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# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

THE PEOPLE OF  
CUMBERLAND GAP  
JOHN FETTERMAN 591  
BRUCE DALE

ANTARCTICA'S  
NEARER SIDE  
SAMUEL W. MATTHEWS 622  
WILLIAM R. CURTSINGER

NEPAL'S ROADLESS KARNALI:  
AN AMERICAN FAMILY  
EXPLORES IT ON FOOT essay  
LILA M. AND BARRY C. BISHOP

CARNIVAL IN TRINIDAD  
HOWARD LA FAY 693  
WINFIELD PARKS

FIRST PHOTOGRAPHS  
OF SNOW LEOPARDS  
IN THE WILD 702  
GEORGE B. SCHALLER

UGANDA, AFRICA'S  
UNEASY HEARTLAND  
HOWARD LA FAY 708  
GEORGE F. MOBLEY





# The People of Cumberland Gap

By JOHN FETTERMAN

Photographs by BRUCE DALE

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER

I KNOW A PLACE where there are still a few of them: free spirits, independent, proud, and self-sufficient, living in harmony with the remnants of the great Appalachian forest their ancestors settled more than two centuries ago. They are all that remain now of the true mountaineers, the children of the pioneers who came to tame the Appalachians. They cling to the values and habits of the frontier: devotion to the land, deep loyalty to family, physical courage, respect for the pledged word, patience, curiosity, fatalism, and superstition.

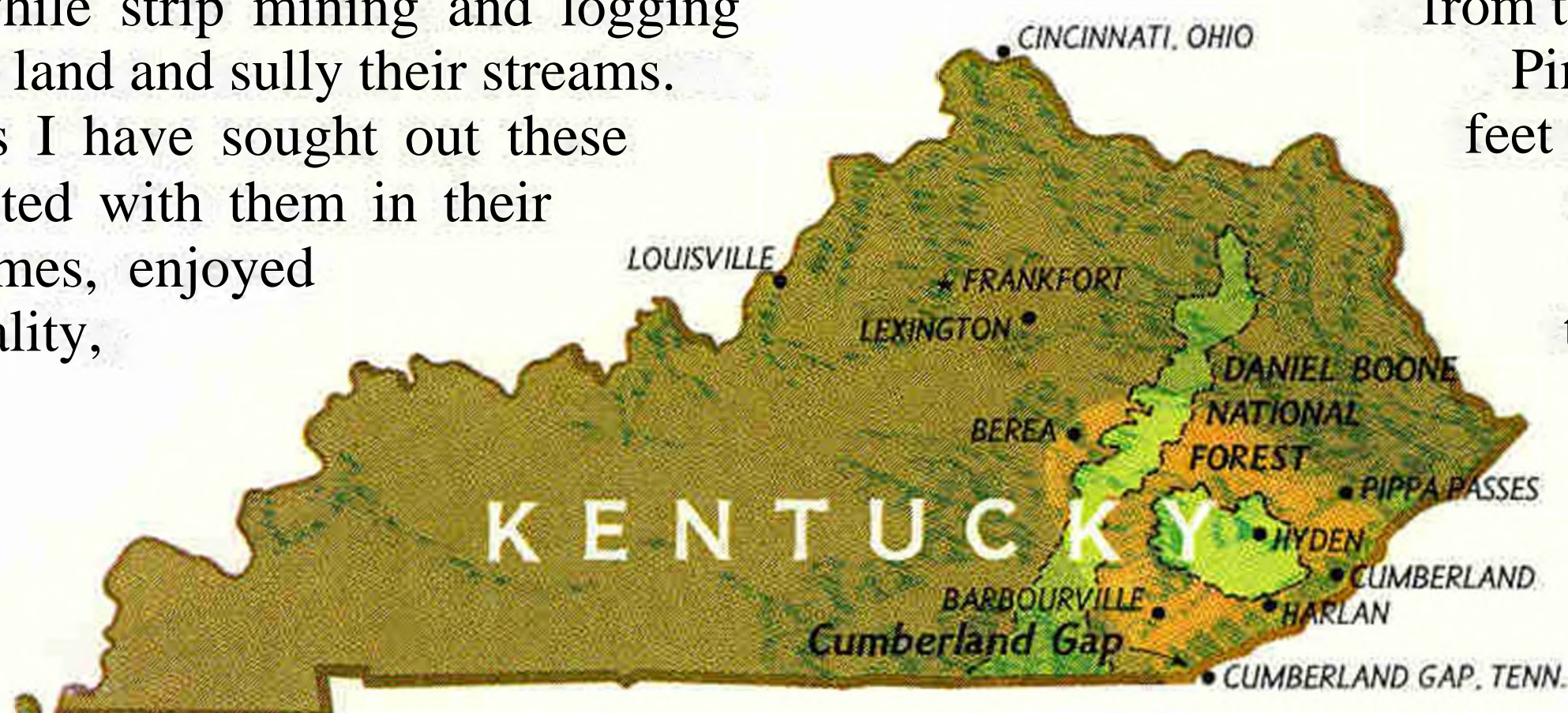
But the mountain people are now found deeper and deeper in remote hollows, driven almost to extinction by the region's poverty and by a society that has little patience with pioneers, while strip mining and logging ravage their land and sully their streams.

For years I have sought out these people, visited with them in their isolated homes, enjoyed their hospitality,

hunted and laughed with them, written about them. And with great sadness I have watched their numbers decrease, despite their amazing talent for overcoming adversity.

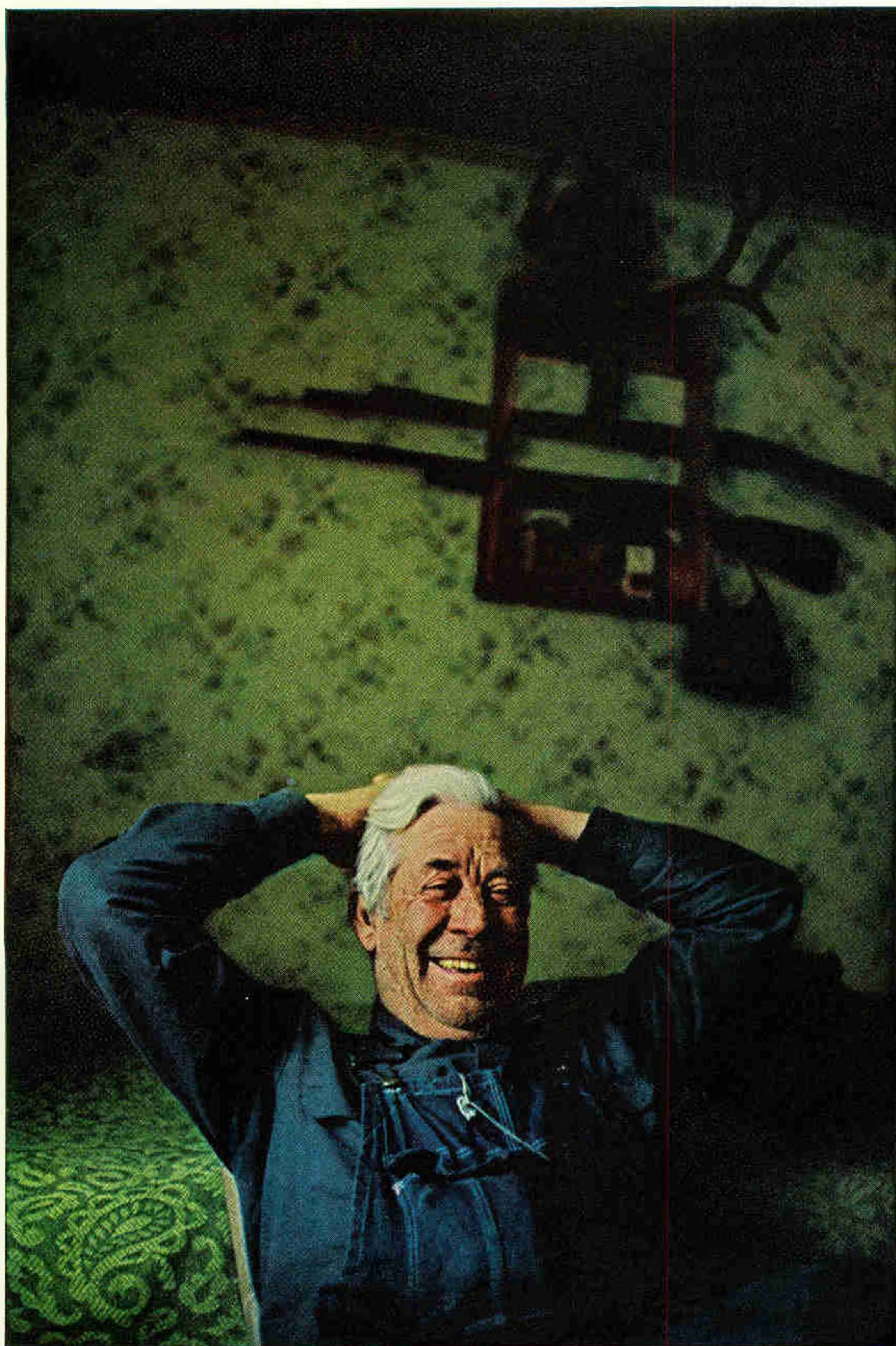
Sometimes I stand upon a sheer, high place of rock near where Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee meet and think of these people as I look down into the V-shaped cleft named Cumberland Gap (following pages). The gap was carved by a stream following a fault line through massive Cumberland Mountain, a wall across the path of westward expansion. The gap was discovered in the mid-1700's; but not until a quarter of a century later did the dramatic migration into Kentucky really get underway.

As you look down into the gap from the place they call the Pinnacle, you are 1,300 feet above the lush valley of the Powell River and 800 feet above the saddle of the gap.



