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Toward An Ecology of Folk Housing in
the East-Central Blue Ridge

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the East-Central Blue Ridge

Along the East-Central Blue Ridge in Virginia and North Carolina,¹ old folk houses are lived in and new ones are built and modified by men and women whose deepest understandings about appropriate lives lived in appropriate dwellings are constantly evolving. If we attempt to describe the folk housing of the Blue Ridge as a whole pattern that would make sense to both those residents and ourselves, we will be forced into some sort of holistic, perhaps ecological, approach to the subject. A cultural region like the Blue Ridge is naturally not governed by the same sorts of rules as a biological ecosystem. In fact, it might be argued that the arbitrary study area of the Blue Ridge Parkway Folklife Project is not at all an enclaved or isolated architectural ecosystem, but it nonetheless is a useful data domain from which to approach the problem of constructing a cultural ecology of traditional housing.

Students of tradition usually begin by assessing the pattern of architectural forms on the land. In the Blue Ridge, the morphotypology of houses has been better documented than in most other regions. Accordingly, I shall begin by presenting a brief summary of the principal traditional house-types found in our study area, and will introduce some individual examples which will be discussed later in this essay in less formal and (hopefully)

more human terms (see Fig. 1).

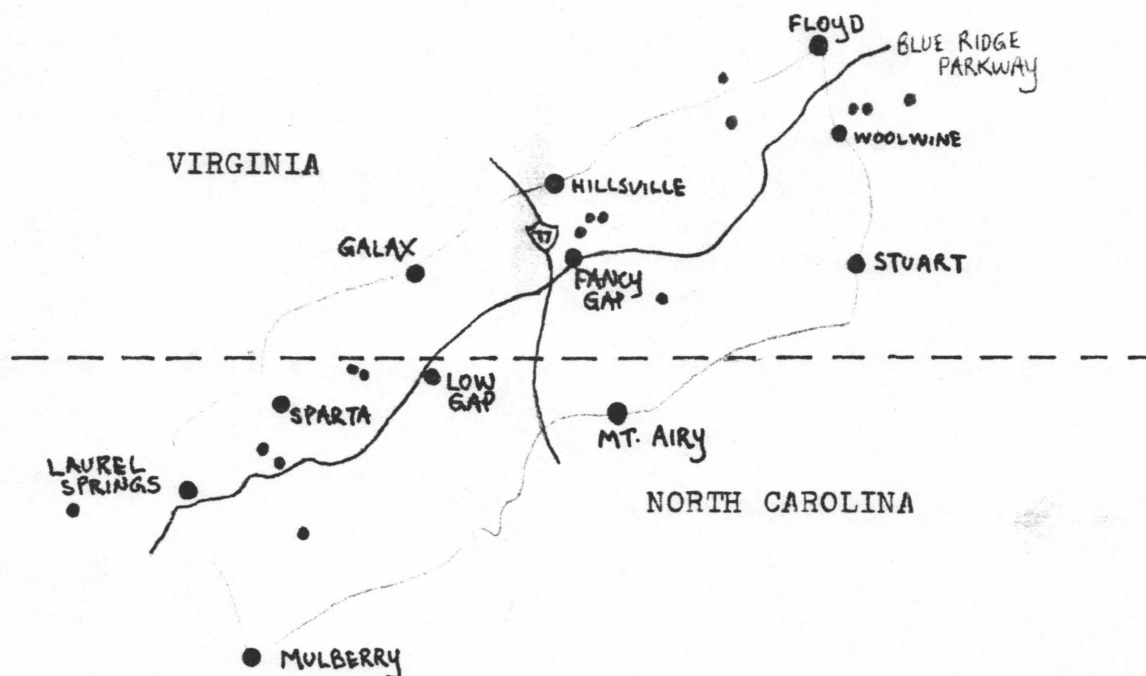


Fig 1. The Study Area and the Houses

Square cabins and rectangular cabins constitute the simplest units of traditional housing in the local inventory. In our area, square cabins are significantly outnumbered by rectangular ones, although most small sheds and "can-houses" are square, and the square also appears commonly as a room module within larger houses. The most visible example of a square cabin near the Parkway is an anomalous or at least an unusual one; the Puckett Cabin,² which is maintained as a National Park Service exhibit, illustrates the rare appearance of a gable-end entrance.³ A more typical cabin that at least approximates a square shape is the tiny full-dovetailed

log house once lived in by Miss Minnie Thompson,⁴ now standing vacant and overgrown with its 10'x11' interior a decaying stew of cobbler's tools, old magazines, and the detritus left by curious hikers and other wanderers.

Rectangular cabins exist in a number of variant forms noted or recorded by American Folklife Center fieldworkers. The smallest and oldest of these might have been "the old Andy Long house," named for a long-time owner who died about 1962.⁵ Roy Woody and his daughter Linda Woody Overwater of Laurel Springs, N.C., diagrammed and described to me the oldest house they knew of; this much-vandalized cabin was apparently a story-and-a-half or two-story log house built in "seventeen hundred and something," and it was:

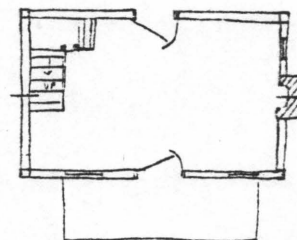
...real small, very small, with a low ceiling. There was three rooms downstairs. It was a teeny little house. If you were bigger than me, you'd have a hard time gettin' up that teeny little stairway. It could be fixed up, but it's just so far back off Peak Creek Road that nobody'd want to live up there in the winter. But you talk about a beautiful setting-- There's mountains on three sides, you know, and it's right down in the valley, just like a bowl. Protected from the weather real good. It didn't get the wind like we got here, for instance, and it was a real warm place.⁶

A slightly larger rectangular cabin variation is the

two-story subtype which Howard W. Marshall has designated the Stack House (Fig. 2). Built about 1870, the Payton Akers house⁷ is a 16'x18' half-dovetailed log stack house



Fig. 2A



4 FT.

Fig. 2B

with elaborate Gothic trim belying its pole rafters, unusual round log plates, and lack of any wall-covering in the upper room.

Several more rectangular single-pen houses were documented in our study area; examples range from the two-and-a-half story $18\frac{1}{2}' \times 22\frac{1}{2}'$ house built by Henderson Crouse⁸ to the old Slusher house, the first log house in the Floyd area to be built with nails,⁹ and ultimately (on a scale of increasing size) to the original $20' \times 26'$ log house (Fig. 3)

now used for hay storage on Ernest Jarvis's farm near Ennice, N.C.¹⁰

Other double-pen or larger Southern Mountain house types showed up in our study area in many materials other than log,

and seemed also to exhibit complex and confusing formal variations.

