereed journal articles, and 14 other publications. She has written 83 entries for encyclopedias and collected works and has authored seven booklets and teachers’ guides. She has two writings that have been accepted for publication and the number of research papers that she has presented at professional conferences keeps growing. Baird also participates in teaching activities, workshops, and seminars. She is a member of seven professional organizations and has even found time to join 17 WKU activities groups.

In 1988 Baird received the Rothert Award for the best article in the *Filson Club History Quarterly*. In 1994, she took home the University Libraries Research & Creativity Award. In 1998, she won three awards: the University Libraries Public Service Award (which she also won in 1992), the University Libraries “Librarian of the Year” Award, and the WKU Public Service Award.

Despite these many achievements, Baird doesn’t feel as though she has served as a national role model or helped a great deal in the scheme of the entire world. Her accomplishments lie closer to her heart. She always wanted to let her daughters know that just because they are women, it doesn’t mean there are things they cannot do. She feels that she has been a role model for her children.