*East Kentucky's hills "Cumberland Country" — preserve a self-reliant way of life inherited from the pioneers who streamed westward through Cumberland Gap.*

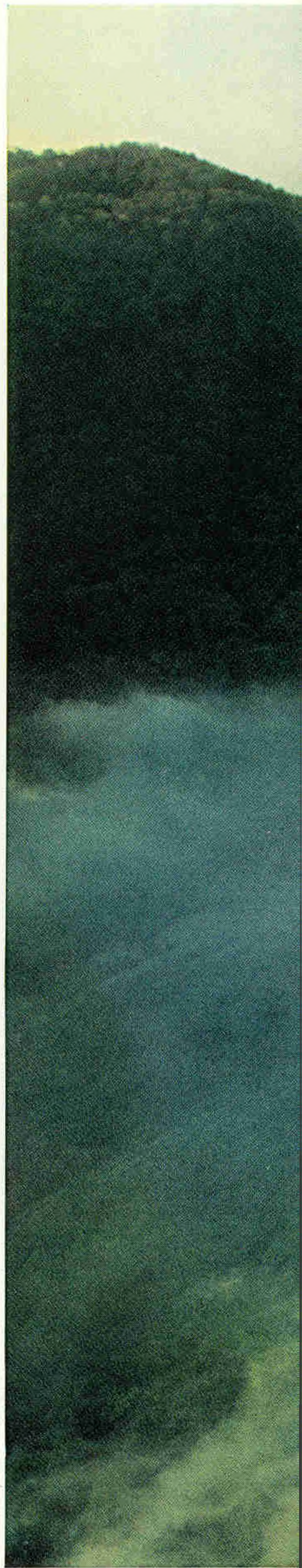




EKTACHROME (ABOVE) AND KODACHROME © N.G.S.

**“I get up at daybreak,”** says 70-year-old John Caldwell, **“and I still don’t** have enough time to do my chores.” But night brings ease here in his home on Laurel Fork near Hyden, Kentucky. He and his wife Lottie, 65, typify the industrious folk who dwell in the state’s mountain hollows.

Mr. Caldwell’s ancestors, with 300,000 other pioneers, moved westward in the late 1700’s. To reach the wilderness, they funneled through Cumberland Gap (**right**), which had been explored by Dr. Thomas Walker—a Virginia physician turned land speculator—and later by Daniel Boone. Today a highway ribbons the passage where three states meet. This view looks south-eastward from Kentucky; over the mountain lie Virginia and Tennessee.











KODACHROMES © N.G.S.

**"Sure, I fall in sometimes.** Just change my shoes." For 49 years Lottie Caldwell has used a log to cross this creek beside her house. With her dog Rover, she heads out to pick poke and other wild greens.

**Forging a wagon brace,** John Caldwell works at his blacksmith shop in a cliffside cave behind his home. With his wife toiling beside him, he cultivates tobacco, corn, and a variety of vegetables on his 300 acres.

It might have been only yesterday that some 300,000 hardy people passed there—but that flood of pioneers came between 1775 and 1800.

On a day of spectacular blue skies and huge white clouds, I stood there with Joseph Kulesza, the cigar-smoking Superintendent of Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, and two National Park Service historians, Bernard Goodman and Bob Munck.

"I wonder what we would have seen if we could have been standing here for the past two centuries," I mused.

Goodman is a quiet, meticulous historian with a unique feeling for the flow of human events. "The people who passed here were a tough stock," he said. "It took a lot of nerve to leave civilization and come into this uncharted country."

Later, in his office, Goodman showed me a quote from Frederick Jackson Turner, the noted historian of the American frontier:

"Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by."

Outside his office in park headquarters, civilization was still passing: huge interstate diesel-powered trucks, tourists towing trailers in which they would camp that night, perhaps on the same spot Daniel Boone once chose.

"The traces of the old pioneer are almost gone now," Goodman was saying.

But he is not completely gone, and I had several aching muscles in my legs as a reminder. I was still sore from a high-ridge hunt for rattlesnakes a few days earlier with a 70-year-old mountaineer named John Caldwell.

**O**N A CLEAR, warm spring morning when the fog shroud had lifted from the lonely and lovely creek called Laurel Fork, I walked across a log bridge with John Caldwell to watch while he made some small parts in his blacksmith shop. The shop consists of a hand-cranked forge, an anvil, and a few tools, all of which John keeps in a shallow cave, or rock house, near his home south of Hyden (opposite). The term "rock house" is one of those handed-down phrases. Indians, early hunters from the Carolinas, and pioneer families lived in these rock houses while en route, while hunting, or while a cabin was being built.

John Caldwell fired up the forge, cranking the bellow's until the coals in the fire bowl were







**Creek and road nearly merge** when spring rains deluge the countryside near Pippa Passes, Kentucky. In such narrow, isolated vales live the so-called hillbillies of Appalachia. "Like the land they live on, they are torn and bleeding, and have survived without hope or champion," says author John Fetterman. "The descendants of strong men who wrested the hills from the Indians and then defended them from the British, they now sit disconsolately in poverty." Industry, the author laments, has scarred east Kentucky's mountains with rapacious mining and logging practices. Eroded slopes, polluted streams, and ravaged forests have turned a land of plenty into a bleak region peopled by welfare recipients.

**Shy eyes peek** over the edge of a porch when a stranger comes to visit a rural home.



glowing. Then he pounded a piece of hot metal into shape for a brace for his wagon. He is an erect, proud man in bib overalls and heavy work shoes, a man who can wear a three-day stubble on his face and a weathered hat with great dignity.

"Everybody 'round here is studying something to make some money on," John told me. In many east Kentucky counties, more than half the people are on welfare. But not John Caldwell. "I been over in Harlan in a supermarket onc't and saw a big stout man with a buggy full of food and he paid for it with food stamps." There was a tinge of disgust in his steady voice.

"I'd say 20 or 30 years ago, back about that time, people had plenty to eat. There are people on these creeks now who don't even have a potato patch. They live on the giveaway.

They don't care for pride no more. I never got a nickel of that stuff in my life. Long as I'm able to work, I don't want nobody to give me nothin'." He punctuated the last sentence with sharp blows with the heavy hammer. At 70 he appeared to have many years of independence left.

**W**IELDING LONG TONGS, John held up the piece of metal and examined it carefully. "Little things, I make them myself," he said. "No use for brought on tools." "Brought on" means store-bought, and on farms such as John Caldwell's 300 steep acres, things like hoes, plow blades, rakes, hinges, knives, even furniture, are usually made as the need arises.

I asked him about his early years on Laurel Fork, and he settled onto a huge rock, his eyes





KODACHROMES © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

lighting with the pleasure of a mountain man who has found a listener.

"Why, I wouldn't have in mind calling no names," John said, "but back then there was no kind of work in here. There were some who would carry moonshine out in half-gallon fruit jars in their saddlebags. They'd leave about midnight and get over Pine Mountain into the coal camps around Harlan about daylight, doing their traveling when there were not too many people stirring. Why, during World War I, moonshine went to \$40 a gallon. It only sells for \$10 or \$12 now and there ain't much of it."

John leaned nearer. "I knowed one fellow broke his moonshine jars and he was carrying a miner's carbide light. He caught on fire and burned up right there on the mountain."

He looked silently at the high ridges across

the creek for several minutes, and a new<sup>7</sup> excitement was in his eyes when he spoke again. "I don't reckon you would care to go huntin' rattlesnakes," he said. I had heard of John Caldwell's reputation as a snake hunter. He studied me for a few moments, and his voice was gentle, seeking understanding.

"There never was a man loved to outwit wild things like me," he said. "Why, I'll hunt a week for a bee tree just to know I can find it, then go on back home and never go back to that tree. I like to find me a rattlesnake that thinks he's got hisself good and hid from me." John was still watching me closely, measuring my reaction, and he added, "Now, I suppose you've played some golf?" I nodded. He said, "Well, sir, snake hunting is like that... like a sport to me."

I jumped at his invitation and, aloud, he



began to plan. "We'll go on a Sunday, and we better take Earl Chappell. 01' Earl is the snakingest man around."

Several weeks later, on the Saturday before the hunt, I drove the 200 miles from my home in Louisville to a tiny cabin on the banks of Cutshin Creek, east of Hyden, where I had been instructed to go. The cabin belongs to William Dixon, whom everyone calls "Billie," and who had celebrated his 66th birthday the day before. Billie met me there and confirmed that I was to spend the night.

Before nightfall, another member of the party arrived, and I recognized him immediately. He was B. Robert Stivers, a compact, virile man of 48 who, like Billie Dixon, is a stalwart in mountain Republican politics and who also, like Billie, had been a circuit judge.

Now he was a member of the Kentucky Alcoholic Beverage Control Board.

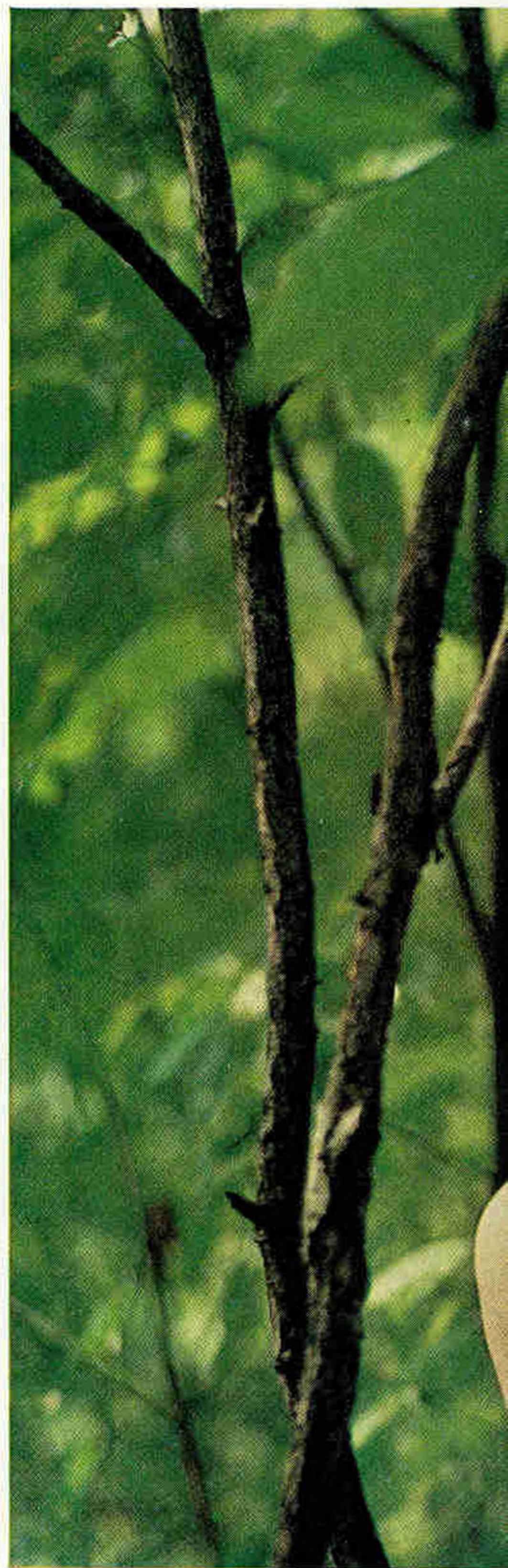
Six years earlier I had heard Bert Stivers deliver a speech in the Barbourville courthouse, in which he mentioned a nearby stream called Stinking Creek. That remark set me off on a project that resulted in a book about the creek with the unsavory name.\*

There was a temptation to settle down there on the bank of Cutshin and reminisce, but Billie Dixon, our host, reminded us that John Caldwell would be "getting a mite edgy" knowing that the party was gathering and that he was not there to enjoy it.

