

BOOK REVIEWS

R. Gerald Alvey. *Dulcimer Maker: The Craft of Homer Ledford*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984.

"I always loved music and loved to carve and to make things with my hands and I seemed to be pretty good at it; so when I got my first pocket knife, for Christmas at age 12, I tried to make a musical instrument—."

These are the words of Homer Ledford, a remarkable musician-craftsman, a native of eastern Tennessee and resident of Kentucky for the past thirty-five years. His first instrument, a match stick fiddle, was not so pretty or durable, but he persisted until he made a fiddle of maple and hemlock which was really playable.

When he went to the John C. Campbell Folk School at age eighteen, Homer could play the guitar, fiddle and other instruments. It was there in Brasstown, North Carolina, that he was introduced to the Appalachian mountain dulcimer and was encouraged by Mrs. Campbell and by Edna Ritchie to learn to play, repair and build the nearly forgotten instrument.

The origins of this sweet-toned folk instrument are obscure, but the traditional three or four-stringed dulcimers with the hour glass shape can be traced to Mr. J. E. ("Uncle Eddy") Thomas of Bath, Kentucky. One of the dulcimers which Homer played at the Campbell School was constructed by Mr. Thomas, who is believed to have made and sold (or bartered) as many as 1500 of them between 1871 and 1933.

Homer Ledford began to make dulcimers, one at a time, for people who would play and appreciate them. He has always been motivated by the joy of completing a new instrument and by knowing that the new owner will derive pleasure from it. Homer has never succumbed to the pressure to mass produce as the dulcimer has gained in popularity.

After studies at Berea and Richmond, Kentucky, Homer earned a B.S. degree and taught industrial arts for several years. In 1963, he went full time with his dulcimer making. While staying faithful to the traditional design, he has made some innovations to improve quality and has developed a few special tools and methods to make his one-man shop more efficient.

Ledford's wife, Colista, and their children have assisted with sales and service as he has completed almost 5,000 of his creations. The family has been active in festivals, concerts and community affairs and has made a record album.

R. Gerald Alvey is associate professor of folklore at the University of Kentucky and has published numerous articles on Appalachian culture. He is also a neighbor of Homer Ledford, as both men live in Winchester, Kentucky.

Prof. Alvey has divided this book into three sections. The first section, biographical, is the most easily read by the layman. Section two is an excellent manual on the construction and care of the Ledford dulcimer. It should appeal to dulcimer players and craftspeople. The third and last section is a scholarly treatment of why Homer builds dulcimers and how he has been influenced by folk, popular and elite culture. I find this section to be a bit tedious and "over my head" and suspect that it will seem so to all except the more serious students of folkways.

This book is well organized and fully indexed and annotated. The text is enlivened by the inclusion of many Ledford quotations and with the sixty-three clear and instructive photographs by Jerry Schureman. It should be welcomed by all who have come under the spell of the aptly named dulcimer, (from root words "dulcis" and "melos" meaning "sweet song") and by those who admire the unassuming and dedicated artist-craftsman typified by Homer Ledford.

Joe Bone

Ardell Flatterm. *BUT FIRST* . . . Tampa, Florida: 1984.

In a style as unaffected and natural as the place and people she writes about, Ardell Flatterm gives an intimate, honest picture of whatever her family encounters in their settling in Douglas County, Missouri, a generation or more ago. Hers is easily one of the most engrossing and entertaining books I have enjoyed lately. The universality of her *BUT FIRST* . . . is immediately obvious. Who has not found firsthand that before a person can enjoy the reward he seeks, first he has to perform a long and often trying succession of tiring tasks. So it is in the Flatterm family's dream of switching from a Los Angeles fast lane to a relaxed hill country backroad.

The moving of three generations of Flatterms from the West Coast to the Missouri Ozarks is accomplished with only a few less catastrophes than Steinbeck's Joad family encountered in their trek to California in the mid-1930s. A 240-acre dairy farm eventually expanded to almost 400 acres is their dream destination—*BUT FIRST*, they have to dispose of their California property while they continue to save for another full year in order to pay for their farm. There are mechanical breakdowns on the almost 2000-mile trip east, serious injuries and illnesses, but

the last ten miles, especially going up Dogwood Hill, were steep and winding, and Ken was afraid that the truck would turn over on some of the sharp curves . . . the heavily laden truck ground up the hill slowly . . . slowly. It barely made the top.

