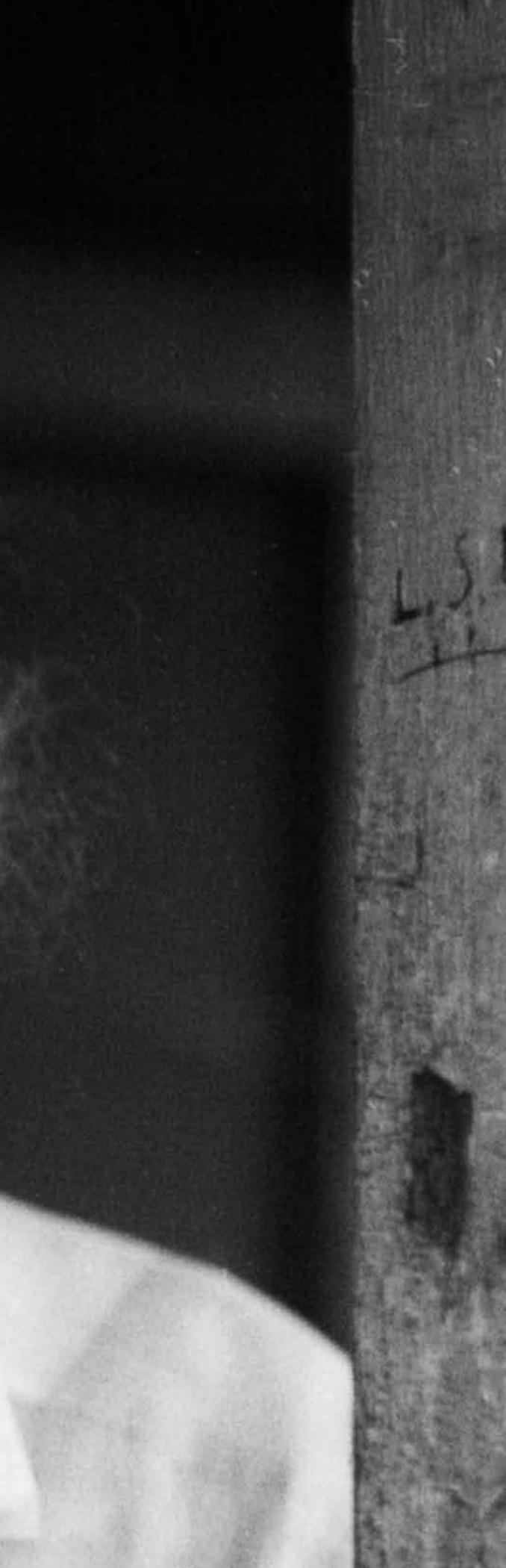


**MEMORIES OF THE HAMMONS FAMILY
PART III: MAGGIE HAMMONS PARKER**
by Wayne Howard





I had gotten well acquainted with Lee Hammons by the summer of 1970, but I still hadn't met Dwight Diller, who had indirectly led me to Lee. At the end of his school year at West Virginia University, Dwight came home. By the time of Pioneer Days, in mid-July, we were fast friends; and Dwight was rapidly acquainting me and my wife, Barbara, with the "mountain music" scene.

Pioneer Days was a week-long annual festival, initiated three or four years earlier, in which the people of Marlinton and the surrounding area celebrated their pioneer heritage. Actually, it had been generalized into a celebration of everything old-time. Men dressed in high boots and overalls, women in long dresses and sun-bonnets; steam engines from the lumber-camp era were brought in; there were demonstrations of shingle-splitting, apple-butter making, and other crafts; there was a frog-jumping contest and a liar's contest and a square dance; but the truly glorious culmination of it all was the music contest on Saturday evening. A number of good, traditional Pocahontas County musicians participated. Woody Simmons would come down from Randolph County and Glen Smith from, I think, Clay County. If I'm not mistaken, Wilson Douglas was sometimes there, too. And already there were young musicians beginning to arrive, invited there by Dwight: Bill Hicks, Malcolm and Blanton Owen, Tommy Thompson. . . . Most of the members of the Fuzzy Mountain String Band were jamming with Dwight in our living room that week.