There are no telephones on Laurel Fork, so we drove the 30 or so miles to John's place to

\*E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York, N.Y., published the author's book, *Stinking Creek*, in 1967.

**"Because it's fun**—that's all the reason we do it." Capturing poisonous snakes is sport in Cumberland country, and Earl Chappell, who lives near Hyden, enjoys a reputation as "the snakingest man around." Finding a copperhead (**below**), Earl snares it with a homemade "snake stick," a metal rod with a clamp on the end. When the author went snaking with Earl and John Caldwell, the mountain men apologized for finding only seven. Once they caught 42 copperheads and rattlesnakes in a day—"one heavy sack."





fetch him. From John's house we drove a tortuous route along the creeks until we came to a wide stream called Lower Bad Creek, where Earl Chappell lives.

Earl, whom John had called "the snakingest man around," is a dark-complexioned, slender man of 36 (below). He is lean and quick of action and eagerly agreed to go along next morning. "I'll be there to meet you on Laurel Fork if something don't bad happen," he promised. We all shook hands on it and drove back to Billie Dixon's cabin on Cutshin.

Meanwhile, John's daughter, Alice, a slender, quiet mountain woman who lives nearby, had gone to the cabin to work those miracles mountain women perform in their kitchens. While the aroma of Alice's late supper of ham, biscuits, corn bread, green beans,

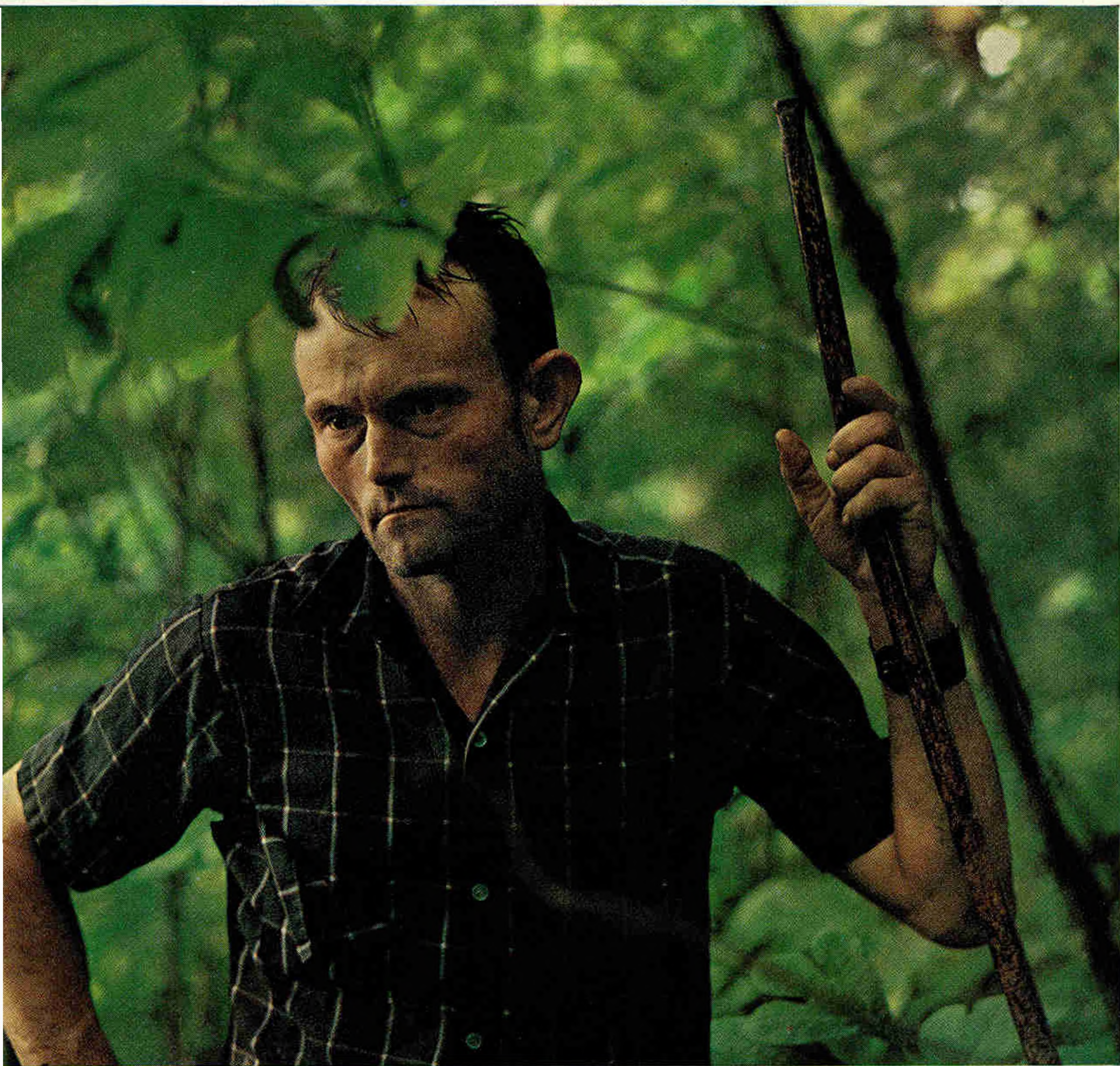
fried potatoes, and coffee wafted out to us, we sat by the creek, and some of us "settled our stomachs" with a drop or two of bourbon.

AFTER SUPPER we sprawled content and stuffed. And with two veterans of the A local political wars such as Bert and Billie, and a weathered mountain man like John on hand, one thing was inevitable. Above all else, mountain friends cherish the telling of tales. So with the soft gushing of the creek as a background, and an early evening breeze nudging the poplar trees overhead, the three friends told their tales.

Billie Dixon, squatting comfortably and chewing on a blade of grass, recalled, "There was a lawyer around here called in a repairman and got charged \$60 for some little job.

599

KODACHROMES BY JOHN FETTERMAN © N.G.S.





That lawyer said, 'Well, now, I'm a lawyer down in town with a right good practice and I don't make that kind of money.' The repairman looked at him sort of sad and said, 'Well, I didn't either when I was a lawyer.' "

Bert said his new car reminded him of something that had happened over near the Cumberland River. "Man in an air-conditioned car picked up an old farmer on a hot, dusty road and had the air conditioning turned up until the car was downright chilly. The farmer pulled his collar up and was slapping his arms to get warm. Fellow asked him where he was going. The farmer said, 'Well, sir, when you picked me up I was going down to the bottoms and cut me some hay, but with this here sudden change in the weather I guess I'll go back and kill hogs.' "

Billie Dixon, the son of a mountain sheriff and a veteran of the judiciary, placed a hand on John's shoulder and announced with exaggerated sadness that there are some men who don't always tell the truth.

"Puts me in mind of the time John here was 'lectioneering for me when I was running for judge, and he went to this house where I had some deadly enemies. A man came to the door with a rifle and said, 'You here to 'lectioneer for that no-account Billie Dixon?' Well, John said right away, 'No, sir, I would not do such a thing as that. I'm here buying cattle. You got any cows for sale?' "

**T**HE WIND WAS KICKING UP, there was lightning across the ridges to the west, and Billie Dixon reminded us that we would be arising before daylight. "Best way to get a good night's sleep is to retire with a clear conscience." So we did. I lay by an open window, and when the storm broke I could feel the cool rain misting in through the screen. I wondered briefly whether the thunder and the excitement of the approaching hunt would keep me awake.

The next thing I knew, Billie Dixon was standing in his small kitchen, waving a skillet of bacon, and calling, "We best have a bite before we set out." It was not yet 5 a.m.

En route to the high ridges where the rattlers hunt and sun, our party grew to seven, as Earl and two of John's grandsons, Duane

Lewis, a boy of 14, and Wayne Russell, a muscular 19-year-old, joined us.

Each hunter carried a "snake stick." Earl's was of metal; the rest were ingeniously fashioned from a stout hickory or oak stick and a piece of cord. The stick has two holes bored near one end, about three inches apart, and the string passes through them, forming a loop. When the loop is dropped over a snake's head, a quick tug on the string snares it, enabling the hunter to extract the snake from its hiding place.

**N**EAR WHERE BEAR BRANCH empties into Greasy Creek, John pointed toward the fog-shrouded ridge with his snake stick and said, "In my opinion, we'll find them up there." Within a few yards we were soaking wet as we clambered upward through thickets of rhododendron and mountain laurel, their waxy leaves glistening with rain from the night's downpour.

Earl Chappell, racing like a deer through the tangle, led the way. Within a mile, I was panting and blowing, and when Earl slumped to the ground for a quick rest in deference to me, I was immensely grateful.

Earl pulled out an ancient pocketknife and observed that "this old thing won't hardly cut a piece of bologna," then felled an inch-and-a-half-thick hickory sapling with the knife's razor edge, and with a few strokes fashioned a walking stick. "Might do something for you," he said, handing it to me. It did. From then on, I could take several steps up the steep wet forest floor without slipping back almost as far as I had climbed.

Once on top of the ridge we were in "snake country," and there was a new intenseness and silence as we walked, frequently catching breathtaking views of the mountains through openings in the forest canopy. But there was little time to sight-see. From a few feet ahead, Earl's low voice reported, "Fellows, I reckon I got me a copperhead here."

