

Folklife—a celebration

Dressed in baggy-legged blue denim overalls, an orange-and-brown-striped shirt, scruffy brown boots and a straw hat, Stanley played his dulcimer and banjo, sang, danced, told stories and answered questions for the throngs of festival goers who gathered near him.

"I make this stuff right here," he says, pointing to a table of banjos and dulcimers in front of him. "I've been making banjos for about 52 years now, off and on. I learned from my great-grandpa, my grandpa and my dad. I've been making dulcimers for about 20 years."

"I've made so many banjos, I can't keep up with 'em all," he says, picking one up and wiping off fingerprints with his red handkerchief.

"I made 160 dulcimers, then quit counting. I've probably made 300 in all."

Stanley makes one instrument a week, either a banjo or dulcimer, spending about 36 hours on each one, not counting cutting and hauling his own wood. Materials cost Stanley \$25 and he charges \$85-\$90 for a banjo or dulcimer. That works out to be \$1.66 for an hour of Stanley's labor. It's less than minimum wage, but that doesn't bother him.

"I like working for myself," Stanley says, leaning back in a blue plastic chair and tipping his hat back a bit.

"Ain't nobody bossing me. I can quit and go as I please, nobody goug'in me with a stick, telling me to git to work."

"I made my first dulcimer when I was fifteen. Sold my first banjo for \$2. I send my stuff just about everywhere — all over state and out. I've shipped 'em to New York City, D.C., California, Japan, Germany. Lately, my orders have plumb piled up. I've got five banjos to do and five dulcimers to do."

Stanley says he can't get his 37-year old son or his twin grandsons interested in playing or making the instruments. "They say it's tootedious, takes too much time," he says, shaking his head.

Stanley plucks at a few banjo strings, pats it affectionately.

"I used to use cat hide in my banjos, but people didn't want you to use cat hide. My wife told me she didn't want me using our cats no more," Stanley grins, showing a gap in his lower gums where three or four front teeth are missing. "We had too many cats — 10 or 15 of 'em. But now I use ground hog hide. Go and catch 'em myself."

"I tan my own hide," he says, rubbing his banjo's cream and brown hide. "I take the ashes from my wood stove, put the ashes, and some water over the hide, put it in a pot and let it stay there about two days. Then I pull

the hair off, stretch 'em on a board and let 'em dry.

"Don't use anything but Minwax on my banjos, sometimes I'll take a damp cloth to 'em. If you get a build up of wax or varnish on it, it won't ring good, kills the sound of it, holds the sound in so it won't come through the wood," Stanley says, tapping the top of his banjo.

"My wife used to help me put hides in," he tells a crowd of festival watchers. "But one time, we was working down on the floor and I guess a piece of glass scratched the wood of the neck. I got aggravated and she got mad, quit and said she wasn't gonna help me no more." The crowd laughs. "But it's hard to put in the hide all by



Staff photo by John Hoke

yerself," he says. The crowd nods yes.

"I build most of my banjos out of black walnut. I use some cherry, poplar, chestnut. But chestnut's getting scarce — can't hardly find that," Stanley explains loudly, straining to be heard above the bluegrass band playing on stage next to him.

"Cut and haul most of my wood myself. I buy some — I have to buy chestnut. I have my own cherry and walnut. I cure my wood five or six years in my barn before I use it," he says.

A toddler saunters by and raps on a dulcimer, tries to pick it up. A worried father mumbles something about its being too expensive to play with. Stanley doesn't say anything, but just maybe he's keeping watch out of the corner of his eye.

"This banjo has no frets," he says, picking up another banjo. "A fretless

banjo, the way the old people made 'em. You can still play just about anything you want on it." Stanley strums a little, picking up on what the stage band is playing. "My grandfather and father built the first dulcimer in this country — that we know of. Built it out of chestnut bark.

"I learned to play by watching my dad," Stanley says. "Mostly learned it myself. I picked it up by ear. I'm the fourth generation of my family to play and make 'em. My dad sold his banjos for \$3, his dulcimers for \$2.50."

Stanley laid his dulcimer across his lap and explained its parts. "The top is made of fir, the fingerboard's cherry, the ribs are black walnut, bottom's tiger maple — see, its streaked like tiger hair." And the smooth marbelized neck that it seemed everybody oohed and aahed over was made from "the burl of a maple stump."

The initials S.T.H. are carved on the back of the neck — this is one dulcimer he made for himself. The top is patterned with four hearts that Stanley carved out with his pocketknife.

Stanley starts up a spontaneous rendition of Skip to My Lou, "about the easiest piece of music there is to play," he declares, his right hand sweeping the strings with his homemade pick, his left hand holding the strings down with a hickory stick.

He cut his triangular pick from the side of a plastic milk jug and wrapped the end he holds in black tape. "Why buy a pick when you can make one yerself? Plenty of milk jugs, clorox bottles around to cut one from."

Stanley is teaching 31 seventh graders from all over the state this summer to build banjos and dulcimers. He gives four lessons at \$3 a session. He charges the same for a playing lesson.

"If they're really interested, it only takes a day or two to learn, depending on how bad you want to learn. I learnt my uncle when I was seven. I took a piece of paper and lined it up along the fingerboard and marked the notes for him."

"You gotta start out slow. Never leave a note 'til you got your beat." Stanley whizzes "Give Me the Old-time Religion" on his strings and tells some spectators, "You can play it in an hour or two, if you're interested."

