

# Play takes glimpse into feelings of past

COALFIELD PROGRESS, February 7, 1984

By JENNIFER MOONEY  
Coalfield Progress Staff Writer

*"We didn't have much but we always had plenty... it's not what you've got, it's what you're satisfied with."*

WHITESBURG, Ky. — "We tell some things only family oughta know," Ron Short warns the audience as he begins his role of the seeking Thaddeus in "South of the Mountain."

But the way he delivers the line, in a conspiratorial aside laden with familiarity with those present, is the key to the force behind this musical/comedy/drama — in the land which lies wherever the actors from Roadside Theater play, where everyone is treated as family and the experience is universal.

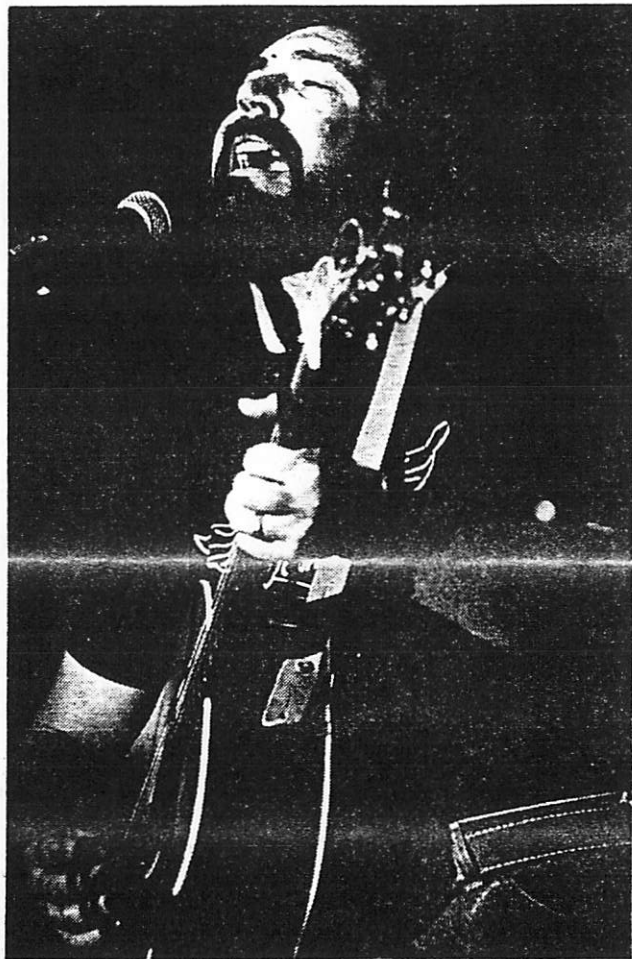
"South of the Mountain," a work written by Short, recounts the history of Thaddeus' family as they find themselves faced with the inescapable approach of change. Vivid word-pictures of new grounds, circuit riders and home remedies vanish with the onset of coal mining, C.C. (Civilian Conservation) camps and the loss of youthful innocence.

## Review

Raised on the same farm on Big Creek in Dickenson County, Thaddeus and his brother Everett, played by Roadsider Tom Bledsoe, weave two entirely different courses as they grow to maturity amidst a world which is worlds away — if not all that many years — from the present.

With his fuzzy red beard and a lanky frame accentuated by suspended trousers, Bledsoe not only fits, but controls, the bill of the hollow-born and -bred Everett, who remains with his mother on the farm long after the other children have grown and gone. Most of the comic elements are found in Bledsoe's wise-cracking character and are lent authenticity by the actor's malleable face and large, revealing eyes.

As the mother who will not accept the changes which destroy forever her simple and



Ron Short, above in usual concert garb, dons "old-timey" clothes as a member of the Roadside Theater production "South of the Mountain."

unthreatening way of life on the farm, Nancy Jeffreys lends dimensions. Slim and pale, the actress has the ability to create, through the altering of her voice, a cadence now heard in the vocal patterns of only the oldest citizens.

Even though its life-revelations are universal, South of the Mountain is an actual geographic location, an area near Clintwood which runs in and around the ridges between Virginia and Kentucky. The timespan

prevalent as barn dances and mailmen on horseback shared the roads with equestrian bootleggers.

South of the Mountain was wild then, as wild as the land on which the area was founded. Superstitions were strong, as were cases of pride and temper.

Times were rough, luxuries rare. Entertainment was usually bound with necessity, coming in the form of barn-raising and corn-shuckings, followed by the appropriate all-night-and-into-the-next-day dances, and in church meetings. Good times were tempered by the desire for survival-through-work.

In "South of the Mountain," Short puts old-mountain wisdom in the mouth of mother Jeffreys: "Work's what you learn, it's what you are... it puts food on the table, clothes on your back and a roof over your head."

As most growing boys, Thaddeus and Everett have their share of problems — sore teeth that need pulling by the local blacksmith-cum-dentist, bruised pride at the taunts of more well-to-do classmates, complaints that they'd "never seen the time we didn't have more work than we could do." But for the most part, their problems are small-boy ones, easily solved by their mother's reassuring presence. They are safe.

Later, when they are grown, the loss of innocence and, for Thaddeus, venturing beyond the boundaries of the family farm to work in the mines destroy any sense of security they may have felt before. Maturity comes hard for both characters as the simple lifedies.

Short's mournful voice and determined stage-presence show Thaddeus to be a seeker, one who yearns for life away from the farm and can bluff his way into attaining it.

The family farm is momentarily lost to Thaddeus after he leaves

and realizes that, because of the initial break, he can never return. In the end, the realization that he has escaped the farm for electricity and movies and a chance is seen as the cause of its destruction for him. There is the lament that realization comes but is often too late: "When the things that you leave home for are the things you left at home."

As for Everett, his enchantment

universal history of an era and a land that is no more.

Perhaps most poignant is the fact that the story is not fiction, for it is based on the reflections of Ron Short's relatives, who still live in the area South of the Mountains.

For anyone who lives in the mountains or simply needs to understand the time and the

*"... the things that you leave home for are the things you left at home."*

*- "South of the Mountain"*

for coon-hunting and farm life are lost due to age and the fact that he is left alone after his mother's death. "I could dance all night 'till the fiddler laid down his bow," he says as he reminisces. "I ain't danced now in 30-odd years."

By the end of the play, change has turned the family's rough-but-unity-filled farm life into a

feeling which produced southern life as it is now known, Roadside Theater's works are unique glimpses into life past, conjuring into reality that which others presumed dead.

"South of the Mountain" will next be presented in the area on May 3 in the auditorium of J.J. Kelly High School.