

THE
JAMES
STILL
NOTEBOOK

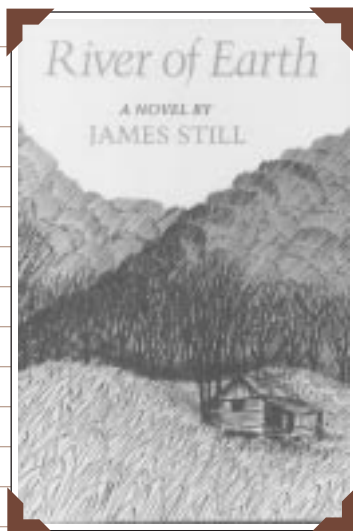
A viewer's guide to the KET documentary

James Still's River of Earth

by GEORGE ELLA LYON



The Kentucky
Network



First printing: 1940

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... plus discussion
questions and activities
throughout

The Documentary

James Still's River of Earth is a 1997 production of KET, The Kentucky Network: Heather Lyons, director; Guy Mendes, producer; Cindy Asher, associate producer; Nancy Carpenter, executive producer.

Heather Lyons is an independent producer/director whose most recent documentary works include *M & M Smith: For Posterity's Sake*, *Laura Clay: Voice of Change*, and *Imani*. Now in her sixth year as an artist-in-residence for the Kentucky Arts Council, Lyons also works with students throughout the state in the creation of their own film and video projects.

For more information about the program and airdates, contact KET at 600 Cooper Drive, Lexington, KY 40502-2296, (606) 258-7000.

Funding

This project—the program and the guide—was produced with the support of the Kentucky Humanities Council through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional funding was provided by the KET Foundation.

Viewer's Guide

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600 Cooper Drive
Lexington, KY 40502-2296
ISBN No. 1-881020-02-9

Written by **George Ella Lyon**, whose books include *Catalpa* (poems), *Come a Tide* (picture book), and *Borrowed Children* (novel for young readers). A native of Harlan County, Kentucky, she works as a freelance writer and teacher in Lexington.

Design/layout by Barbara Clifton, KET. Cover photo: Guy Mendes.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY (continued)

About James Still

Iron Mountain Review: The James Still Issue. Vol II, No. 1, Summer 1984. Contains a conversation between Still and Jim Wayne Miller plus essays about various aspects of Still's work. For information, write IMR, Box 64, Emory, VA 24327.

"Man on Troublesome" by Dean Cadle. First appeared in *The Yale Review* in 1965. Rpt. *Appalachian Heritage*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1976.

"The Seamless Vision of James Still" by Fred Chappell. *Appalachian Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring 1981.

About Literature of the Appalachian Region

Voices from the Hills. Ed. Robert J. Higgs and Ambrose Manning. New York: Ungar, 1975.

Appalachian Inside Out: A Sequel to Voices from the Hills. Vol. 1: *Conflict and Change*. Vol. 2: *Culture and Custom*. Ed. Robert J. Higgs, Ambrose Manning, and Jim Wayne Miller. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995.

Old Wounds, New Words: Poems from the Appalachian Poetry Project. Ed. Bob Henry Baber, George Ella Lyon, and Gurney Norman. Ashland, KY: The Jesse Stuart Foundation, 1994.

The James Still Web Site

The "James Still Homepage" World Wide Web site at <http://www.uky.edu/KentuckyCulture/Still/jshome.html> contains biographical and bibliographical information, critical essays, transcripts of conversations, poems, and other resources.

Appalachian Writers Workshop

For more information about the Appalachian Writers Workshop, held each summer at the Hindman Settlement School, contact the school at P.O. Box 844, Hindman, KY 41822. A KET program, *At the Forks of Troublesome*, visits the workshop and includes James Still among the writers spotlighted.

INTRODUCTION

James Still's River of Earth not only offers us a portrait of a writer and an introduction to his work, but also gives us insight into the history and culture of the Appalachian region from which that work springs. Through interviews with Still and a number of people who know him—Appalachian scholars and writers, his godchild, one of his publishers—we come to see the uniqueness of this man and the importance of his vision. Through archival photographs and reminiscences, we see into Still's life; through readings from his work, we stand inside, looking out. He tells us “[h]ow it was in that place” and shows why he has “come back to the long way around.”