In 1970 the music contest was still being held on the grounds of the Pocahontas County Court House. On a small side porch Burl Hammons and Maggie Hammons Parker were waiting for the music to start when Dwight introduced me and my wife, Barbara, to them. I don't remember any other details of the meeting. Burl was probably wearing the outfit he always preferred for public performances: a white cowboy hat and blue cowboy shirt. That was not out of place at all for a country-music performer, nor for anybody else during Pioneer Days. Maggie was dressed, as always, with a scarf folded and pinned around her head, straight cotton skirt, man's shirt, and canvas shoes on her feet. Wrinkled, chapped skin on her cheeks gave her a sweet, apple-doll quality that could not be missed. This description did not change much in the whole time I knew her.

Not long after meeting them I visited their home for the first time, escorted by Dwight. They were living together with two other sisters, Emmy and Ruie, in a four-room house belonging to Burl, or possibly to his brother-in-law. It was located in the tiny hamlet of Stillwell, West Virginia, about a mile from Marlinton. Another of their sisters, Dasie Buzzard, had a house across the road, not far away but down among some trees. The only other dwelling in sight was a cinder-block house next door, maybe fifty yards from theirs, but up the road a little farther was a busy sawmill. Log trucks and lumber trucks passed frequently, stirring up thick clouds of dust from the gravel road.

Burl and his sisters had been thrown together by circumstances not long before this time, I think. Burl had lost his wife; Maggie was widowed. Ruie was never married and must have been on her own all along, but in her old age she got around poorly and had many infirmities. Emmy, also a widow, was suffering from some form of dementia, lucid one minute and completely abstracted from her surroundings the next. She was treated tenderly by the others but



Stilwell, West Virginia, home of Burl, Maggie, Ruie, and Emmy Hammons.



Maggie Hammons Parker and Ruie Hammons, 1971.

mostly cared for by Maggie. Neither Burl nor Maggie had much patience to spare for Ruie, the oldest sister, and occasionally there were little spats.

Like many people in rural West Virginia, the Hammons family did without many modern conveniences. They had electricity, and even a television, but no running water. A trap door gave them access to a spring beneath the back porch. Dishes were washed in a dishpan set in a sink in a metal kitchen counter. They had no phone, heated and cooked with woodstoves, and used an outhouse. Burl had one bedroom, the women shared the other, but sometimes Maggie would sleep on one of the old couches in the living room.

I do not know how much their living arrangements were merely economical, or how much they reflected a preference for old-timey ways. In their earliest days, they seemed to remain largely outside of the cash economy. Once, Maggie said, her daddy, Paris Hammons, cast down around the timbers of a railroad bridge in

the Williams River and caught a big trout that everybody had been trying to catch. One of the bosses of the timber company came along, and Paris showed it to him. The man offered him some money for the fish, but he said, no, he wanted the children to see it. The man offered him more and more and got the same answer, until finally he remembered that Paris had been wanting to get a house that belonged to the company. So he offered *that* for the fish, and Paris accepted. He only got the house, not the land it stood on. He took it apart and rebuilt it at another spot, and the family lived for a long time in it—a house bought with a fish.

When I first met them, things were relatively quiet in the Hammons household. I was not the first visitor Dwight had brought to them, but the hordes of musicians and scholars and curiosity seekers who eventually flocked in to meet them, interview them, record them, hear them or play music with them, had not yet arrived. Not many outsiders, but there were

plenty of visitors. Relatives and old acquaintances showed up frequently. Some teenager or other who needed a home would often stay for a while. These hospitable ways might have been a vestige of the Hammons family's early years, when isolated circumstances made visitors especially welcome. But mostly, I think, they took young people in because Maggie was the soul of charity. It was a great sorrow to her that she never had any children of her own, and she seemed to compensate by caring for everyone else's.