Arriving at their farm on Easter morning, they find their timberlands on fire, but mercifully rain soon douses the flames. It is a symbolic new beginning for the author and her husband Ken, their sons and the paternal grand-

parents. That first evening in the Ozarks, whipperwills, their otherwise quiet valley and refreshing mountain air help to soothe the exhausted travelers and sustain them for the continuing ordeal they will experience in grappling with weather and none-too-generous hillside soil in the hard work of establishing themselves in an area both friendly and alien to them.

Finding that being good neighbors makes for a good neighborhood, the Flattens are not long outsiders:

We didn't take the attitude we later saw among some of the newcomers. They would say, "We're going to show these dumb hillbillies how to farm." Believe me, it is not easy to farm in the Ozarks; it takes a smart person to earn a living from the poor, rocky soil found here. Usually the so-called smart newcomers sell out within a year or two and the "dumb hillbillies" buy their farm and equipment at bargain prices.

It does take the former Minnesotans and Californians a while to understand some local folkways:

The man that waited on me bent over behind the counter, slipped the cans into a bag and softly told me I could use the back door to leave . . . Had I stumbled into a place that sold beer illegally? . . . There was the beer sign. Why did they act so strangely? I later found out that there were a lot of people who drank beer but tried to keep it a secret from others. Well, that's their problem.

This fifty-two page paperback is anything but a romance. It comes to grips with the character of the land and the people the Flattens come to love, but not uncritically. The Ozarkian is seen as warm but wary at the same time he is resourceful and wise, seasoning his action with humor and humanity. A neighbor, for instance, advises the new farmers that the only way to avoid infestation with tricks and chiggers is to "do your farming from the middle of the road." In the spirit of their neighbors, the novice farmers learn to laugh at themselves: An uninvited pig is seen joining the author's husband in the shower he has been enjoying in the barn that serves as their first home. The hogpen, in fact, is next door to the family's barn bedroom while they are building their house. Mrs. Flatten's description is a model of Ozark humor:

At night they [the pigs] slept close to the barn door, four feet away from our bed. Four would be on the ground, three on top of them. About every half hour, the two outside pigs grew cool and would climb the top layer—after fifteen minutes of grunting, they finally re-arranged themselves. Half an hour later, the two on the outside decided it was better on top, and the grunting began again.

Heifers, cavorting around the family's new bull, the author describes
as

like a bunch of silly girls . . . He [the bull] pawed the ground, throwing dust; he arched his neck to show his best profile . . . The silly heifers pranced off, then pranced up to him, sometimes jumping sideways in their excitement. That young bull must have thought he'd died and gone to heaven!

"Turkeys," Ms. Flatter declares, "are the most stupid birds; they die just for the fun of it."

Raising livestock with all of its losses and frustrations, her family learns to fence and cross-fence "hog-tight, horse-tight, and bull-strong."

Inadvertently, the author may have described her own writing style in this folk maxim. Like her fences, her style holds up well. On occasion her taut, tough style can grow poetic, but never sacharrine:

The floor of the valley was flat, and fern and wild flowers grew along the stream. It was so peaceful in this green glade, the cows would linger there in the hot summer and in the winter they'd be sheltered from the wind. The stream flowed gently over the flat rocks, creating a miniature falls. Had it been a city, it would have been a beautiful park.

I could wish for more dates—years, months, days specified—but perhaps that is the author's deliberate effort to keep her work from dating and ageing. I could wish for more recollections from the Flatters' years out sixteen miles in the country from Ava, Missouri. Her publisher, the American Studies Press, Inc., of 13511 Palmwood Lane, Tampa, Florida, notes that Ardell Flatter is at work on a novel. If it is as good as *BUT FIRST*, I am anxious to read it.

Walter Darrell Haden