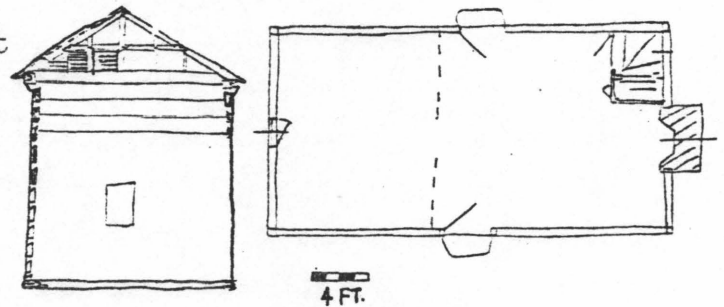


Fig. 3

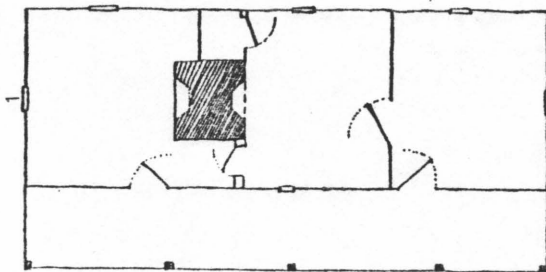


Fig. 4

Sitting behind a curiously Georgian-modified I-house¹¹ built in 1895 was an older and smaller saddlebag house (Fig. 4) with a gable-end addition, called the "little house" by Bridgette Smith, granddaughter of the I-house builder. Two more frame saddlebag

houses were documented by Howard Marshall at the Adam Clement farm in Patrick County.¹² While one of these was a relatively new house, the other was old enough to have been transformed into

a rear ell when an I-house "addition" was made in 1901 (Fig. 5).

A very small and simple frame board-and-batten double-pen house (Fig. 6) near Floyd, Virginia was built in 1931 by its present occupant, Roy Weddle.¹³ A much grander two-story double-pen house, the Hall house (Fig. 7), seemed almost as recent to Blanton Owen and myself, even though it was of half-dovetailed hewn log construction.¹⁴

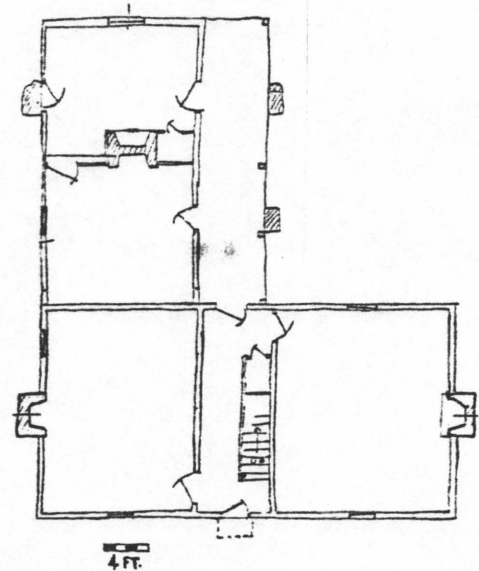


Fig. 5

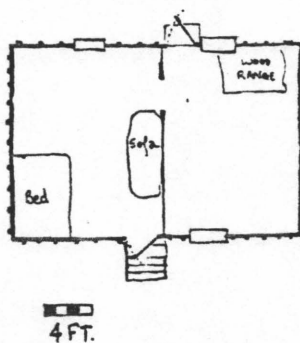


Fig. 6

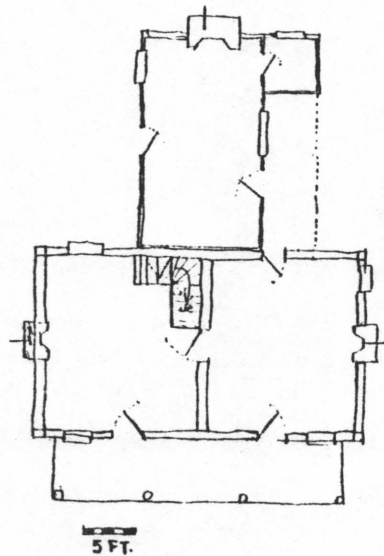


Fig. 7

No dog-trot houses, to my knowledge, turned up in our area; since I did not really expect to see any example of this predominantly Deep South type,¹⁵ I was quite surprised to hear it functionally described as having been part of the repertoire of a

former log-house builder:

(How big did you build /log houses/? Well, they's different sized. Some wants all the way from twelve by sixteen /to/ sixteen by twenty-four. And sometimes you'd build two and leave a space in the middle here, and it'd be open at each end, and'd be floored in there, used as a floor. And the kitchen in one end, the sleeping quarters in the other end. And sometimes we'd box it up at each end and make a room in the middle. The house standin' now at the meadow place, the Joe Caudill place, now, is done the same way.¹⁶

Built in 1876, the B.D. Akers farmhouse¹⁷ is a heavy-timber framed house of the "Tidewater" or hall and parlor type (Fig. 8); it has an original kitchen ell with painted walls and ceiling, yet lacks interior paint in the main rooms.

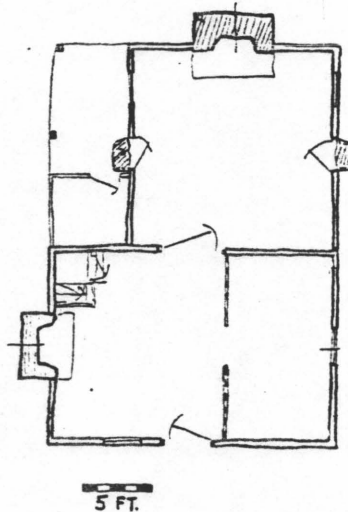


Fig. 8

By far the most common folk house type of the Blue Ridge (as in the rest of the Southern Mountains) is the I-house. Numerous I-houses were noted on the landscape in our area, and the particular

examples we documented in some detail revealed both predictable and unusual features. Especially noteworthy are the Bunyan McAlexander house (Fig. 9), near Woolwine, and the Tom Pruitt

