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Sherman

Noel Smith

Appalachian Heritage, Volume 32, Number 2, Spring 2004, pp. 82-83
(Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.2004.0096>

Appalachian Heritage



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Sherman

After raising his eight kids on the coast
he came home, himself at last,
to the place where he was born,
whose forests and spiney ridges
snake back and around enough

to confound anybody but the likes
of him and whose flowing waters
were as his own blood. He chose
a house of upright planks
across the creek from a rutted track.

Now, just back from Goofy's Pool Hall
and the best cheeseburger in all of Kentucky
he and I prance across a spidery claptrap
of hanging slats and boards which
span the creek. We climb down to his yard,

pick our way among pinhorses, froes,
and a beached toilet filled with birdfood
and onto the porch, a jumble of splitting mauls,
wedges, pulleys, axes, mallets, bucksaws, and crosscuts
And through the door to the very workings of his mind

where he shuffles through curled shavings
and turns a naked bulb in the ceiling
lighting up a crowd of chairs in every
stage of becoming. Under a calendar
of a winking brunette, lean solid wheels

of walnut, their growth rings as ancient
currents whorling into an owl's eye here,
an embryo there, ocean and strata
swirling between them as though
the earth had laid its story in the grain.

The pinhorse is the only seat. He works
the drawknife toward his waist, coaxing
a chair leg from a blunt stump. His white beard
caresses the grain. He begins a tale, leaning back
on a saddlebag with a wren's nest in the pouch.

We breathe the smell of wood and apples,
the bitter sap of new felled oak, as above,
the breeze tousles green trees, as around,
dead ones wait in their roundness for Sherman
to lift their bark and free
the swirling song of their grain.

—Noel Smith

Sherman Wooten of Leslie County, Kentucky, died on February 26, 2004, at the age of 93. To many, Wooten epitomized Appalachia. At craft fairs around the region many were charmed by his mischievous baby blue eyes set off by his white beard and his blue denim overalls. They were enthralled as he took the time to answer any question, often bestowing small gifts upon complete strangers. A consummate primitive chairmaker, Wooten's old-fashioned craftsmanship made him one of the last surviving authentic craftspersons of the region. Even those who only knew him, for example, from the paintings of Mitchell Tolle or Willard Gayheart or who had merely seen the photos and profiles in Sam Venable's Mountain Hands or in The National Geographic often considered Sherman the ultimate mountain man.

Sherman Wooten was born the fourth of eight children on Cutshin Creek in Leslie County on the day that Halley's Comet appeared, May 15, 1910. He was delivered by his grandmother, Fanny Martin, a midwife. His family lived briefly in Hamilton, Ohio, but moved back to Hell-fer-Sartin Creek after the death of his mother from influenza. Sherman attended Pine Mountain Settlement School and studied woodworking there with Luigi Zondi. Later he attended Hyden High School where he was the quarterback on the football team. After graduating, he and a brother went west. He often bragged that he had ridden the Orange Blossom Special but only as a hobo. He served in the U.S. Navy twice, both before and during World War II. Married in 1938 and divorced in 1962, Sherman raised six of his eight children as a single father while working as a carpenter in the San Francisco Bay area. In 1970 he moved back to Leslie County and soon became established as a chairmaker.— Thanks to Winston Wooten for providing information for this editor's note.