Another aspect of Maggie's caring for people was her service in doctoring their ills. She had a considerable reputation as an herb doctor that comprised more than her knowledge of plant lore. Mrs. Beecher Hamons [*sic*], who had been a neighbor of Maggie's out on the Little Laurel, told me that people called on Maggie anytime they were sick. Mrs. Hamons herself had sent for her because she had a baby that wouldn't stop crying. Maggie, she said, came in and looked at the baby and said

right away that it was just starving to death. The woman had been breast-feeding it but didn't have enough milk.

In her herb cures, Maggie had a certain governing philosophy. I can't find this in any of my notes, so I may not have the wording quite right, but I remember her saying that for everything harmful there is something that was put on the earth to undo it. Also, "There's two kinds of pretty near every weed," she said. Her examples of this were the stinging nettle and the "blind" nettle. The stinging nettle itself wasn't necessarily harmful—you can eat it for greens, and her daddy always said that it wouldn't hurt you if you looked right at it. He would roll up his pants and walk right through a patch of nettles, but for most people any contact with this plant is pretty painful. The blind nettle, on the other hand, lacks the tiny needles that produce such pain, and it is useful as medicine. It can cure a malady known as "toe itch."

I did not manage to collect very many of Maggie's herb cures. (See inset.). I have also included here, for the sake of completeness, cures employed by other people in Maggie's circle. The ones not labeled with anyone's name are Maggie's, but not necessarily hers alone. Both she and Ruie, for example, recommended the kraut juice for anyone with a weak heart.

Not all of Maggie's medicinal lore involved herbs. When I told her that Barbara and I were expecting our first baby, she said that Barbara must be careful about reaching over her head for anything. If she got a craving for some food and didn't get enough to satisfy her, the baby would always have a craving for that same food. It would also hurt the baby if she got afraid of anything. She described some little people from Greenland, a "Spider Man," and a baby born with frog legs, all of which she had seen in a carnival sideshow. These, she said, were examples of "marked" babies, whose mothers were frightened by something during pregnancy. Barbara was very careful, and none of our babies were marked.

Maggie generally went to bed early, exhausted by a hard daily routine and needing to get up early the next day. She would get up before daylight, at least in winter. She and Ruie were soon busy with the making of breakfast—which in their household began with building a fire in the stove. Water was drawn, and a pot of coffee was started. The grounds

HAMMONS FAMILY REMEDIES

MUTLLEIN

catarrh (sinus trouble)

This is the plant generally known as mullein, with a spike of yellow flowers. Dry the leaves, smoke them, and inhale the smoke.

OLD-FIELD BOSTON

catarrh

A whitish-looking plant that grows in old fields, or poor ground. Dry the leaves, smoke them, and inhale the smoke.

GROUND IVY

give to children for hives

This is a creeping plant with small purplish flowers, little round leaves with scalloped edges, and a spicy smell. (I have heard homeowners in the Chicago area refer to it as "Creeping Charlie.") Make a tea of it and drink it.

SALTY APPLE

remedy for too much snuff

KRAUT JUICE

weak heart

COLT'S FOOT

good for the lungs

Grows in a clump of half a dozen stems, with a round leaf (something like a grape leaf) on each stem. Take it as a tea.

WAHOO

good for the blood

Wahoo is the Indian name for it. Not many people know what it is. (Appears to be a kind of tree.) Use it to make bitters.

WILD CHERRY BARK

good for the blood

Boil the bark down in water or pour the water over it to make bitters.

YELLOW DOCK

good for the blood

Use the root. Make bitters of it.

BURDOCK

use with yellow dock

Use the root. When mixed with yellow dock and one other ingredient (not recorded), this makes the yellow dock more effective.

BLIND NETTLE

toe-itch

Blind nettle looks like the stinging nettle but doesn't have the tiny needles that make stinging nettle so painful. It is also known as "toe-itch weed." Toe itch is a condition that people get from going barefoot.