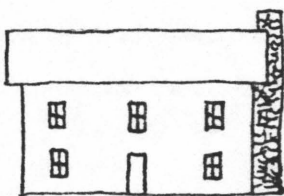


Fig. 9

house south of Sparta; in both of these instances, the dwellings themselves are straightforward and relatively unencumbered central-hall I-houses built by men who are still living in the area, and who could

therefore amplify our understanding of the building process itself. Ninety-two-year-old Ward Compton, who runs a store at Tuggles Gap, near Floyd, built the Bunyan McAlexander place in 1923 with Mr. McAlexander, and described it as "the first type of house they built after they quit making log ones." Tom Pruitt, who had built many houses for neighbors in the Doughton Park vicinity, explained to me that such houses as his own balloon-framed I-house were built only to very general specifications; the builder's

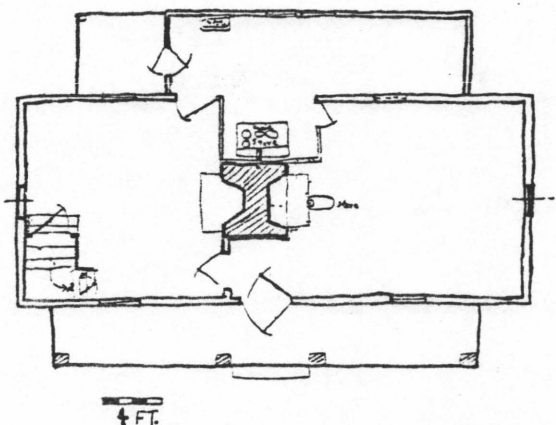


Fig. 10

customer would simply request a certain size to suit his needs ("...32'x28', and so many rooms"),¹⁸ and the plan and details were then left to the builder. Although I-houses with central hallways and end chimneys predominate, we also noted a few central-chimney I-houses, for instance, the Ernest Jarvis

house (Fig. 10), and even the hall-less subtype with two front doors which is isomorphic with a two-story double-pen dwelling.¹⁹

An interesting aspect of Blue Ridge folk house morpho-
typology is the propensity some types have for occurring in
fractional forms like the 2/3 I-house (which could be seen in a
few Galax and Hillsville examples) or in additive forms. A most
striking and unusual example of the creation of a large house from
several smaller types is the magnificent Dehart house, which
originally consisted only of the rear tee (a hall-and-parlor house

built by Flemin Dehart), to which a huge front facade addition was made between 1900 and 1905 (Fig. 11).²⁰

The house essentially integrates three complex units of folk housing (two hall-and-parlor types and a central-hall I-house) into a single impressive structure, the longest dimensions of which are 72'x51'!

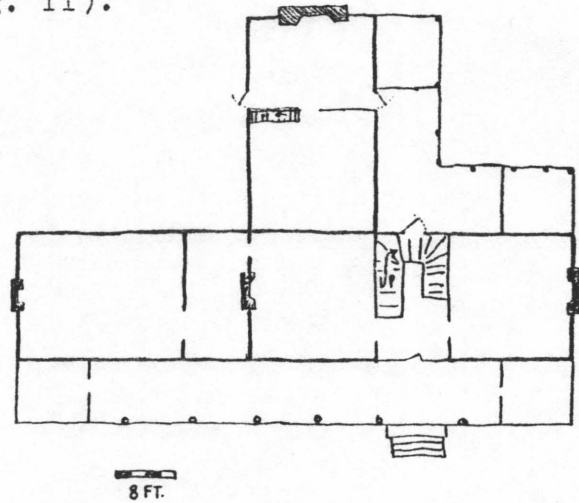


Fig. 11

Although the seven types illustrated thus far are clearly the dominant formal units of traditional housing in the Blue Ridge of the Virginia-North Carolina border, a number of other forms help to fill out the visible axis of vernacular housing. Though they are not usually considered part of the Southern Mountain repertoire of old traditional house types, simple pyramid houses, bungalows, and one-story Georgian-plan houses also cropped up along the small roads we travelled while looking for and at old dwellings. Moreover, the repertoire of old house types is increasingly being supplemented (if not supplanted) by a host of new, modern, and popular types: brick "ramblers" and ranch houses, builders' planbook houses, A-frame vacation homes, and the now-ubiquitous mobile homes (still universally called "trailers"), which may represent a financial investment nearly as great as that required to build a modest I-house seventy-five years ago.

In introducing these modern types for consideration here,

I am not attempting to somehow subvert the basic conception under which most folklorists rightly approach folk architecture. The types which have been painstakingly established as traditional by geographers and folklife researchers allow us to identify and treat an individual building as a worthwhile object of study even when that building lacks a human interpreter. Houses which are morphotypologically "folk" can be studied as special kinds of enduring texts, and therein lies their tremendous value. But just as a written text reduces an oral performance from a lively and compelling process to an analytically-accessible abstraction, the focussing of a folklorist's attention too closely on houses as manifestations of traditional types reduces the people for whom houses exist completely out of the picture. Thus, while I can agree with Glassie that "...a modern brick bungalow, located in a lonely hollow, built and inhabited by an herb doctor who tells marchen learned from his mother and plants by the moon is not folk...",²¹ I have also come to feel that we owe that same herb doctor (whom we would willingly label "folk") a debt of understanding which includes exploring his reasons for building such a house and describing some of the actions-becoming-traditions which are subsumed under that general verb "inhabited." To begin to work on the payment of that debt of understanding, the remainder of this paper will survey some of the factors and forces which help to context the houses documented in the Blue Ridge Folklife Project.

The "ecological" whole that ought to become our object of

study (rather than just the houses) might be idealized as a system of three aspects. A complex ongoing pattern of growth and change in the external vision and internal meaning of local architectural landscapes emerges from the dynamic interaction of DWELLING, BUILDER, and DWELLER. The essential interaction is a kind of communication; of course, any house communicates a simultaneous group of ideas to all those who see or enter it, but it seems right to suppose that a particular house will speak in special ways to the man who builds it and the man (and woman and child) who lives in it. A builder and a dweller understand and reciprocate the house's silent messages by re-enacting them in other buildings and translating them into the attitudes and patterns of inhabitation that cluster around any house. These, in turn, are ultimately crystallized as memories, which our friends and informants in the Blue Ridge could share with us. Since some such memories -- particularly those of builders -- center on matters of form and construction, they offer a logical extension to the survey of forms.