He held the poisonous creature aloft, writhing futilely in the jaws of his well-used snake stick. It is his own invention, a long rod with angled jaws of steel that grip the snake's neck. He fashioned it from parts scavenged from

*(Continued on page 60S)*

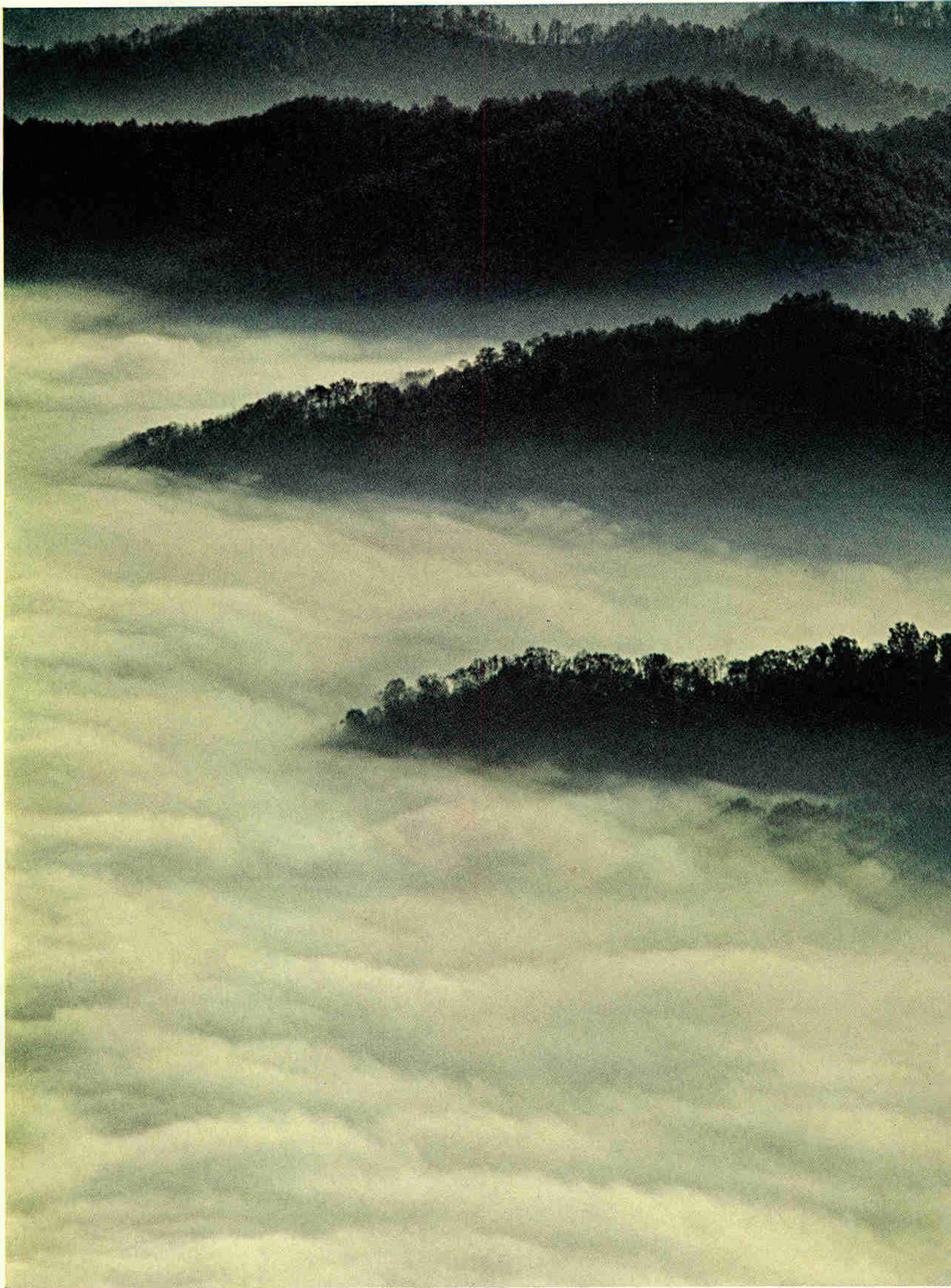
**Red tint of death** colors a creek south of Berea. Trickling past a weathered barn, the polluted stream carries poisons leached from mining wastes that can kill any wildlife or plants they touch. Only a few streams deep in the hills are still pure enough for drinking and cooking. Many of the younger mountain people have abandoned creek life and moved to cities and towns.

kodAchrome © n.g.s.









**Fingers of fog** probe the hollows of Harlan County before the morning sun burns them away. Since 1965 the United States Forest Service has been buying acreage on such wooded ridges, whose natural resources have





KODACHROMF © N.G.S.

been exploited and abused. Under government control the land—and its people—benefit from improved logging and mining practices, fire protection, reforestation, and rehabilitation of abandoned strip-mining areas.







an old car. He popped the copperhead into a burlap bag and strode off, resuming the hunt.

At one point the ridge led out to a narrow spur where the rock outcrop was heavy and the undergrowth was more sparse. It was here that John predicted, "There'll be a rattler right around here." There was.

The hunters, often on all fours, shoved their faces near the shallow' crevices to search the dark recesses where rattlers take refuge. When I asked whether this was not dangerous, John assured me, "A rattler can only strike about half the distance of his body. So you see a four-foot rattler, you keep your face two feet away." I had no intention of testing this bit of mountain wisdom.

John, peering into the opening beneath a rock, soon said, "Well, boys, this one's a rattler." He poked his snake stick into the opening, fishing for the snake's head, and the unmistakable buzz of the snake's rattles filled the air. "He's a-singin' now," John said happily. In a few moments he hauled the snake

out, held it aloft for all to inspect, and dropped it into the sack.

From ridge to ridge we fought our way through the undergrowth, and twice I fell heavily, tripping over the tough saw brier vines. My companions politely pretended not to notice my clumsiness. Sometime after noon, when the fog had long been gone and a wet, sweltering heat was lying upon the mountains, we stopped for a quick lunch of canned minced ham and bread—and long drinks from one of those miniature cool creeks born in heavily wooded mountain coves that remain in perpetual twilight.

The snake hunt was not going well. It would be over soon, and the total bag was four copperheads and three rattlers. I knew that John and Earl often catch as many as thirty rattlers in a day. John w<sup>as</sup> embarrassed. Once he fell into step beside me and said, "I was wondering that if you put my picture in your magazine, could you write something like, 'This man has caught 42 rattlers in one day.' " I assured him that it was possible and that as far as I was concerned, the hunt was a huge success, much more fun than golf.

**W**E CAME OFF THE RIDGES ahead of the twilight, along a creek that led us toward John's farm. Mrs. Caldwell, a dark-eyed, friendly woman, threw me a huge smile, pulled a heavy hickory chair into the yard for me, and said she had "a little snack 'bout ready."

John was still worried about the dearth of rattlers. "Snakes are smart," he said. "A hard critter to figure out."

"Not as smart as coons," Earl said. "Smartest animal in the woods. I laid a trap along Lower Bad Creek for a big wildcat I saw. Baited it with some canned salmons and buried it. A coon came by that night and dug up the trap and ate the salmons and turned the trap over and buried it under a pile of dirt. Then he messed on the pile of dirt and went on about his business and he never did spring that trap. How do you figure to outwit a critter like that?"

Mrs. Caldwell called us into the kitchen,

**Furrowing a tilted field,** Golden (Bunt) Howard guides a bull-tongue plow behind pony Bill (**following pages**). Bunt lives south of Hyden on a two-acre homestead beside Greasy Creek, only half a mile from the farmhouse he was born in 44 years ago.



KODACHROMES © N.G.S.

**High-jumping hound,** yapping in triumph, wins the "first-tree" award at a drag race of the Clay County Coon Club. The scent, laid by dragging a sack of raccoon fat, leads to a caged animal placed high in a tree. These dogs outran eight others to find their quarry; the first to bark took top honors. A coon pelt (**above**) dries on a barn.











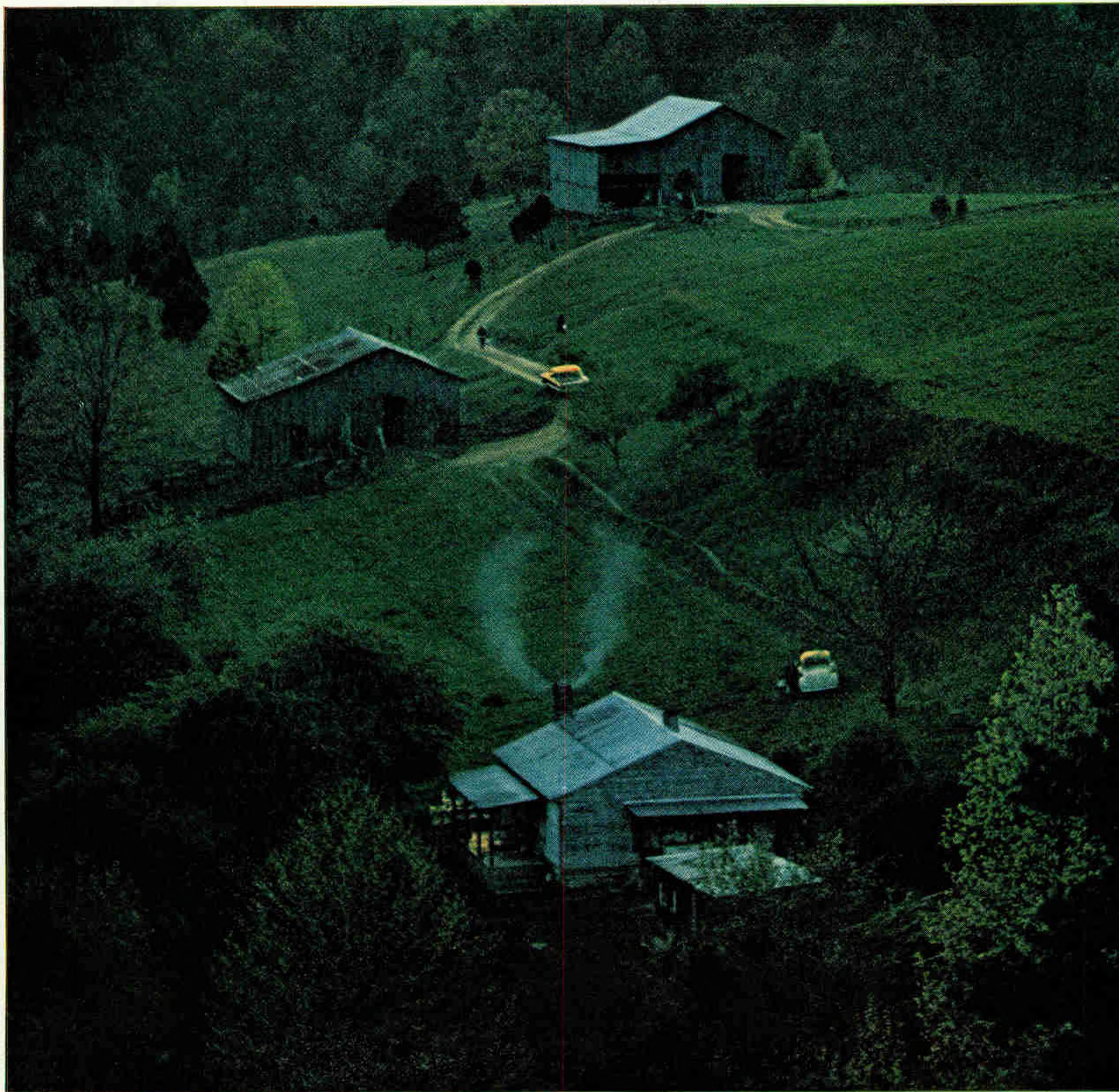
where her "snack" was spread on a sturdy wooden table: fried chicken, sliced yellow and red tomatoes, fried green tomatoes, green beans, fried okra, boiled potatoes, cucumbers, Jell-O with fruit, slaw, corn bread, homemade butter, frozen strawberries, stack cake, Kool-Aid, and coffee. I ate like a condemned man.