RATTLESNAKE MASTER

takes poison out of rattlesnake bites

Grows near pine patches. Ratsbane grows with it.

BURNT WHISKEY

stomach cramps

SLIPPERY ELM BARK (SHERMAN)

the best stomach medicine there is

Use the inner bark.

SLIPPERY ELM BARK (LEE)

healing cuts, making a cut draw well

Children used to chew the inner bark like chewing gum.

SLIPPERY ELM BARK

drawing out sores

BASSWOOD INNER BARK

drawing out sores

Doesn't hurt you. (See entry for spruce rosin.)

SPRUCE ROSIN

drawing out sores

Draws so hard it hurts.

KEROSENE (BURL)

good for your chest and throat

good for croup

Swallow a little bit of it. Rub it on a child's chest for the croup. Nowadays they put so much stuff in it that Burl would be afraid to take kerosene.

MILKWEED JUICE (BURL)

warts

Apply the milky juice to the wart.

TIMOTHY HEAD (BURL)

diarrhea

Timothy is an old-world name for bluegrass. Uncertain whether that is what Burl means by it. Make a tea of it.

TOUCH-ME-NOT

poison ivy, bug bites, or any kind of a sting

Also known as Jewelweed. Pale green plant with fleshy stalk and little orange or yellow flowers that grows in low, wet places. Crush the stalk to make a poultice and apply it to the affected area. I tried this, and it does work.

SPANISH NEEDLE

poison ivy

Spanish needle has very pointy leaves and has seeds known as "stick-tights." The seed is not a burr but has two barbed points on one end.

were put directly into the water, not filtered out. The pot was kept going all day long. The temperature of the stove top could be regulated well enough to keep the coffee from burning. It had a wonderful flavor, but after a couple of hours it was strong enough to keep a corpse awake.

Then biscuits were made—from scratch—and let me say that Maggie's biscuits were one of the wonders of the world. There would be preserves. Maggie made pumpkin butter and she made "grape butter," which was something like apple butter but flavored with Concord grapes. She and Ruie were both good cooks. They made not only biscuits but such things as pinto beans, green beans, and dumplings as well as anybody possibly could. Meals were unplanned, though, and there was not much differentiation between meals. Everything they had on hand would be set out at every meal until it was all gone. The meat served was often game. A ham of deer meat might be in the refrigerator, no matter what the season. Once I spied a little red carcass on the shed roof, and Burl told me it was a muskrat. He was curing the meat somehow for a future meal. He did raise a few chickens, though, and occasionally a hog.

Meals were eaten without much ceremony. When all was ready, Maggie would call from the kitchen, "Better come on in now and get your breakfast (or dinner, or supper)," and everyone would find a seat and start filling his plate. There was no blessing and no great show of formality. As a guest, I was considerably directed to help myself to this or that.

Immediately after the meal, Maggie would draw more water, if needed, and warm up some to wash the dishes. This was done in a dishpan set in the sink, but the sink had no running water nor plumbing for the drain. It was part of a free-standing enameled-metal kitchen counter. Ruie, I think, would dry the dishes and put them away. When they were done, the dishpan was carried out the back door and emptied onto the ground.

After breakfast, and at intervals during the day, Maggie would sweep the floor. Ashes from the woodstoves, mud and leaves tracked in on shoes and dogs' feet, dust from the road, occasional spills of snuff—all conspired to make it a constant battle for cleanliness. I do not know from direct observation how the clothes were washed, but there was no washing

machine. I did notice once that Maggie was struggling to iron one of Burl's shirts on the kitchen table. Before my next visit I found a small, portable ironing board to make the work a little easier.

I did not try to help directly with the housework. Partly I was busy trying to collect music and folklore in the very limited time available, and partly I think that I would have upset the existing arrangements and created a certain degree of confusion if I had pitched in with women's work. I did split wood and help with other men's or gender-neutral chores. I tried to contribute a little for my keep by bringing a can of coffee and some other provisions when I came. I was able to help sometimes by providing rides in my car, for although Burl could drive he generally did not have a car in the time I knew him.

