

A Community Celebration of Place

by Laura Caldwell Anderson

DURING THE SUMMER of 1998, students and elders from four member schools and communities of the PACERS Small Schools Cooperative performed at the City Stages Music Festival in Birmingham, Alabama, and as part of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the Mall in Washington, D.C. These performances, along with two compact disc recordings released by Folkways Records—“Here I Stand: Elders’ Wisdom, Children’s Song, Larry Long with the Youth and Elders of Rural Alabama” (1996) and “Children’s Music Collections” (1998)—represent recognition of the value of youth and elders working together. The sight and sound of their combined voices is powerful, as are the stories of life and work in rural places about which they sing.

The PACERS Small Schools Cooperative is an association of 29 small, rural schools located throughout the state of Alabama. Member schools and communities of the Cooperative engage in collaborative projects that serve to celebrate and prove the viability of small rural schools and places. One such project is “Community Celebration of Place,” an intergenerational educational process developed by folk musician and educator Larry Long. Fifteen schools and communities of the PACERS Cooperative have participated in the process since 1994.

Working together, Long and students in rural Alabama invite community elders into schools to tell their life stories—stories that Long and students turn into song. After creating melodies based on the characters or personalities of interviewees, Long involves students in fashioning elders’ words into song and performing the results for communities. The “Community Celebration of Place” process, then, is both intergenerational and interdisciplinary. Students become interviewers, historians, and artists. Elders are recognized as rich community resources. And their work together, and with Long, results in important documentation of community.

In addition to the “Community Celebration of Place” process, other projects of the PACERS Cooperative’s Better Schools Building Better Communities Program, such as book shows, greenhouses, community history, and photography, provide opportunities for youth and elder collaboration. Approaches to teaching and learning that arise from involvement in the projects are exciting to members of the Cooperative. Teachers have found that knowledge of elders’ experiences can enhance students’ acquisition of academic skills by creating a context for academic subject matter. In addition, the work simply makes youth and elders feel good about one another, strengthening relationships between schools and communities. According to Celia Sampley, a young elder from Arley, Alabama, known for her storytelling, the community celebration process has made her feel honored and proud of herself and the students. While she may always have known the students and all their kin, she now knows that they have a capacity

for and an interest in learning local history and culture. She told them her story and they told it back to her and all of Arley—even to a large urban audience in Birmingham—in song.

Laura Caldwell Anderson is the Celebration/Documentation Coordinator for the PACERS Small Schools Cooperative at the University of Alabama Program for Rural Services and Resources.

Listen to the Singing of the Songs in Your Soul

She had frames built by her father
That hung from the ceiling
In the house and made a lining
Hooked around the wood
Picking seeds out of the cotton
For the quilt she was making
I don't know how she did it
But she always did it good

Taking baths in a washtub
Outside in the summer
Sleeping between four quilts
In the winter to keep warm
Killing hogs to make chittlins
Making lard in a wash pot
For the chittlin supper
In these hollers I call home

Her great-grandmother an herb doctor
Her grandfather a soldier
In the Civil War
He passed away too soon
Down by the bubbly waters
She put her hand down under
Planting by the seasons
Beneath the circling moon

(Chorus)

Her grandmother full blooded
Cherokee from Carolina
Who traveled down through Georgia
She was not alone
Even though she was married
She could not be buried
Beside my great-grandfather
To mix with the white man's bones

(Chorus)

Love God
Love your family
Love your friends
Love your teachers
Love the books you're reading
If you read you will know
How to do the rest of living
Through a lifetime of giving
Listen to the singing
Of the songs in your soul

We were poor but didn't know it
There were things we never heard of
People call us Redneck Hillbillies
Though my Mom part German Jew
Who believed in Decoration
To honor your loved ones
To stand beside the waters
Of the love they have for you

(Chorus)

Without penicillin
She would use whatever
Star and snake root
And sassafras tea
When hurt she used Mullein
On my body when swollen
Without a tooth brush

Words and music by Larry Long with assistance from Sherrill Williams's 5th grade of Meek School, Arley, AL Inspired by Celia Sampley