**D**ESPITE THE LACK of telephones and the few travelers to be met, news somehow moves swiftly. Soon after the snake hunt I called on a friend on Greasy Creek named Golden Howard. Golden, whom they call "Bunt," was plowing a bottomland tobacco patch with a bull-tongue plow drawn by a stout pony (preceding pages). Bunt is a 608

tanned hands are capable of extraordinary strength and dexterity.

He leaned upon the ash handles of the plow, polished from long use, and watched me approach. "Heard you're a snake hunter," was his greeting. Bunt then did the only thing I have ever seen him do badly. He pulled a sack of tobacco from his overall pocket and rolled a lumpy, distorted cigarette.

Bunt, using only a pocketknife and long strips of white oak, makes baskets that have found their way to such places as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C. (opposite). He has built a lathe from odds and ends of an old bulldozer and a gasoline engine; when he needs a cutting bit, he fashions one from a steel bolt. He turns out





furniture and tools for relatives and friends, using the techniques he learned from his father. But he prefers hunting and mountain farming to what he calls “crafting,” and he is amused that outsiders sometimes offer him as much as \$12 for a handmade basket that they obviously do not need for gathering eggs or carrying seed potatoes. So he does not make many.

Bunt, like John Caldwell and all true mountain men, will go to great lengths to stay away from cities and towns, which they find intolerably crowded. Bunt once was excused from jury duty when he told the judge, “It bothers me to sit in a town.” The judge, a mountain man himself, understood.

As we talked, Bunt sat on his bull-tongue

plow. He grimaced and admitted to tenderness in his mouth where a tooth had recently been. The tooth had begun to ache one night and the only dentist available was in town.

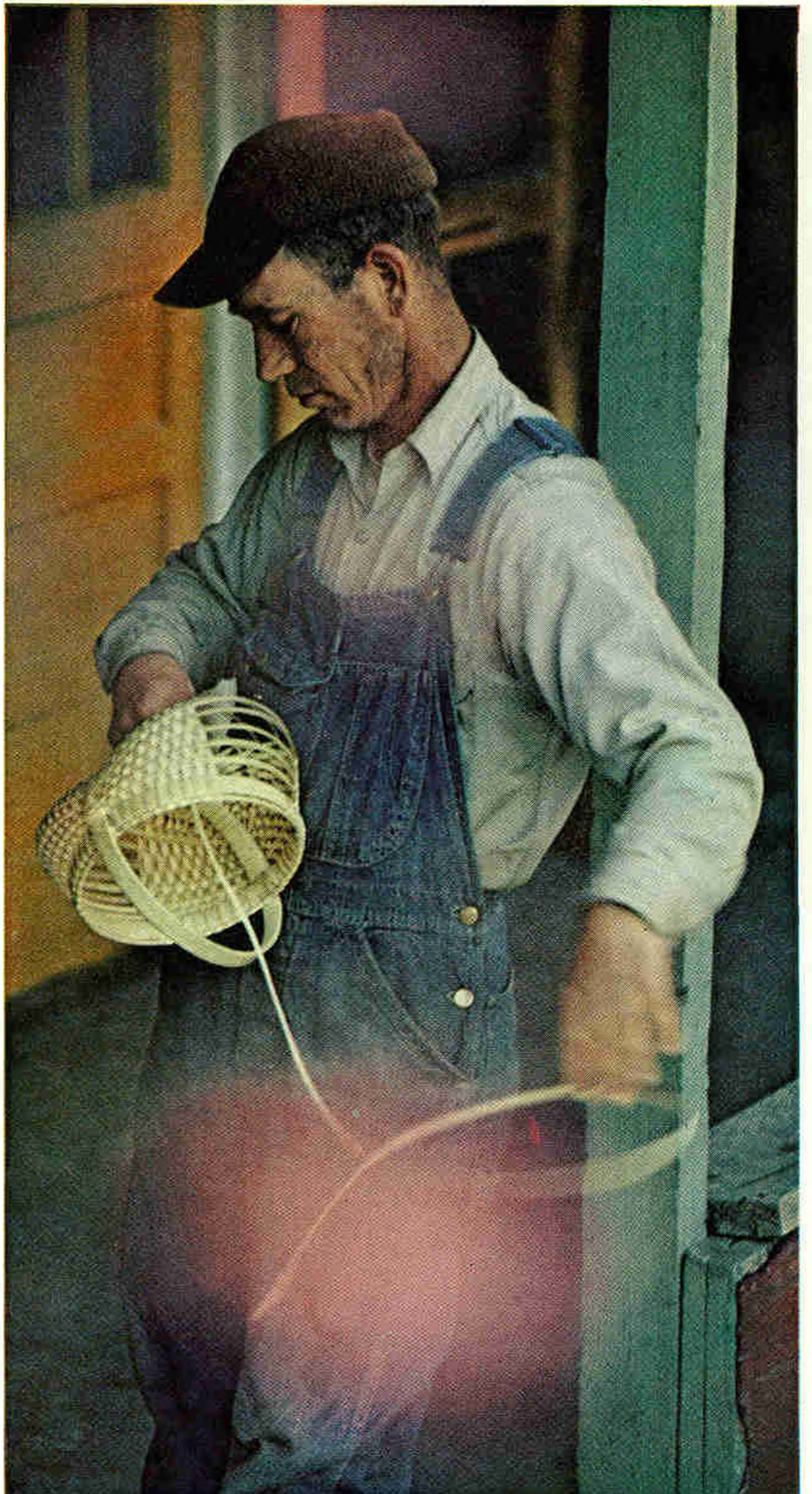
“When a tooth gets to hurtin’, a fellow will study a way to get it out,” Bunt said. “I took me a 20-pound-test fishline and doubled it. That made it 40-pound test, to tell the truth. It was plenty stout. Well, sir, it pulled the tooth for me with no trouble.” Better, it saved him a trip to the hated town.

Bunt is modest and reluctant to show visitors the things he has created with little more than a few handmade tools and imagination. But his dark-haired wife Eula Lee proudly shows off beds and gunstocks made of curly maple and black walnut, knives and tools

EKTACHROME (OPPOSITE) AND KODACHROME © N.G.S.

**As day nears its end**, wisps of smoke from a woodburning cookstove signal suppertime for “Loggie” Renner and his wife. Their neat frame house and its outbuildings sit atop a hill south of Berea. Like most mountain families, the Renners eat dinner, their heartiest meal of the day, at noon. Also like most, they eagerly pull up extra chairs for guests who drop in to “set a spell” and swap stories.

**Self-taught craftsman** Bunt Howard weaves long strips of white oak, still green and pliable, to make a strong but graceful basket. He built his trim wood-and-stone house and—with handmade tools—produces handsome furniture, looms, and musical instruments for family and friends. His main power tool is a lathe fashioned from a gasoline engine and parts of an old bulldozer.





**In a demanding land** that offers few rewards, religion provides sustaining comfort. This concrete sign, built to withstand the years—and, paradoxically, the bullets that regularly pock it—issues its prediction near the town of Cumberland in Harlan County. Similar messages adorn barns and boulders throughout the hills of Cumberland country.

**Sharpening their aim,** Bunt Howard and his son Wade practice target shooting in the yard of their home. Bunt, firing at a tin can, steadies a .22-caliber pistol on the handle of a lawn mower. Wade waits his turn with a rifle. Like most mountain men, both are exceptional marksmen and kill for meat as well as for sport.



EKTACHROME (BELOW) AND KODACHROME © N.G.S.





made from old blades salvaged from abandoned sawmills, a banjo that Bunt made for his father, and a dulcimer he had just made for his son Wade. Wade had taken to that instrument of ancient origin, and eagerly showed me how well he could play "This Land Is Your Land" and "When the Saints Go Marching In."

When the sun reached the height of its arc above the hollow, signaling noon, Eula Lee called us into the kitchen for a feast of baked young coon. Later, Bunt rested in the warm sun, smoking one of his horrendous cigarettes. He looked at the green hills and volunteered, "I like it here. I like a little room. Besides, I got nowhere to go."

**A**N AFFECTION FOR THE LAND, the vast unwritten lore of the frontier, and the memories of the early settlers are preserved in the minds of the older men, a fragile archive that too soon will be gone. Two such older men who impressed me were 75-year-old Logan Renner, the finest hand at splitting shingles I ever saw, and Irvin Pratt, who at 68 delivered mail three times a week, rain, snow, or shine, on horseback over a treacherous 18-mile mountain route. The two men live many miles apart and do not know each other, but they share a common legacy.

The last time I visited Logan, or "Loggie," as his friends call him, he made a handle for my froe from a stout length of hickory. It was a gesture of friendship and he wished me luck with the crude tool, although he knows full well that I never will be able to rive perfect oak shingles with it the way he does. There is practically no market for handmade shingles, or shakes, now, but Loggie proudly clings to the skill. An oak-shingle barn roof will last a lifetime, he assured me. "That is, if a man will die by a hundred, like he's supposed to."

A rainstorm, one of those sudden gully washers that spring from quickly darkening skies, came upon us, and we retreated to the front porch of Loggie's house, south of Berea. We munched shelled black walnuts from a gallon glass jar and visited while Loggie offered gems of hill-country wisdom.