One summer there was a severe drought, and water from the Hammonses' spring was low. The water was dangerous as well as scarce. Maggie said she was "afraid of water when it starts to fall." Barbara and I had a barrel, bought at an auction, that would hold, maybe, forty or fifty gallons. They instructed us to soak it with water so the staves would swell tightly together. I think this was accomplished by the next day. Then we drove them and the barrel to an artesian well up the Stillwell Road, past their house. We stood the barrel up in our trunk, filled it with water, and drove slowly back to their house. It was enough to get them past the worst of the drought.

Maggie would often sing softly to herself while she worked. Sometimes—if, say, Burl was playing the fiddle while she was cooking—she would sing lyrics to his tune. Her preferred time for more formal singing sessions was in the morning when, she said, her voice was clearer. I'm sure she was also less tired then than later in the day.

My general procedure was to set up the tape recorder in the living room and have it ready to tape whatever they chose to perform. When the tape supply was adequate, I would keep the machine running to catch stories and music that arose spontaneously. Maggie would often pause in her chores, inspired by some turn in the conversation, and start singing.

Sometimes she would stand and sing, even with the broom in her hand. More often she would sit, elbows at her sides, hands folded in her lap. Much of the time she would close her eyes. This may have helped her to concentrate and remember; it may have helped her imagine the world of lords and ladies,

murders, sinking ships, and all the other things she was singing about. Sometimes, though, she would dart glances at her listeners. It seems to me that this was mostly during the comic songs, so that she could judge the effect and maybe share in the mirth. Maggie herself would often laugh out loud during comic performances, sometimes so much that the lyrics would be hard to make out. At times she would watch the audience during serious songs, too.

At a festival on Droop Mountain (at the southern end of Pocahontas County) two college girls with a portable cassette recorder came up and asked Maggie to sing for them. She obliged them with one of the long, old songs; but halfway through, all of a sudden she stopped singing. They were not really paying attention, and she had noticed that. Either she thought the song didn't interest them or she was annoyed—possibly both—but she would not take up the song again. The girls, of course, knew that they could play back their tape as often as they liked. Maggie, though, seems never to have taken the advantages (or drawbacks) of technology into consideration.

One time she sang a wonderful, full version of "The Greenwood Sidie" (Child 20). After she started, I realized to my horror that the red "Record" light was not on. Maggie sang on and on, her voice as fine and clear as I ever heard it, and the whole time all I could think of was the terrible loss I was experiencing. At the end, she sat silent for a moment, knowing that she had done a fine job. When I told her that I had muffed the recording, she was really irritated. She would not sing it again. But this, I think, was not out of spite like Sherman's refusal to repeat a tune (recounted in the previous article in this series). With Maggie, it was simply that the moment had passed. She could not have mustered the same intensity again.

To Maggie, these songs were emotionally gripping, comparable to movie or television dramas for other people. These stories were *real* to her. More than once, at the end of her performance, she said, "Now, that's a *true song!*" If questioned about a plot element, she would say, "It's in the song," meaning that it must have happened the way the song has it. If it was not in the song, she considered that there was no way of knowing the truth of the matter. She always maintained that when she was young she could go out and hear a song and put it together in her head when she got home, and then she would know it. That required close attention, but also deep involvement. She would often prefix a song with "Now, let me study for a minute." As she paused, her head in her hand and her eyes shut

tight, she seemed to be repeating that process of putting the song together in her head.

However she managed it, Maggie did have a remarkable memory for songs. Her family all regarded her as their song expert and generally referred anyone to her who asked about the words to a song. Russell Hatton, who headed a project to publish Dwight's tapes and mine as CDs, astutely noted that her repertory was not only huge but was preserved without any written aids whatsoever.