Old houses bind time. Any old house will serve as a powerful symbol of the local generalized past; but a particular old house can awaken memories and stimulate explanations by the men who built in the old styles long ago. Memories brought forth and shared with young outsiders often center directly on constructive processes. Since log construction constitutes the main "pioneer" building technology of the Blue Ridge, some of the very oldest house-builders I met, like Harrison Caudle, spoke to me extensively

about their own work building houses of logs:

I guess I've built around seventy-five or maybe eighty log houses myself. You cut your timber and you saddle it out. You cut it on a forty-five degree, straight down here. And this other'n's cut on the degree and straight down, and that saddle goes down like that. Called "saddling the house." And every log-- it's saddled up. The log end sticks over that way and you build it up, and then-- The wall plate here is a big log, and you bore a hole through your long rafters, and a peg goes down there, and it comes together up here. Instead of nailing it, there's a hole bored, and pegs went through it. And then you split shingles and boards and put them over there, and made homemade nails, and nail 'em on. I made a lot of nails.²²

Much more frequently, the reminiscences of traditional house-building centered on other mens' work, and on the ways in which they might go about the house-building tasks which seem most difficult or mysterious to a modern resident. Sometimes the "they" referred to were implicitly the earliest settlers in the area, but often "they" were the immediate ancestors of the speaker. Perhaps Ernest Jarvis had his father Kemper, his grandfather Ira, or even earlier ancestors in mind when he spoke to me of "the old people" and their notch-cutting abilities:

Now, one man didn't do all that. It's hard to tell how many was a-workin' when they hewed these logs out. It's hard to tell. It's hard to tell how many it was when they put them together here. But I don't know how they matched these [notches] here, whether they laid that up there, or whether they cut that when it was on the ground. They may have done this on the ground, and laid it up there and it matched that. They may have measured that, you see. They'd have to, I'd say, 'cause you couldn't cut this notch out while that was up there. But it takes a pretty good skill to do that. They've measured this here; see the slope on this? See, they just put up a log at a time; they've had to measure that. 'Cause you can't lay the log up there and do that. I'd say they put up, like, this log, and then this'n'd be the next one; they just measured that some way, and then

sawed that out. See, that's been sawed out. Now they sawed that out and then put a wedge in here and busted that. They knowed just how far to saw down here to match this piece, is what they've done. And they just saw it down, then take a wedge and bust it out. It'll bust right out. When it's green, it'll do that.²³

Well, they're still building log houses. But they build 'em out of different logs to what they used to build 'em. They used to hew their logs a certain thickness, enough to get enough face on 'em, you know, that they could put 'em one on top of the other. And they notched 'em at the ends, and they locked 'em in, some way. And pegged them with pegs.... A lot of houses now are sawed out; them was hewed with an axe. Yeah,²⁴ and they're asphalt, too-- They're creosoted, I mean.

In the course of reminiscing about construction methods used in old houses, direct contradictions may occur. When I asked about how many men it would take to put up a log house, Harrison Caudle said with a smile, "One man can build it if he's stout. All alone.... Just pick up [the logs] by natural strength." But speculating on the same subject, Ernest Jarvis emphatically stressed the need for neighbors and kin to cooperate:

One man couldn't have. It'd be impossible for one man to have done that back when that was built down there like that. Why, I don't know how many it would take to put them logs up there like that. There's more than one done that, now, I'll tell you.²⁵

Most of the older generations of house-builders in the Blue Ridge seem to have worked with at least one assistant or helper. Two men could certainly accomplish much more than one, especially when it came to moving heavy logs or framing timbers into place:

My Dad built that house -- three stories. Had four fireplaces. (Did he build it by himself, Daddy?) Well, I doubt that. They had help because, you know, his brother built a house at about the same time just up the road here a ways, so I imagine they helped each other.²⁶

In some cases, a builder might have a regular helper of known abilities, but most often a skilled carpenter would work with the man who wanted the house built:

Martin Harmon helped me build our house, the big end of it. He done most of the work. (Did somebody design 'em? Or did you copy 'em off other houses?) Well, you just figure out sort of how you wanted it and you just build it, mostly.²⁷

It seems likely ~~that~~ the skilled carpenter/builder would have dominated the informal process of designing vernacular houses, particularly when working with a would-be house owner who had less construction experience. Thus a few prolific builders could consistently shape a local folk architectural landscape, and the scene of work itself could come to be a locus for the effective transmission of house-building lore. Local specialist builders like Tom Pruitt, Harrison Caudle, Martin Harmon, Ward Compton, and Wallace "Dad" Spangler²⁸ may be significantly responsible for the pattern of house forms which is found in our area, but there are aspects of house construction which are widely known in the area and which would have been incorporated into the building methodology of any farmer:

They say that you can bust one of the shingles, you know, split one out that's on that house-- If the point of the moon's turned up, that they'll turn up. I've heard that. And they said that they had a time when they went out and split them.... And they say that they always split them when the point of the moon's turned down, so they would turn down, the shingles on there.²⁹

I can take you today -- if the roof's still on -- I can take you right today and show you a building, we covered half of it in a different time of the moon, and half of it turned up. And I got the almanac and went to the signs and looked. And when we put them on that turned up, the moon was a-pointin' up.³⁰

After a while my inquiries into old buildings and old methods of building began to make clear to me that the builders themselves really preferred to relate concrete matters of construction, rather than abstract matters of form; no coherent system of house typology was ever alluded to in anyone's statements. The pattern of traditional forms in the Blue Ridge is suggested primarily in the houses themselves. Builders and dwellers might at most refer to "a two-story with a front porch, like you see a million of," or sometimes to a "double house." But an awareness of traditional forms is present even where a system of formal terminology is not, and that awareness can be alluded to tangentially, as in Ed Severt's account of how hard the work of house-building could be:

I helped that feller build that house from scratch. And we put nine truckloads of rock-- He had a '28 Chevrolet truck, and we hauled nine loads of rock, and when we got up to the hearth-rock -- that's down here at the floor -- when we got it up, we put nine loads of rock up to the ceiling in the chimley. But it's a double chimley, had a fireplace in two rooms. Right there in the middle of the house. Just a house with a double chimney. Some of 'em didn't even have a double chimley; just a little old two-room house with a chimney in the end. You can heat the house better if it's in the middle of the house.³¹

If the rationale for a particular type of house -- the saddlebag -- is for Ed Severt simply a matter of heating efficiency, the rationale for other houses may be more complex (or at any rate, less explicit). Every house serves a complex assortment of functions in the eyes of both builder and dweller. For a builder, the house is an economic and artistic product which can communicate his mastery of a craft or trade to the dweller and the

wider community. For the occupants, a house provides the sheltered (heated) living space foregrounded by Ed Severt, and also comprises room for storing clothes and other personal possessions, a multipurpose set of interior work spaces, and a symbol or emblem of the family visible to those within and without. Any of these functions might be singled out and emphasized as the primary rationale for a house by a given builder or inhabitant.