"Take that froe of yours and always split down the tree," he advised. "Else the blade will run out on you and spile your shingles."

He turns his head slightly to one side when he talks because most of his life he has been blind in his left eye. Despite the handicap, he is one of the best shots around, and he can document this by killing a young groundhog

on the next hill, some 200 yards away, with a single shot from his .22-caliber rifle.

When he was a small boy, he was blind in both eyes, but he walked to a tiny one-room school "where the teacher let me sav my les-sons. I learned to spell and such as that, but they didn't let me do any arithmetic or geography. One day the teacher said to squirt warm milk from the cow into my eyes. My mother did that, and one eye cleared up."

The blindness in one eye did not prevent Loggie from serving briefly in the Army during World War I. He got as far as a camp in Macon, Georgia, before the Army discovered that the young sharpshooter had only one good eye.

"I asked them to keep me awhile," Loggie recalls, "bein's I already went that far. They said they didn't need me so bad. So I just walked away from that place. I figured I could shoot good as any man they had in that army. I could hit a chicken in the head, and him a-walking."

**T**HE RAIN WAS A DRUMBEAT on the galvanized tin roof of the porch, and I led Loggie into a discussion of mountain medical lore. Any veteran hillman knows that the woods contain a storehouse of herbs, or "arbs" as he calls them.

"Yeller root will cure anybody's stomach trouble," Loggie said. "We make tea out of the root. And black snakeroot is an awful good medicine. You make a tea and it will make a bowel runnin' off quit right now. Make the tea hot enough to scorch the tail off a lizard."

"Close to 40 years ago" Loggie was bothered with rheumatism. He collected a pile of the tiny aromatic plants called mountain tea and made a gallon of tea, which he sipped faithfully. "And chewed some plants and swallowed the juice and dried some plants and made them into cigarettes and smoked them." He says he hasn't been bothered with the ailment since.

I admired Loggie's cure all the more for knowing that mountain tea can be poisonous if not processed properly, and I strongly advise readers against experimenting with any of these home remedies.

Research has shown, however, that many of the mountain plants do, indeed, possess curative properties, and many are used in the manufacture of medicines and drugs prescribed today. One of the more fascinating research projects in this field is conducted at







Berea, Kentucky, by the U. S. Forest Service. In addition to determining the proper time and way to harvest such plants, the researchers under Dr. Arnold Krochmal, an economic botanist, hope to develop ways for mountain people to supplement their incomes by cultivating and selling the plants to pharmaceutical firms. The Forest Service says that there are at least 126 marketable species of medicinal plants growing in Appalachia.

Loggie Renner said that "during the depression some folks lived pretty good on sassafras tea, sorghum, and corn bread. Nothin' wrong with that. Besides, in times such as that we take care of each other. I principally kept up six or seven families. They'd a' done it for me."

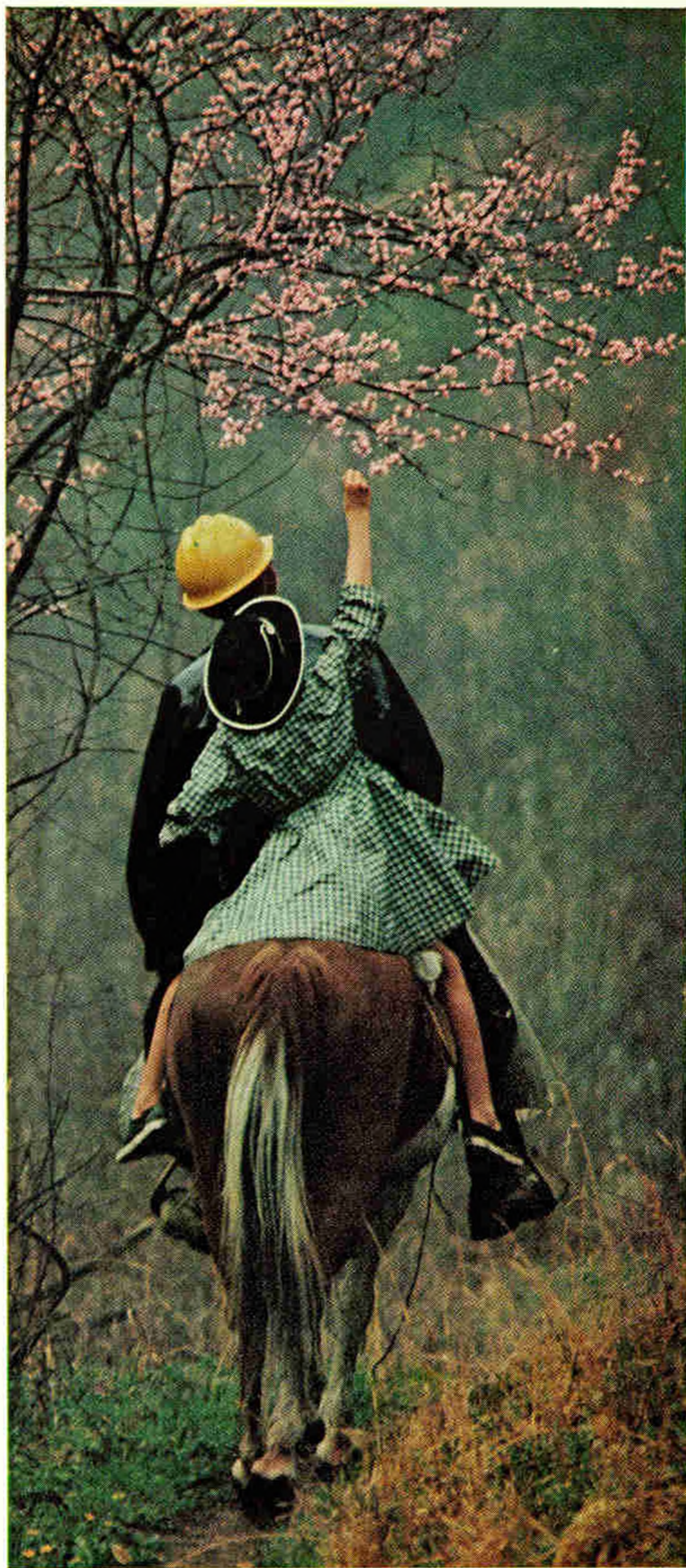
The Great Depression lay far behind Loggie Renner. There were fat cows and pigs on his hilly farm, a cash crop of tobacco was planted, and the big vegetable garden was green and growing.

Loggie has great faith in his garden. He plants it according to the chronology of the mountains. The moon tells him when, he said.

"The moon and the stars around the moon are like a big nature's clock. I plant the potatoes just before the full of the moon, then they won't go down too far in the ground and they will be easier to dig. You plant your corn when the moon is shrinking. My daughter once happened to plant corn on the new moon, and it got so tall she had to bend the stalks over to pick off the roasin' ears."

The rain stopped, and I prepared to leave, but Loggie put a thin, strong hand on my shoulder and said in mock seriousness, "A friend don't get out of here alive without eatin' with me." So we ate, and then I left. As we walked along the dirt path toward my car, Loggie handed me the froe with the new handle and warned, "Be keerful. Old man I know cut his throat with a froe. Took only one lick."

**I**RVIN PRATT was 68 last Christmas Eve, but a \$1,500-a-year contract and a deep sense of responsibility have kept him carrying the mail three times a week from Pine Top, Kentucky, to Pippa Passes (following pages). There are still a dozen or so horse-mounted rural mailmen in eastern Kentucky, holders of so-called "star route" contracts, who must carve their profits from the contract payment, bearing the expenses themselves. I have accompanied several of these mounted postmen, and Pratt's route is by far the most difficult I have seen. He has carried



EKTACHROME (ABOVE) AND KODACHROME © N.G.S.

**Extravagance of color** under a warming spring sun lures a young rider to join her grandfather on his rounds (following pages). Redbud blossoms create a rosy glow, soon to be followed by the snowy white of dogwood. May sees a wash of flowering laurel and rhododendrons.

**But winter yields reluctantly.** An April snow sprinkles eastern Kentucky's Pine Mountain with a coating of powdered sugar. Now the hill people must brace for the flood season, when rain swells the streams and water rages unchecked through the valleys. A 1957 flood claimed a dozen lives and left hundreds of families homeless.



**Man with the mail** meets a youthful welcoming committee at one of the stops on his horseback route in Knott County, Kentucky. Irvin Pratt has worn out five mounts in the 16 years he has carried the mail from Pine Top to Pippa Passes. The 68-year-old postman delivers "anything within reason," but now draws the line on the mail-order tires he once toted. When the author asked Mr. Pratt how long he planned to ride the exhausting 18-mile mountain route, the Cumberlander replied promptly, "Long as they're expecting me."