But her songs did not quite fit the romantic notion of pure oral tradition. She did sing several songs learned from her father; a cousin called "Trampin' John" Hammons went out West and brought back some songs; and she got songs from other family members and friends (who were named earlier, in Part II of this series). From women presiding over a camp meeting, she learned a couple of religious songs. Quite a few of her songs came from early recordings, though. In the days when I was taping her, these recorded sources were a dark mystery to me. All the CD reissues we have today were not available, only a few songs had been reissued on LPs, and I did not have the money for many LPs. In recent years, with a collection of compact discs, I have been able to identify several of the 78s that Maggie learned from. When the list is complete enough it might be helpful to publish it, possibly in tabular form. For now, I can only say that the artists she was familiar with included Kelly Harrell, Fiddling John Carson, Buell Kazee, Eck Robertson, the Skillet Lickers, possibly the Hillbillies, and possibly Earl Johnson. She even sang one Johnny Horton song ("North to Alaska") from the early 1960s. A good song was a good song, no matter where it came from.

She seemed to respect the antiquity of the old ballads she knew, but that might be a consideration picked up from me and others who came to record her. Also, she had no idea how old her songs really were. If she learned a song from another person, she had no way of knowing how many had sung it before that person. The same is true of a song she heard on a record. If she had learned a song from a recording fifty years ago, she had good reason to call it an *old* song.

As in the case of medicinal lore, Maggie was the acknowledged family expert for songs. The others were familiar with many of the songs, however. Sherman sang several of the ones Maggie sang and knew fragments of many others. Sherman's wife, Allene, who was raised by Maggie, also seemed familiar with her repertory. Burl was not much of a singer—he had a raspy voice and a sort of bland delivery—but he would on

occasion correct Maggie's lyrics if she strayed from them. Ruie had the same familiarity and would interpose the same corrections; but for some reason her corrections were resented, while Burl's were not.

Among themselves, they did not jam. Sometimes Maggie would start to sing while Burl played the fiddle, as I said. Burl would sometimes play with guitar backup; sometimes he would back his cousin James on banjo; but there was no inclination for everybody to join in. It was just solo playing or a capella singing, as a rule. Certain people seemed to own certain songs, certain tunes. When I was visiting, not being a very accomplished musician, I was courteously assigned a little role of my own. I had learned, from a Hobart Smith LP, the ballad of "The Devil and the Farmer's Wife," and sometimes I would be requested to sing "that devil song." They had a version of that song themselves, but unfortunately, because it was my specialty, they would not upstage it. I never heard but one verse of Maggie's version and part of another verse from Burl.

I don't mean to suggest that they had any particular format, or formal order, to their musical sessions. These were nothing like the "song-swapping" sessions that I have encountered among folkies. Whatever came to mind, or came up in the conversation, was presented. I did observe one occasion, though, when Maggie sang with a specific purpose in mind. Her nephew and his girlfriend were having a spat, and the girlfriend was sitting and silently fuming in Maggie's front room. Maggie came up with a comic song—I believe it was the one she called "Blackjack Daisy"—on the very subject of lovers' quarrels. By the time it was over, a lot of tension had gone out of the room.

We hadn't been married but a very short time

*When she said we'd better be parted,
Then she picked up her danged old duds*

And down the road she started.

*Where are you going, my pretty little miss,
Where are you going, my honey?
She answered me back with a kee-kee-kee,
I'm a-hunting for my money.*

*How old are you, my pretty little miss,
How old are you, my honey?
She answered me back with a kee-kee-kee,
I ain't sixteen 'til Sunday.*

*I'll saddle a gray horse and a black,
A black so [much?] and steady.
I'll ride all day and a bar all night
Till I get back with my Daisy.*

*Where the coffee grows on white oak trees
And the rivers floats in brandy
And oxes' ears is lined with gold
And the girls is sweet as candy.*

Although Maggie was a fine banjo player, she never used the banjo to accompany her singing, even when she knew words to go with the tune she was playing. If you asked her for the words she would sing them afterward. She never backed up Burl's or anybody else's fiddling with the banjo, either. If she had ever played it for dances, she never mentioned that. At Pioneer Days she sang from the stage, but she didn't participate in the banjo contest. She played it strictly as a solo instrument, for her own enjoyment, and she played no other instrument, unless you count the "beaters" she would sometimes use on the strings while Burl bowed the fiddle.