Stanley plays "Barbara Allen" and gets appreciative applause. Someone asks him if he can play holding the dulcimer upright. Stanley shows he can, but somehow it's an awkward position for him and "Barbara Allen" doesn't sound the same. He lays it back in his lap and plays the "Wildwood Player," thumping his foot on the ground and nodding his head to the beat.

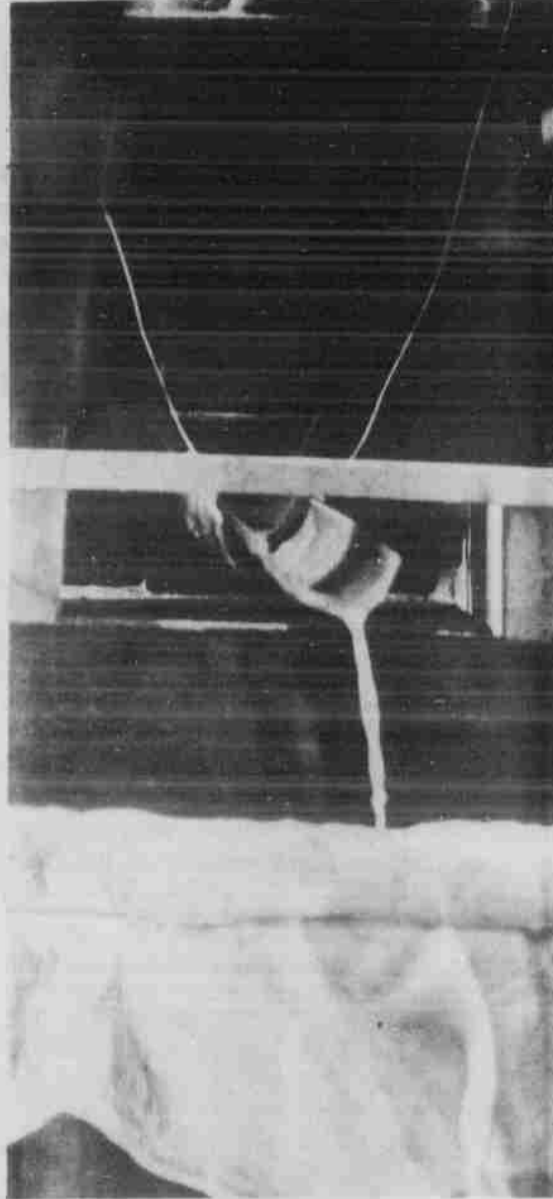
Another bystander asks why he plays only three of the four strings. "Dulcimers only had three strings originally," he says. "They can have three, four or five strings. I can play a tune on one string just as good as I can on a five. The more strings, the more volume, that's all." Some onlookers look doubtful. "The more strings, the more longer it takes to tune," Stanley says.

Strains of a drinking song come from the stage and Stanley explains that once upon a time he got in "with the wrong crowd, thirty years ago, and drank too much. Ain't no good in it. I have a beer now and then. I could go fer one now when it's hot like this."

"Ragtime Annie" is being played on stage and Stanley sings softly the last few bars. "I just play the old ones. I don't learn nuthin' new. Someone took me to Charlotte and I heard whatever ya call it, hard rock, can't remember their name. But I really liked it. They really get with it. Mostly I like old-time stuff though."

"I hardly play at home much anymore. Might play an hour or two a day. Might not play for two or three days. Haven't done much in the past two months."

Stanley is one of those mountain folk who just can't resist the sounds of a fiddle. He hears some bluegrass plucking on stage, sees folks dancing and jumps up saying, "Think I'll go



down and help 'em." He grabs the hands of a lone dancer, swings her around, kicks higher than other dancers forty years younger.

"Whoo! Hit it Stanley," a band member calls. The song ends. Stanley bows, tips his hat and hustles back to his seat. He is elated. "Can't let that get by with all that good music. Used to dance all night at the corn shuckings," he says, hardly out of breath.

The afternoon grows late. The crowd thins, but still people want to hear Stanley play.

"It takes an hour, hour and a half for my hand to warm up." He flexes his fingers. "My hand's gettin' a little stiff right now. When it gets to where I can't go where I wanna go, I'll quit. When I have to crawl to git someplace, I'll quit. But I ain't crawlin' yet."

—Patty Grebe

In the midst of the Folklife Festival's celebration of North Carolinian traditional arts and crafts, there is a stark 18th century edifice that lends testimony to the state's contribution to industrial development in the emerging United States.

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The popularity of the Durham Folklife Festival attests to the continuing appeal of handicrafts. People still flock to museums to view the survivals of a past way of life, or wander once a year through crafts fairs to purchase handmade quilts, jewelry, or pottery.

In spite of the current vogue, however, folk arts have a precarious existence. A particular skill may die with its practitioner, a piece of history gone, never to be regained.

It was to preserve the lore and folk crafts of the Appalachians that the John C. Campbell Folk School was created. Located in Brasstown, in the western mountains of North Carolina, the Folk School offers instruction in metal and woodworking, weaving and needlecraft, folk dancing, pottery, and a variety of other folk arts.

The school was founded in 1925 by Olive Dame Campbell and Marguerite Butler Bidstrup with the enthusiastic support of local citizens. It is organized in

the tradition of schools to emphasize instruction by hand and its instruction far away as Vermont or as close as Appalachian communities.

Many of the crafts they were practicing in the spinning instance, students complete process hand yarn, from spinning to coloring made from natural gathered by themselves. Like basketry learn to split that basketweaving.

The school workshops in folk dancing, with dancing, with every spring and summer. Unlike other camps, the school encourages participation, encourages week Family Folk summer for families ages 6-17.



Staff photo by Allen Jernigan