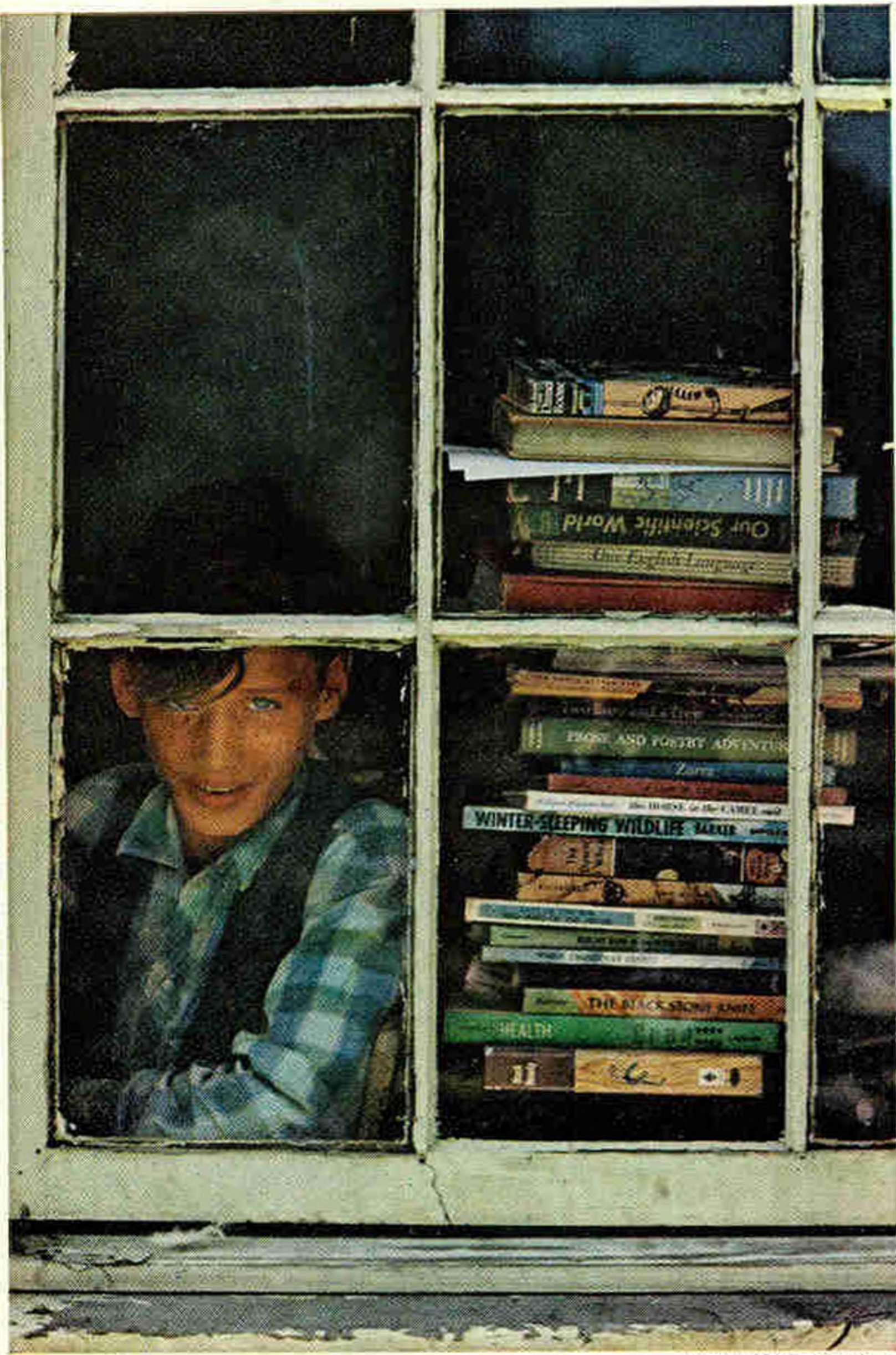
EKTACHROME © N.G.S.











KODACHROME © N.G.S.

**Afflicted with an age-old student virus**

—spring fever—a pupil gazes longingly through a window of Double Creek School, west of Hyden. The one-room schoolhouse is named for a stream that flows nearby.

the mail, through isolated steep country, off and on since 1955, and has worn out two mules and three horses that he can remember. “Seems like there was another mule or two in there somewheres.”

The last mule he had was named John, and Irvin said he cost \$200, an item that cut heavily into his annual net profit. But Irvin understands why the mail must go through.

His clients depend on him for delivery of welfare and pension checks. “And when one’s got a boy off in Viet Nam, they’re looking hard for me,” Irvin said. “It gets seven or eight below zero and the ice is on everything and you think nobody’s alive, but when they see me coming, they know there’s news.”

Irvin’s route led us up a creek called Nealy Branch, then across two lonely high mountains, until it reached the birthplace of another creek, called Hollybush. We followed this creek down toward the tiny community of Pippa Passes, where the post office is on

the campus of picturesque Alice Lloyd College, which serves the youth of that isolated area. There Irvin picked up more mail and retraced his route. It was a journey of 18 miles, and in perfect weather we completed it in a little over six hours—uncomfortable hours for me, since I had not ridden a horse in 20 years.

All the clients live near the beginning and end of the route, and for years most of Irvin’s ride over the almost trackless ridges has been a ride among ghosts. Once 15 families lived up there, but now the roads and trails have disappeared. All that remain are the shells of sturdy log houses and outbuildings, and the ruins of a schoolhouse.

“The Howards and the Honeycutts lived up there in the old days,” Irvin said. “They had a good life. Been gone a long time. I haven’t seen a soul on these two ridges in years.” He patted the bulge in his pocket where he carries a “right good .38-caliber special Smith & Wesson shootin’ pistol,” and said that infrequently he found it necessary to shoot a rabid fox.

Irvin made his round with dignified dispatch and declined the invitations to “come in and set.” He waved a greeting and kept moving as he called back, “I reckon folks will be expecting me.” He said he rarely had more than a dozen or so pieces of mail to carry, including magazines, but he tried to deliver anything addressed to people along his route. “Used to carry those big mail-order auto tires. Now I just say, ‘You’uns go to the post office and fetch ’em.’ Man’s got to be reasonable. You can ask a horse to carry so much.”

One woman on his route became a saleswoman for a home-products firm, and for a long time Irvin delivered packages from the manufacturer to her house. “Then it got to be upwards of 80 pounds. Lord, I’d have to have six arms. We worked it out where she goes and gets most of that stuff now.”

There was only one place where Irvin lingered for a few minutes, and that was at a small, neat cemetery. He pulled the horse over to the encircling fence and made a check of the graves so he could report to kinfolk that all was well. He remembers most of the people who are buried there, and after we left the cemetery he was silent for a long time.

Irvin’s mail route seems certain to continue its decrease in numbers of people and increase in numbers of abandoned homes. Poverty,



mechanization of the local mines, and the impossibility of wringing an existence from small steep farms, all combine to drive people from Appalachia.

An estimate based on the 1970 census indicates that more than a million people left Appalachia during the preceding decade. Eastern Kentucky is typical. The census showed that the two legislative districts that encompass nearly all Kentucky's mountain counties are still being drained steadily of their people. The Fifth District had 417,544 people in 1960, and declined by more than 26,000 by 1970. The Seventh District, with 444,821 people in 1960, lost more than 34,000 in the same period.

The young adults have flocked to northern and midwestern cities seeking jobs, leaving the region with increasing percentages of old people, young children, households headed by women, and the mentally and physically handicapped. There are not many people left who will preserve the legacy of the pioneers.

Many of the rural young fret away in poorly financed and understaffed schools, awaiting the day when they will be able to leave, too. But their faces still reflect the wonder and aspiration of their venturesome forebears.

In Kentucky there are approximately 70 one-room schools, and these will disappear. The last one I visited, 13 miles west of Hyden, is called Double Creek School, named for a nearby stream. It had 15 pupils spanning eight grade levels. There always is a warm welcome in such a school, because the bright-eyed and handsome children are eager to discuss "way off" places such as Louisville. They are attractive, friendly, and inquisitive, and they join eagerly in discussions.

At Double Creek, amid the wooded slopes of Daniel Boone National Forest (map, page 591), we talked, and then went outside to play marbles and basketball on the dusty playground. Then we washed our hands in the creek and returned to the small white building.

Inside there was a potbellied stove, an American flag (of 48-star vintage), and refrigerators and a cookstove to facilitate preparation of meals (following pages). For good or for bad, there soon will be no such schools. And there will be no naive mountain children gathered in such schools to charm and haunt visitors. No shy little girls who instinctively begin to smooth their hair when they see the camera; no little boys eager for friendship who slip you notes so you can compliment them on their spelling and writing.

WHEN THE CHILDREN are finally gone from the hills, the only monuments to the pioneers will be the hundreds of tiny, carefully tended mountain-side cemeteries. There is among these people the lay-led fundamentalist religion that promises a Resurrection Day, upon which there will unfold a better life; there is the unshakable faith in mountain and family. The cemeteries are testimony to these traits.

Late in May, on Memorial Day weekend, the hollows are clogged with the automobiles of mountain natives who come home from Detroit, Chicago, Cincinnati, Dayton, and dozens of cities where they have found employment. The mountain people know this gathering as "Decoration Day," and it is a weekend of mass reunion across the mountains, a time to groom and decorate the graves of kinfolk, a time to pray, a time to feast—a time of reassurance that the mountain way of life still exists.

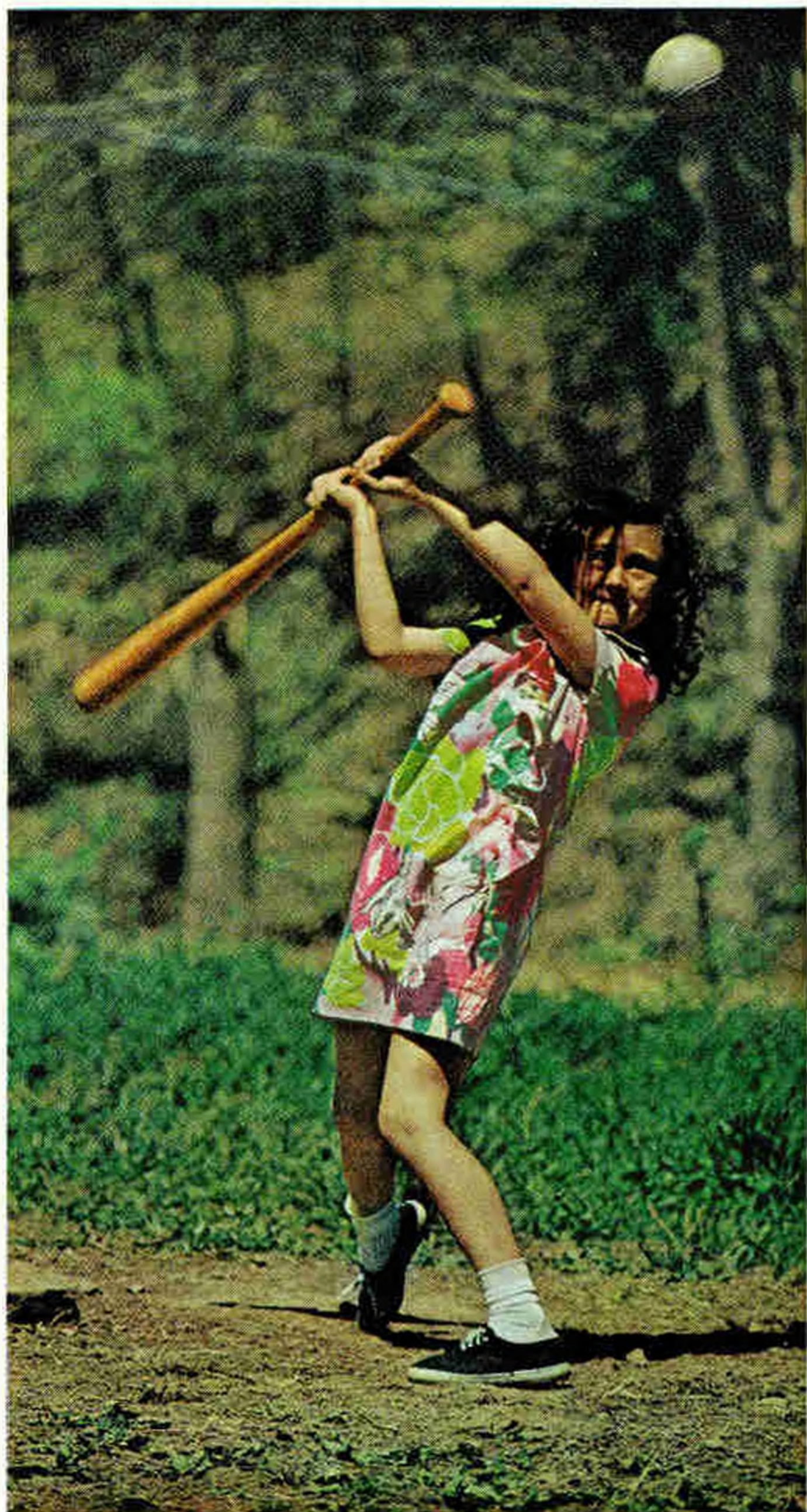
A few days before Memorial Day I sat with Mr. and Mrs. Shelby Mosley on their front porch south of Hyden and shared the excitement as cars bearing Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois license plates streamed past on the narrow road along Beech Fork. On the hill above the house, in a cemetery enclosed by a white board fence, are buried the families who settled the land. Their descendants still live there. The names are Mosley, Howard, Simpson, Muncy, Baker. Many appear on the earliest deed records in the county courthouses.