She had a very light touch on the banjo and produced a clear, delicate sound. Partly the reason for this was that she played with her thumb and *middle* finger, even when "thumping" (clawhammering). A "bone felon" (evidently an infection of the bone) had caused her to lose the first joint of her right index finger. She had a couple of tunes, "The Falling of the Leaves" and "The Rabbit Skipped," that I never heard anyone else play. "The Rabbit Skipped" had a couple of verses that are worth passing on:

*The rabbit skipped and the rabbit hopped,
And the rabbit eat my turnip top.*

*The old hound yelped and the old hound leaped,
And the rabbit eat my cabbage leaf.*

As a storyteller, Maggie Parker was extraordinary. Her style of telling a story took some getting used to, full of long strings of repetition for emphasis—a lot more repetition than we are accustomed to—and an order of events that would sometimes seem scrambled. Her manner was so animated that it carried the plot along anyway, her voice dramatically rising and falling. You could not help but be drawn into the story, whatever it might be, rushing along with the action, not questioning things that normally you might doubt. And the subject matter of these stories could be an awesome

departure from the world you live in: escapes from wild animals, impossible eccentrics, witches, an abominable snowman. . . . And she was convincing because she herself was convinced of the truth of these stories.

Of course, she told funny stories, too. Most of these—all of them, in fact, as far as I can remember—were not jokes but anecdotes about oddball characters or humorous accidents that had befallen people she knew. Sometimes she would laugh so hard in the telling that she could hardly finish her story.

That's how it was when she told about a family with a couple of pretty daughters that lived in a shanty car on the Williams River. A man (whose name she gave) came around one night, drunk, determined that he would get one of those girls. It was pitch black, for everybody was in bed, but he just walked on in. Besides being drunk, he didn't know his way around. There was a pantry room in the corner of the kitchen, and in the dark he missed the bedroom door and walked smack into that pantry. Pots and dishes started falling on him. He got so turned around he couldn't find his way out of the room, so he started yelling for help. The yelling and the racket of everything falling woke up everybody in the house. When they pulled him out of the mess, he took out of the back door as fast as he could. There was a big step down from their back door, and it led straight into the hog pen. The hog always slept right up against the shanty, and he stepped right down onto it!

By the time she reached this point, Maggie had dissolved completely into laughter. I don't know precisely what became of the man, beyond being pitched into the mud by the startled hog, but I don't believe he ever went back.

I captured very few of these narratives, whole and entire, on tape. Dwight Diller fortunately did and is working on a book of stories told by all the Hammons family, with CD copies of the original tapes and transcriptions of the CDs. Not wanting to steal his thunder, and not having space here anyway for a full text, I will have to content myself with tantalizing you. The few stories I did record will be included in his book. For now, a couple of the things Maggie told on *The Hammons Family* recordings, "Parson's Rock" and the discussion surrounding "Jay Legg," will give some idea of the style that I have tried to describe.

My last visit to the house at Stillwell was in 1980. Two years later, on vacation with my wife and children, we stopped by for a brief visit. By that time Maggie, Burl, and the others had moved to a different house, near Huntersville. Although she lived on for another five years, this was the last time that I saw Maggie. She had a hard life but a magnificent spirit. A great deal of song and story and a tremendous store of kindness left this world with her passing.

Wayne Howard is a retired programmer/analyst now residing in Chicago, Illinois. He lived in Pocahontas County, West Virginia, from 1969 until 1972 and in Charleston, West Virginia, from 1972 to 1974. His tapes of the Hammons are in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, with copies in the archives at West Virginia University. Believing that there must be other tapes not yet deposited in any archives, he urges their owners to ensure their preservation and make them available to others by publishing them or donating them to an appropriate institution.