Storage space, for example, seemed to be on the mind of Roy Weddle when I asked him about the building of his small two-room house (which was crammed full of beds, tables, chairs, a wood range, and assorted wardrobes in lieu of closets):

Well, my Daddy helped me a little bit, and my brother and all. I hadn't built the whole thing. Tain't done yet. Just kind of an old boxed-up thing. I had to get somewhere to put our junk.³²

The storage space available in old houses often was used for large quantities of foodstuffs, particularly when a "can house" (also called "dwellin' house" or "cellar") was not available. Before Kemper Jarvis built a separate can house into the hillside facing the front (!) of his I-house, the only closet in the house was filled up with food:

Right in here's where we used to keep the cans-- before that dwellin' house? Kept the cans. Kept 'em covered up with quilts and stuff. Hit would be about everything you could get out of a garden: tomatoes, beans, sweet potatoes....³³

Likewise with an eye to storage, the rooms and porches of an old dwelling might shelter a kitchen safe or two, a series of dressers, a large wardrobe, or other pieces of case furniture providing

storage space for small everyday objects.

In addition to storage, every house offers space for sleeping. While modern houses like D.J. and Janet Keith's brick "ranch-style" tend to contain a number of small rooms specifically designated as "bedrooms" and more-or-less specialized for that function in their interior arrangements, many old houses (particularly the little ones) contain a smaller number of rooms used for a greater number of purposes. The idea of a separate, personal bedroom for each married couple and child, to be used only for the "private" functions of sleeping and dressing seems to be a modern one. Yet the sharing of sleeping and working areas in old houses must not be seen as the inevitable result of limited space; paradoxically, many old houses in our area contain rooms or whole floors which were never occupied, or only sporadically used to put up an overflow crowd of visiting family, friends, or neighbors. The sleeping rooms in many old houses were frequently left unheated, but usually could be heated if desired. Yet some of the upper rooms in larger houses showed no provision for any sort of heat, which may account for their not being normally utilized. Several informants who described life in old houses "in the old days" commented on the relationship between heat and the sleeping arrangements:

Upstairs, now, uh-- I never did sleep upstairs. And none of my family did. But my Daddy's brother and sisters, some of them stayed upstairs now. They slept up there, but I didn't. We always slept in these rooms here. Now my mother and daddy slept in here, and two sisters; and I know I'd go in there, and when you opened the door, that was just like the North Pole!³⁴

You had to be tough to survive. You really did. We had knotholes in the floor, and absolutely no insulation and nothing under. The wind'd come up through there, and-- I remember my Grandmother takin' a snuff-box lid and tackin' over a hole! And you talk about bein' cold-- And I remember one time my brother and I, we busted out the window, you know, the window right beside our bed. And the first snow came, and the next morning we took the quilt and dusted the snow off. You know, it had snowed right on us.³⁵

The common existence of unoccupied rooms on the second floors of old houses suggests that even fifty or sixty years ago there might have been beginning a movement towards one-story living arrangements. This movement finds its logical fruition in the several sorts of single-story dwellings (including the modern trailers, ranch houses, and brick "ramblers") which are coming to dominate the new house construction of the region.

This lack of specialization in the rooms of old houses, of course, was never absolute, though single-room log cabins have been occupied up until relatively recent times within the area. Most of the daytime functions within the older houses centered around the fireplace, the chief internal wellspring of heat and light:

...you can see the house just below there, and you go there and see and there's a fireplace in each one. They cooked in the fireplace. Had a skillet and lid; they baked the bread. And the fireplace had a crane, you'd turn it around like that, and hang the pots on it and turn it over the fire to cook in.³⁶

I'll tell you, when it was wintertime, see, and the door was closed, I'll tell you that it was pretty dark in there. 'Course, that lamp, it wouldn't burn a gallon of kerosene in, probably, two or three days, or twenty-four hours. And that big fireplace, see, they's a lot of light by hit, too, in the wintertime.³⁷

We'd all sit in a big circle around the fire in the big fireplace. And she'd be tellin' these stories....³⁸

The kitchen (and/or fireplace) continues to be an informal center of many homes. Even in those larger houses which contain a formally-designated "living room," it was evident during the course of fieldwork that many families carry on the bulk of their own work and conversation in or near the kitchen and the hearth. As strangers, we might be initially led into the front room or formal parlor of a house, but many of my own subsequent interviews (and those of my colleagues of which I know) took place in the less formal setting of a back room or kitchen.

One of the factors which makes the discussion of a whole region's vernacular housing complex is the great range of economic considerations which are linked to and revealed in the dwellings. While some of the larger and fancier I-houses and Georgian-plan houses in the area had plastered walls, carefully panelled wooden walls, or even walls with extravagant murals painted on them, the older and poorer dwellings might be characterized by unpainted or tarpapered exteriors and newspaper linings, both of which lent insulation to a log house or crudely boxed-in shack:

They papered their house inside, to keep 'em warm. They used old newspapers, and magazines, and made a solution of flour and water, or corn starch and water, and they papered everything with old newspapers. There're some of 'em still on the walls over there. Some of 'em are dated, you know, but they were dated in the 1920's. But they've been papered, probably-- No tellin' how many times.³⁹

There was this feller-- He was a married man, but he batched. Had a little building, oh, as big as a truck bed, I guess, and if it come up a rain we'd go in that. He had him a little cot in there to sleep on, and a stove

he cooked on. A heater or something, I don't remember. But he had it covered with tar-paper, we called it, and that hailstorm beat every bit of the roof off of that, down to the naked boards.⁴⁰

The total range of houses in the Blue Ridge, as in other regions, is in fact much greater than is usually revealed in formal type studies. People in our study area have lived for extended periods not only in buildings built to be houses, but also in schools, churches, barns, sheds, shacks, and other unlikely structures. The 10'x12' can house sitting about twenty yards behind a large tee-extended I-house on the Tasker Martin farm⁴¹ showed signs that it had been inhabited regularly over an indeterminate but lengthy period. We can usually discover very little about the use of such non-houses as dwellings, but a few hints do emerge, now and then, in some recollections:

They decided the old log school house wasn't good enough. They got fancier and fancier as the years went along. Well, they wanted to sell the old log house. It had a chimney to it. That's where I started school when I was just a shaver of a boy, and a little one at that! I went one year or two years in the old log house.... Her uncle bought that old log schoolhouse now, and moved it down on the river and put it back up. But you see, it was already notched. All he had to do is just lay it back up and peg it together at the corners. And me and her lived in it since we been married. We lived in that old log schoolhouse...just one room.⁴²

