



Staff Photo by James Herzog

Don Baker, left, and Gary Slem performed in an Episcopal church in Washington, D.C., recently as photographs of Appalachian life at the turn of the

century were projected onto the stage. The two are members of Roadside Theater in Whitesburg, Ky. The group is now in New York.

## 'Hillraising' tales

### Storytellers enthrall Washington groups

By JAMES HERZOG  
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WASHINGTON—As photographs of Appalachia at the turn of the century are projected onto the stage, they weave their story.

"Right on the foot of the mountain," says one.

"On the Virginia side," says the second.

"There's a little stretch of road," says the third.

"CALLED THE MUDHOLE," they say in unison.

The audience at the Episcopal church in northwest Washington listens intently. "... The mudhole got to be a natural stopping place," says one of the three storytellers from the Roadside Theater in Whitesburg, Ky.

"If you're mired up to your waist, you didn't have much choice," a colleague adds.

"So there got to be a bunch. I ain't talking about four or five or six. I'm talking about a bunch of what they call public houses."

Suddenly, with the vehemence of a revivalist preacher, one of the storytellers interrupts:

"Lord, they sell whisky. Lord, they gamble. Lord, they keep loose women."

And so it went. Three natives of Appalachia stood before sophisticated Washington audiences this week and fascinated them by weaving an intricate tale of Kentucky and Virginia in the late 19th century.

Using the words and accents of the

mountains, they tell the story of Silver (Civil) War hatreds, of moonshining, of killings and of the hanging of Doc Taylor and Talt Hall.

They are led by Don Baker, whose face is chiseled and stern like the faces of Appalachia in 1890 that are projected onto the stage. Like the other storytellers, Baker grew up in Wise County, Virginia—a few miles and a mountain away from Kentucky.

Baker copied his Aunt Addie and Aunt Nanie's style of storytelling becoming one of the founders of the Roadside Theater in 1974. The storytelling group is part of Appalshop, Inc., a nonprofit

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# Storytellers from Kentucky enthrall Washington groups with mountain tale

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media and art cooperative in Southeastern Kentucky.

Joining Baker in telling this tale of Appalachia are Frankie Taylor and Gary Slemp, whose voices are rich with the accent and tones of Appalachia.

When Roadside Theater began, its members crisscrossed the mountains, telling tall tales the way they had been told for generations. More than a year ago, the tale-spinners turned to Appalachian history for material and, in the course of a year, researched and wrote "Red Fox/Second Hangin'".

The Roadside players brought "Red Fox" to Washington, performing first in a conference room at the Appalachian Regional Commission and then at a church. They moved on to New York yesterday for a 10-day run at a Greenwich Village theater.

At the commission offices, Baker and the others were warned that the bureaucrats who funnel money into Appalachia (but not Roadside) might not have time to watch the two-hour show. But they stayed.

At the church, as reporters for the New York Times and Baltimore Sun scribbled notes, an audience cheered enthusiastically and then filled collection plates to help the money-starved theater group.

"Red Fox/Second Hangin'" is the story of Doc Taylor — a preacher, U.S. Marshal, doctor (educated at Louisville Medical College), mystic, herb doctor and surveyor who was hanged in 1893 for the murder of a moonshiner.

And it is the story of Bad Talt Hall, who was arrested by Taylor and preceded him by 14 months to the gallows in Big Stone Gap, Va.

"Red Fox" is an oral history of the

mountains, developed from history books, courthouse records and the tales of mountain story-tellers.

"If I have any message," Baker said, "it's that we're not dummies. We've got a heritage that's really strong and worth saving."

Baker said he — like other natives of Appalachia — were taught as children to be embarrassed to be "hillbillies. . . . You feel like you don't have anything worth crowing about."

Schoolteachers — even those who were natives — told children that a mountain accent is "improper, dumb. It shows you're unschooled," Baker said.

The message of John Fox Jr., a novelist from Southwestern Virginia, was that "if you were anybody, you would get out of there, and you would blossom if you had any kind of intelligence," Baker said.

"I couldn't wait to leave," said Baker, who went to Washington and Lee University and then lived in Washington. "It wasn't until I was gone for a few years that it dawned on me. There are important values at home. You can't leave."

Baker turned to storytelling as "a highly developed art form . . . that uses the tools that we know, that we spent hundreds of years working on."

In the mountains, many people think it's not good "unless it's from the out-

side world," Baker said. "Hardy burgers, Long John Silvers, Pizzaburgers."

"Things at home kind of embarrass kids, especially teen-agers. . . ."

By creating a mountain theater, some people are learning that theater "is not an embarrassing thing. . . . We can go back in the coal camps, in the hollers. People who have never been to school come to listen and just really enjoy it. At the same time, college people listen too," Baker said.