

IN THE VERNACULAR

BY TOMMY NEWTON

FOLKLORISTS MIGHT BE ACCUSED OF LIVING IN THE PAST, BUT THEY'RE ALSO LIVING IN THE PRESENT AND FUTURE, DR. MICHAEL ANN WILLIAMS COMMENTS. "I THINK FOLKLORE IS A WAY OF MAKING THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES MORE ACCESSIBLE TO MORE PEOPLE, NOT JUST A NARROW RANGE OF PEOPLE," SAID DR. WILLIAMS, PROFESSOR OF FOLK STUDIES AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY. "WE'VE BEEN ABLE TO REACH OUT TO UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES BY SAYING THERE IS AN ARTISTIC LIFE THERE THAT'S NOT JUST OPERA OR BALLET."

One of Dr. Williams' main folklore pursuits is "vernacular architecture," a term applied to traditional domestic and agricultural buildings, industrial and commercial structures, 20th century suburban houses, settlement patterns and cultural landscapes. She is vice president of the Vernacular Architecture Forum, the major North American group that studies traditional architecture. "I have a continuing interest in folk architecture which is centered on how buildings were used instead of how they were built," said Dr. Williams, who has been at Western since 1986.

But she remains interested in folklife and its connections with the past and the future. She's currently completing a book on Sarah Gertrude Knott, founder of the National Folk Festival, and John Lair, creator of the Renfro Valley Barn Dance. Knott, a native of Kevil in western Kentucky, knew folklife wasn't limited to the mountains of eastern Kentucky, Dr. Williams said. In the 1930s, Knott created the first multicultural folk festival and in later years helped include the folk arts in funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. "She was somebody who was influential but hasn't received her due," Dr. Williams said. At Renfro Valley, Lair's radio barn dance also showed that arts and music weren't limited to the urban regions. "One of the themes in folk studies is the creation



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of nostalgia for the past," Dr. Williams said. "John Lair's Renfro Valley Barn Dance sold a nostalgia for the past. What he really tapped into was the longing of listeners for a mythical past."

Even today in the age of electronic mail and the Internet, that longing for the community is keeping folk studies alive and well. "Folklorists are interested in how people made these personal connections," she said. "I think it is about creating a feeling of community. Sometimes it is the new technology that does it." A half-century ago that new technology was the radio. Today it is the personal computer. But, as Dr. Williams cautions her folk studies students, the personal computer is simply one tool folklorists can use. The best way to gather information and historical data remains the personal touch.

When she was gathering information for her publication, *Homeplace: The Social Use and Meaning of the Folk Dwelling in Southwestern North Carolina*. Dr. Williams interviewed people who'd grown up in North Carolina around the turn of the century. "I think I've been really lucky. Southern Appalachia is the easiest place to do field work," said Dr. Williams, who received her master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. In most cases, she's found rural people eager to tell their stories and willing to invite a stranger into their homes. A folklorist must have lots of patience and be willing to listen when they collect someone's life story. "The wonderful pieces of information are those things you didn't know to ask for and someone tells you," she observed.

In the folk studies courses she teaches — which include Vernacular Architecture, Folk Art and Technology, Cultural Conservation, Folklore Theory, Museum Procedures and Techniques, and Foodways — Dr. Williams often learns more than she expected from her students. Students in the folk art class are required to present a report on a single object that they can justify as folk art. In the fall 2000 semester, those works ranged from African American quilts to a jar of green beans. "That's a good lesson in thinking about art in everyday life," Dr. Williams said.



Not all log homes in Kentucky were "cabins." The Felts House, an enclosed dogtrot plan, represents relative prosperity, for the time in which it was built.

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Dr. Williams encourages her students to conduct hands-on projects that have real world applications. In September 2000, the Shakerag Historic District on State Street was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The area is Bowling Green's first National Register district recognized for its significance to African American heritage. The idea came from one of Dr. Williams' folk studies classes. The project was funded in part by a grant from the Kentucky Heritage Council. Dr. Williams also recently completed a multi-year Cemetery Management Study funded by Mammoth Cave National Park which also included the involvement of Western Kentucky graduate students in folk studies. Other class and research projects

have been funded by the Kentucky Oral History Program, the Kentucky Folklife Program, and the Kentucky African American Heritage Commission. The Shakerag District now has a walking tour of historic sites and homes. A traveling exhibit called "Like a Family: Life on North State Street" also is available and will be on display at the Kentucky Building during Black History Month.

Dr. Williams is proud of Western's folk studies program and its emphasis on preservation of both heritage and structures. "The folklore field is a strong one," she said. "Western has the best master's program in the country." The program also is concerned about Kentucky's future, she said. "One thing people don't connect with folklore is economic development," Dr. Williams said.

In the next year, she hopes Western students can launch a project about the musical heritage of western Kentucky, which includes the development of bluegrass and the thumbpicking style of guitar playing. "A lot of great traditional musicians came out of this part of Kentucky," she said, adding that this region should be able to market its musical culture and heritage. "One of the things that we try to get out of the Folk Studies program is not just about nostalgia and preservation but about economic development and communicating cross-culturally," Dr. Williams said.