And in pointing out an old log granary to us, Ernest Jarvis recalled how it had been used to put up guests when an overflow crowd at a house-dance might spend the night:

They stayed in there. There was no fireplace to this one. When they had company or something they would come out here, and they stayed in there. Probably some of 'em could stay in there when there wasn't. But they could just put quilts in there and it wasn't too cold. And they stayed in there, and slept.⁴³

A step upward from living in a shack, converted can-house, log school, or granary would be to live in a very small and simple house, like the square cabin of Miss Minnie Thompson mentioned above. The poorest of the old houses that existed in the East-central Blue Ridge in times past have not survived into the late twentieth century, but they still live in vivid memories. Consider Harrison Caudle's tale of a childhood adventure which could not have taken place in a more substantially-built dwelling:

When I was six years old I killed my first bear. Out over here at the Old Hickory Flat. We didn't have a floor. We built a wall down on the ground, just took the topsoil off and took red clay dirt and pat it out and it was just like brick. When it dries it's hard. The bear dug his nose under there, and they was up on the mountain pickin' berries. They used to have to pick berries, huckleberries and blackberries, and dried 'em in a dry-kil'. I was tendin' to the little fellers there for 'em, and there was an old muzzle-loadin' shotgun, with slugs I guess that big, both barrels double-charged with powder. I pulled both triggers, I don't know how. Got him right between the eyes; I got him though. They said he weighed over six hundred pounds. And it like to killed me.⁴⁴

If life in the smaller old houses -- and the limited heated portions of even the larger ones -- was sometimes cramped, dark, cold, or difficult, it was also intimate, socially warm and integrative. Neighbors, who might well be relatives too, would not only swap the work necessary to build houses and outbuildings, but would also get together in each other's completed homes for cooperative work activities like corn-shuckings, funerals, and the house-dances which were once a mainstay of Blue Ridge social life. Almost every interview which touched on life in the old

houses included references to dancing in the larger rooms, sometimes in more than one room at a time, while a band of local string musicians held forth from a corner or from the adjacent hallway:

I've seen 'em square dance in here, right here. They'd take the table and lay it up on the bed back there, move them beds around, and they'd square dance. You ever been to a square dance? Well, they'd square-dance right here. They had plenty of room, or they went in that other room; see, they's big rooms here, they had plenty of room. About four couples, or six couples, I remember that.⁴⁵

The reminiscences of informants about the patterns of life in their old houses are fascinating, multivalent statements, less descriptive than an old photograph of a room interior might be, but also more personally meaningful and hence more deeply useful as an indicator of the relationship binding a house and its occupants. Problematically, most people's memories make their faces light up with associations that are too rich to be fit into the answers called forth by an interviewer's prodding questions; most dwellers' mental maps -- their personal understandings of the meanings and values of the divided internal spaces of a house -- "exist on an emotional rather than a rational level."⁴⁶ Occasionally we see revealed in a conversation a hint that the rooms of an old house will hold different meanings and memories, in relation with their bygone functions:

Up here over the porch were one little room here and one here; medicine rooms. That's what we called 'em when we were kids, because when my Dad-- After he died, there was thousands of bottles of medicine, and my Mom always used to say "Don't touch any of those bottles of medicine, it might be poison." Because he doctored a lot of people. They'd come to him if they had a sick cow, or horse, or if they were sick.⁴⁷

The uses of the particular spaces enclosed in a dwelling, like medicine rooms, canned-goods closets, or rooms for square-dancing, represent the most specialized kinds of dwelling functions. It should be evident from the last two quotes that the rooms and spaces enclosed or defined by a house have richer meanings for the people who live in them than they ever can for a mere observer or note-taker who comes on the scene too late to see people engaged in the day-to-day business of living in their house. The artifacts that remain in an old, abandoned house may faintly echo the patterns of storage, but they can never reverberate with the complex personal meanings of a lived-in house.

Another complicating factor is change in the house itself. In a good many cases, old Blue Ridge houses display manifold evidence of alterations or additions. The house-typologist can read into the Ike Dehart house and the Adam Clement house some intriguing patterns of units in combination; that is, he can see in those examples that dwellers who wanted bigger houses often created them by addition from a repertoire of forms the typologist has already discovered. But the motives for addition may remain hidden; even more frustratingly, it is very difficult to spot those types of alterations which began with the subtraction or destruction of part of an old house. On the Jarvis farm, for instance, the central-chimney I-house (which was carefully documented in its present condition) had actually undergone some significant alterations during Ernest's youth:

Well, now, that porch on the house there, that was a wood porch.... And we went an poured cement, made a

cement porch out of that. Built the lower part on there, and that changed the house, and put the cement porch on the lower side. See, that used to be just a-- You just walked right out those two back doors... just walk right on a wood porch there, and step off. But all that, they've changed that. They was two doors in the back there. You know where you go in the kitchen from one of them there? Well, that's been kindly changed. Where the cook stove been settin', well, they's one door here to your left that walked right out on a wood porch. They was another door and you walk right out of it to come out of the kitchen. The kitchen and the living room was all together on that house.⁴⁸

The new kitchen addition on the rear of the Jarvis house clearly declared a specialization of the rooms' uses; where the north first floor room had been "kitchen and living room all together," it became a living room/bedroom after the kitchen and shed were added over the old wooden porch.

An even more complex and less usual type of alteration was made on the old Woody house because of a change in the road's orientation with respect to the house:

When this house was built the road come right up the mountain here.... Well, our house was facing this way, see, facing the road. Well, about 1900 they changed, and put the road on that side, so we had to change our house. Well, we didn't have to, but we did. My oldest brother was in the Navy at that time, and he come home on furlough, and he got some help with the other brothers, and they tore out the kitchen. See, the kitchen faced that way, towards the road, and there was a big fireplace and a chimney.⁴⁹

Such a reorientation of the house to the road as was described by Roy Woody (i.e., tearing off the rear kitchen tee when it faces the new road, so that an "acceptable" I-house facade is maintained) reinforces the obvious point that the dweller's use of any house is affected significantly by his perception of the site. Each site has a social as well as an environmental meaning. By

tearing off the kitchen addition, the Woody brothers effectively re-oriented their house socially after a disorientation had been effected by the road crews. That the Woody brothers felt such pressure to change their house under the circumstances seems all the more remarkable since many Blue Ridge houses with formal and imposing facades (especially I-houses and Georgian-plan houses) are often surrounded by footpaths and other signs which reveal that the families inhabiting them avoid the front door. There is another minor paradox here; if the Woody's feelings can be assumed to be representative, a house must not be sited with its back to the road, and yet dwellers and friends don't really want to use the front facade they've taken so much trouble to build and maintain.