Shelby Mosley is 75, the son of a mountaineer who in his time walked barefoot along the creek to teach in a log school. Shelby's father, W. S. Mosley, was also a hunter, logger, and farmer. "He managed around and got ahold of 800 or 900 acres," Shelby said. A bit of that land is the spot high on the hillside bench—safely above the spring floods—where the cemetery sits. Long ago, the Mosleys gave it to the community. "I told them to just take all that land they need," Shelby said. "Anybody is welcome to bury their kin there."

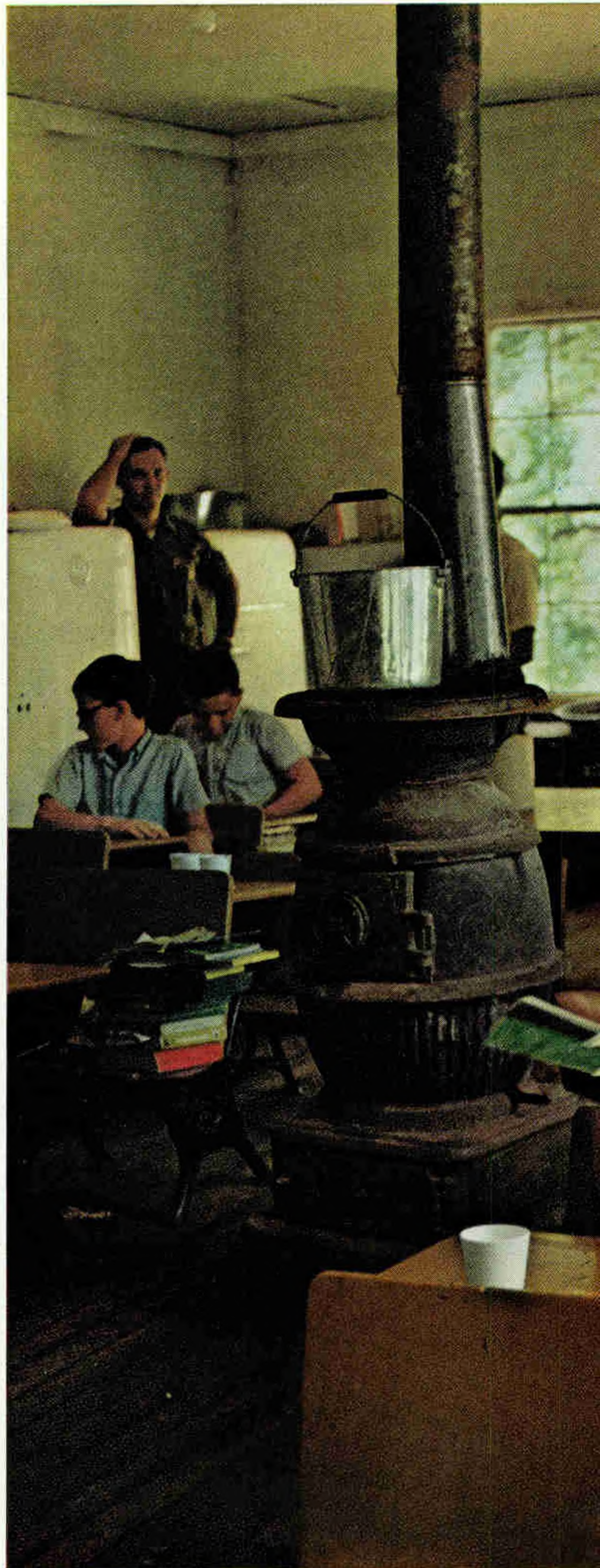
Nearly all the displaced mountaineers I have encountered in the cities are quick to confirm that they plan to be buried back home in the family hillside cemetery.

Shelby Mosley's grandson, Bill Simpson, is no exception. He had recently been discharged from the Marines after duty in Viet Nam and had brought his 17-year-old wife Chris back for the Memorial Day reunion. "Being here is being somebody," he said. "You don't have to buy your spot to be buried in. I want





**Batter up!** On a bright May day a softball game highlights recess time at Double Creek. The narrowness of the hill-walled playground dictates that any drive hit into the stream (**below**) counts as an automatic out.



**School's out!** Double Creek's pupils eagerly put away books and help clean the big room. Then they head homeward on foot, through the hills and hollows of Daniel Boone National Forest. Last term 15 students, from





KOD4CHROMES BY JOHN KETTERMAN (ABOVE) AND BRUCE DALE © N.G.S.

6 to 16 years of age, attended the eight grades taught by the school's one teacher. A flag with 48 stars adorns the wall. Pot-bellied stove provides the only heat on winter days when the temperature may hover

near zero. Refrigerators at left contain food for morning and noon meals. With new buildings and all-weather roads nearing completion, eastern Kentucky is rapidly phasing out such one-room schools.



my children to always come see this place. It's beautiful and the people are that way. I can remember Grandma. She was so gentle that wild birds would eat out of her hands."

All day Saturday and all day Sunday I stayed in the little cemetery, with its spectacular view of the mountains, and watched the families come; some from deep in the nearby hollows, some from other states. They brought hoes and fresh flowers, and boxes of plastic flowers. They cleaned away the Johnson grass and the saw briars from the graves, reshaped the mounds, reread the inscriptions, embraced, and traded family gossip.

There are modern headstones and hand-carved native sandstone slabs whose legends are almost erased by the years. Here and there, only a bare weathered board marks the resting-place of some forebear whose name is now forgotten. Much of the cemetery is shaded by dogwood and holly trees transplanted from the surrounding forest. Rosebushes climb for the sun and spread their displays of pink and red.

The people who came there were of all ages; some came alone, more in family groups. Each went first to the graves of his own kin and stood mute before the inscriptions:

MATT MOSLEY

"FOREVER IN OUR HEARTS"

DALLY PERRY

"sweetly resting"

POLLY HOWARD

"GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN"

There are memories and unbreakable ties. Just by being there, decorating and cleaning the graves, hoeing the rocky ground, they were sharing a testament, a reaffirmation.

Walter Mosley and his wife Grace live in Dayton, Ohio, and had been gone from the hills for 20 years, but they were back again, helping decorate the graves. His father and sister are buried there.

Mrs. Shelby Mosley was there, slender, frail, and aging. She stood before a stone marking the grave of her son, Grant. "My boy—he was just 12 years old," she said. "Big and husky and he just died. Had pneumonia." A white lamb is carved into the top of the

stone, and Mrs. Mosley stood there a long time, letting her veined hand caress the lamb.

A 13-year-old boy, scrubbed, freckled, and excited, pointed out to me the graves of all his relatives who lay there. His name is Derick Snyder, and already he has formed his own inviolate link with the hills.

And Bill Muncy. He is 89, and people along Beech Fork say, "That Muncy. He's worked enough to kill three men." But Bill Muncy is bent and leaning now, like the oldest oaks atop the far ridges. He came to the cemetery slowly, leaning upon his walking stick and nodding to acquaintances. In one gnarled hand he held a tiny bunch of roses (opposite). "From Sarah's favorite rosebush," he told me. Sarah was his wife, and she died early in 1966. Bill Muncy laid the floral tribute upon his wife's grave and began the slow walk back down the hillside.

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON there was a brief service in the cemetery, led by the Reverend Wilbur D. Payne from the nearby Red Bird Mission, an agency of the United Methodist Church. He used a headstone for a lectern, and the assembled people sang "Faith of Our Fathers" and "Onward Christian Soldiers." A cowbell pealed as a black-and-white heifer tore at vines growing in a nearby pine thicket. Somewhere a rooster crowed, which could be considered a good omen. Roosters are associated with dawn, and most of the people in the little Appalachian graveyards are buried facing the east so they can greet the rising sun of Resurrection Morn.

Late in the afternoon everyone walked down off the hill to join in family reunions and to enjoy huge suppers. I was a stranger there, but during that Sunday afternoon I received seven invitations to supper. I like to remember that when I hear people speak of "sullen and aloof hillbillies."

I was back upon the Pinnacle above Cumberland Gap again recently. It was early in the morning and the wind was chilly. U. S. Highway 25E, which passes through the gap, was bustling with traffic, and I could hear the blare of a truck's air horn. Civilization was still passing that way. []

Bringing a gift of roses from his wife's favorite bush, 89-year-old William Muncy visits her grave in a small white-fenced cemetery on a shaded slope near Hyden. "We always pick out the prettiest spot to rest in," explained a Cumberlander. Mr. Muncy lives alone with his pet guinea pigs. In spring he plants a tiny garden and weeds it regularly. Every Memorial Day he and other mountain people, many traveling long distances from city homes, gather at family burial plots to revive memories of years gone by.