An important part of the social meaning of a house's site (and one which may bear on the apparent paradox noted above) arises from the identity and relationship a dweller maintains with his neighbors. Early Blue Ridge dwellers, particularly, needed to have good relations with their neighbors in order to make possible the cooperative modes of both work and play that have already been mentioned. But good neighbors also came from the pressure to subdivide the large early holdings into smaller farms which could be deeded to male children, who built their own houses adjacent to the "old home place" and thenceforth participated in the work-swapping and mutual support. The resulting pattern of settlement in many outlying areas typically featured a cluster of houses, sometimes compact and sometimes diffuse, but all belonging to relatives of greater or lesser degree. The death of older

generations coupled with persistent outmigration from the region, however, has left many houses empty of kin, and filled now with only strangers or memories:

My aunt lived over there across the valley⁷. And this feller bought the house up when the boy, he wanted to move up on the ridge. And the house was built in 1926. I remember it had an outfit kindly in the gable end up there, and it had "1926-- This house built in 1926." He sold it to a neighbor, lives right up above me there. He sold out. So he got it now, and that was the rest of the buildings. They left and never got 'em out, and he lives up on the hill up there. And that's my uncle's place up there; it belongs to my cousins up here.⁵⁰

My Daddy's old farm, it had a tenant house. My oldest brother, he built it, and he moved in it, lived a while. Then my other oldest brother, he moved in it, lived a while. And I reckon me and her was the last two that ever lived in it that I know of. It was across the river from my Daddy's house.⁵¹

That old Bart has got three or four stout grown sons, and every one of 'em got a brick house right on the same ridge with their Daddy. Just strung right out along the ridge.⁵²

The selection of a house site involves more than the question of what land is available.⁵³ Within a given farm's acreage, early house builders almost always favored sites that were sheltered from the wind (as with the Andly Long house). Ridge top settlements like the one spoken of above are usually more recent, and reflect both improved heating and insulating technologies and the growing pressure for building sites. Even more important than being out of the wind was being near to a good source of drinking water:

See, when this place was built here, they went to water. See, that's why they built this, to get close to a spring. Anymore they don't pay attention to that; they just have a well dug. But the old people, they'd

go build close to water, now. You'd be surprised if you could see some of the places where houses have been in this country-- where they'd take it to get close to a spring.⁵⁴

If plenty of water was available, as on the Woody farm (which has five potable springs), the original house site could have been selected for its proximity to the road. When the new Woody house was being planned, its precise site was chosen by a unique method that guaranteed both warmth and a view:

When we were kids, my Mom used to say that she'd like a house over here, on the hill. You see, we lived in the valley, right down across the creek here, which is only a hundred and fifty yards, you see. But the cows always went up here to get out of the bad weather, right over, under the hill, you see? And that was an indication that this site was a good warm spot. And then of course, with the view and everything, too, was one of the reasons.⁵⁵

The desire for a scenic view was incompatible with a sheltered site for the builders of most old houses, but it has come to be an important and feasible desideratum -- if not the chief one -- in selecting the site and aspect of new houses.

New houses and trailers are being added to the vernacular landscape of the Blue Ridge at an astounding rate, finding great acceptance because of their stylish comforts, their easier upkeep, and their contemporary organization of living spaces. The former residents of old houses who bring in trailers or build one-story brick "ramblers" in order to live more comfortably near the main highways almost inevitably endure ambivalent feelings about the old homes they've left. The venerable, abandoned I-houses and cabins of the area carry the full symbolic weight of "the good old days when times were bad." In fact, old houses possess a powerful nostalgic value even for those who don't personally recall their

inhabitation. An old house may functionally become a barn, but in memory it always remains a home. Janet Keith's parents moved out of their old house and filled it with hay; even so, Janet maintains it in her memories, which she can jog as needed or desired by glancing at an artfully composed color photo kept on the wall of the living room in her own new home. The feeling that her grandfather's home was embodied with a personal historic import transcending its present rude use prompted Janet Keith to investigate it more closely a few years ago:

When I was in early high school...I did a thing on the family, recording what he knew, and going over the farm and taking pictures of the house that my grandfather built, the first in the area to be built with nails. And one of the elders of the church had come by and said to my grandfather that he was going to kill Elder Carne's daughter by building her a house like that. It wasn't going to hold up because of the fact that he had used nails rather than the wooden peg and so forth, log construction that had been done, or was being done, in the area before that time. That house still stands.⁵⁶

Similarly, although Ernest Jarvis has moved to a more easily maintained brick house near the main road to Sparta, he feels compelled to wander back over to the old home place frequently, and gamely insists that his old buildings are still valuable to him even if only for storing hay or his ancestors' keepsakes. Although old log buildings can be rebuilt when they begin to decay and tumble down, Ernest Jarvis has resisted the temptation to sell off the homes which are emblems of his family's presence:

That old house -- we used it for a wood house. And it's just about gone. 'Cause I thought about tryin' to fix it up, when that'n started fallin', but it's too far gone to do most anything with. 'Course, you

could take them logs and turn 'em right over, you know, on the outside? Inside-outside. And still make a nice cabin out of it. There was a boy asked me about that. He was settin' right up there one day, he said, "Sell me that old house." And I said, "I use that, to put hay and stuff in." But see, you can turn them right over; you just have to cut 'em off here, where they're notched out. See, you could make a nice cabin; one room log cabin's what could be made, kind of like that'n out yonder. But he looked at it; he thought he could. I told him I didn't want to tear it down, now. But hit's about gone.⁵⁷

I don't want to sell it.... And I want to make it to my boy, I'm gonna-- I told 'im the other day, I'm gonna change this, and make it to my boy, but I'm gonna fix it where he can't sell it till he gets old enough to know what he's doin'. And I don't believe-- If he takes up with it like I have, he won't never sell it either.⁵⁸

It should be clear from the many quotes above that the folk architecture of a given region has nearly as many levels of meaning as there are dwellings and occupants in the region. Some kinds of architectural meanings can, indeed, be read directly from the form and fabric of representative houses, but there is a larger and ultimately a more important set of meanings which arises only from the fact of human occupancy itself. But occupants generate meaning from more than their patterns of use: their eating, sleeping, storing, cooking, dancing, altering, and decorating. If we analytically imagine the house only to be, as Le Corbusier suggested, "a machine for living in,"⁵⁹ then we are too rigidly following his further injunction to "shut our eyes to what exists."⁶⁰ The old house-builders of the Blue Ridge created machines for living, but in the course of occupancy, the dwellers (which group includes the builders) have

James Agee's half-mystic assertion:

...that a house of simple people which stands empty and silent in the...morning sunlight, and everything which on this morning in eternal space it by chance contains, all thus left open and defenseless to a reverent and cold-laboring spy, shines quietly forth such grandeur, such sorrowful holiness of its exactitudes in existence, as no human consciousness shall ever rightly perceive, far less impart to another....⁶²

Thomas A. Adler
September, 1980

Footnotes

- 1 This essay was written for the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, which in cooperation with the National Park Service undertook the Blue Ridge Parkway Folklife Project in August and September of 1978. I joined the Project in early September in order to help with the considerable architectural documentation job that had been undertaken. I would like to acknowledge special debts of gratitude I owe to Blanton Owen and Howard Marshall, who brought me quickly into the light of their early findings and helped me see what needed to be seen in our study area. Figures 2, 3, 5, 8, and 10 are based directly on the field drawings made by Howard Marshall.
- 2 The Puckett Cabin, located east of Fancy Gap at Mile 189.8 on the Parkway, was the home of local midwife Mrs. Orlean Hawks Puckett from 1865 until 1939.
- 3 Henry Glassie, "Southern Mountain Houses: A Study in American Folk Culture," unpublished M.A. Thesis, (Cooperstown: State University of New York College at Oneonta, 1965), p. 150.
- 4 Miss Thompson's cabin lies in the woods near the end of Patrick County (Virginia) highway 678, north of Woolwine.
- 5 The Andy Long house is in the woods in Ashe County (North Carolina), a few miles southwest of Laurel Springs.
- 6 Interview with Roy Woody, Jean Woody, and Laura Woody Overwater, Sept. 26, 1978.
- 7 The Payton Akers house, documented by Howard Marshall, is between Gladesboro and Hillsville, on Carroll County (Virginia) highway 670.
- 8 The Crouse farm is visible from the Blue Ridge Parkway near Air Bellows Gap, just off Alleghany County (North Carolina) highway 1131.
- 9 The Slusher house, childhood home of Janet Keith, is just outside our area, lying a mile or two northwest of Willis, in Floyd County (Virginia).
- 10 Ernest Jarvis's farm near Blevin's Crossroads in Alleghany Co. was one of a number of architectural focal points for our project, and was extensively documented by various American Folklife Center fieldworkers.
- 11 The striking Brooks I-house is on Wilkes County (North Carolina) highway 1737, northwest of Traphill.
- 12 The Adam Clement farm is near Carter's Mill, in southwestern Patrick County.

- 13 Pat Mullen and I visited the Weddles on a preliminary trip along Floyd County highway 804; their small house lies about midway between Union and Shelor's Mill.
- 14 The Hall house is in Carroll County, on highway 674 north of Fancy Gap. Although I have classified this house as a double-pen type, Blanton Owen saw it as a hall-less I-house. Cf.Fn. 19.
- 15 Glassie, "Southern Mountain Houses," p. 169f.
- 16 Interview with Harrison Caudle, Sept. 21, 1978.
- 17 The B.D.Akers farm holds a number of interesting old buildings which were measured by Howard Marshall. It is located near the intersection of Carroll County highways 674 and 682.
- 18 Interview with Tom Pruitt at his home on Alleghany County highway 1131, Sept. 21, 1978.
- 19 Glassie, "Southern Mountain Houses," pp. 199-201.
- 20 Several multiple-unit dwellings coexist on State Highway 40 in Patrick County, east of Woolwine. The Dehart house represents the financial success of a family who ran an early legal distillery on the same site. Despite its evident grandeur, the house was barely saved from the bulldozers about to raze it when its present occupants, Leah and Morley Wheeler, agreed to restore it and to permit tours through it.
- 21 Glassie, "Southern Mountain Houses," p. 5.
- 22 Harrison Caudle, Sept. 21, 1978.
- 23 Interview with Ernest Jarvis, Sept. 13, 1978.
- 24 Interview with Ed Severt, Sept. 26, 1978.
- 25 Ernest Jarvis, Sept. 13, 1978.
- 26 Roy Woody, Sept. 26, 1978.
- 27 Interview with Dewey Keith, Sept. 24, 1978.
- 28 Thomas Carter, "The Joel Cock House: Meadows of Dan, Patrick County, Virginia," Southern Folklore Quarterly 39 (1975), 329-340.
- 29 Ernest Jarvis, Sept. 13, 1978.
- 30 Ed Severt, Sept. 26, 1978.
- 31 Ibid.

- 32 Interview with Roy Weddle, Sept. 15, 1978.
- 33 Ernest Jarvis, Sept. 13, 1978.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Roy Woody, Sept. 26, 1978.
- 36 Harrison Caudle, Sept. 21, 1978.
- 37 Ernest Jarvis, Sept. 13, 1978.
- 38 Roy Woody, Sept. 26, 1978.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ed Severt, Sept. 26, 1978.
- 41 The Tasker Martin farm was another architectural focal point for our work. It is located in the Red Hill community on US. 58, between Hillsville and Laurel Fork, Carroll County.
- 42 Ed Severt, Sept. 26, 1978.
- 43 Ernest Jarvis, Sept. 13, 1978.
- 44 Harrison Caudle, Sept. 21, 1978.
- 45 Ernest Jarvis, Sept. 13, 1978.
- 46 Robert Sommer, Personal Space: The Behavioral Basis of Design (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 160.
- 47 Roy Woody, Sept. 26, 1978.
- 48 Ernest Jarvis, Sept. 13, 1978.
- 49 Roy Woody, Sept. 26, 1978.
- 50 Ernest Jarvis, Sept. 13, 1978.
- 51 Ed Severt, Sept. 26, 1978.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Cf. Robert Keber, "Site Selection of Pre-1940 Mountain Houses," in Carolina Dwelling (North Carolina State University, 1978?), p. 198.
- 54 Ernest Jarvis, Sept. 13, 1978.
- 55 Roy Woody, Sept. 26, 1978.

- 56 Janet Keith, Sept. 24, 1978.
- 57 Ernest Jarvis, Sept. 13, 1978.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Le Corbusier, Towards A New Architecture, translated by Frederick Etchells (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1960), p. 10.
- 60 Ibid., pp. 106-7.
- 61 Roger L. Welsh, "The Meaning of Folk Architecture: The Sod House Example," Keystone Folklore 21 (1976-7), 36.
- 62 James Agee and Walker Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 121.