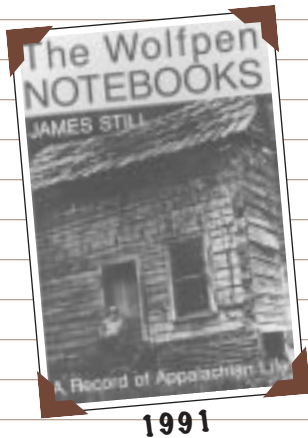
As his deliberate, chosen life unfolds before us, we witness his devotion to what Irish poet and Nobel winner Seamus Heaney described in a National Public Radio interview as the poet's job: “to find the language that makes the common, almost unconscious life vocal; [to] be a voice box for something that is in the land, the people.”

Teachers will find this program useful in studying:

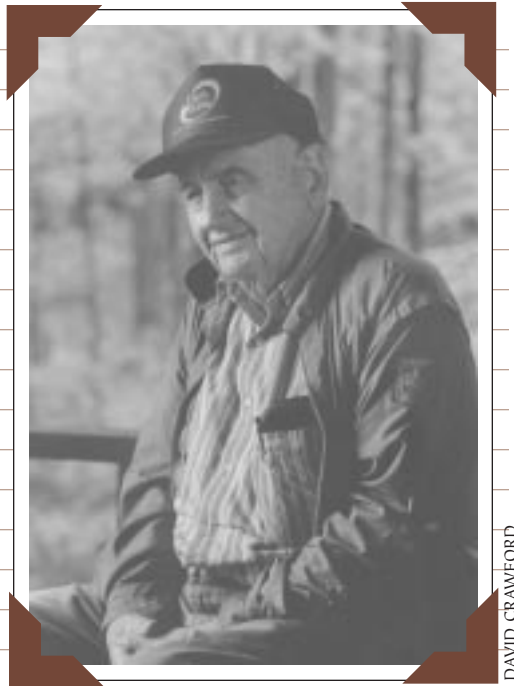
- the creative process
- Appalachian/American literature
- Appalachian/American history
- environmental issues
- the nature and value of community

Writers, linguists, and those interested in Appalachian culture will find it equally rich. There is room for much discussion in Still's comments about how and why he writes and in the model he offers for living locally while remaining aware of global connection. As he points out, regardless of its geography, no place is finally isolated. “What happens in Afghanistan,” he says, “happens to me.”

It is this sense of rootedness and universality which James Still and his work embody and which viewers and readers alike will find so compelling. Welcome to *James Still's River of Earth*, to Wolfpen Creek in Knott County, Kentucky. Welcome to the universal grounded in the local. Welcome to the world.



1991



DAVID CRAWFORD

TO DISCUSS AND DO

We hope this program spurs readers new to James Still to add a book by him to their reading list or invites others to get reacquainted. Many of those interviewed in the documentary single out a book or a story or a poem as having special meaning for them. The program also enables us to hear his work read aloud. Is there a story from, say, *Pattern of a Man* or a poem in one of the collections, such as *The Wolfpen Poems*, that speaks to you? What specifically appeals to you? Do particular phrases or passages stand out? Why? Read the work you have selected aloud. In the program, James Still and Randy Wilson “perform” a passage from *River of Earth*. What qualities make this passage particularly appropriate for “performing”?

TIMELINE

1906 James Still born in Lafayette, Alabama	1929 graduated from Lincoln Memorial University	1931 moved to Hindman in Knott County, Kentucky	1937 <i>Hounds on the Mountain</i> (poems)
1939 moved to log house on Wolfpen Creek	1940 <i>River of Earth</i> (novel); Southern Author award	1942-45 served in U.S. Army Air Corps in Africa and Middle East	1947 American Academy of Arts and Letters Award; National Institute of Arts and Letters Award
1971 first trip to Central/ South America to study Mayan ruins	1976 <i>Pattern of a Man</i> (stories)	1977 <i>Jack and the Wonder Beans</i> chosen as one of the Best Illustrated Books of the Year by the <i>New York Times</i>	1978 Weatherford Award for lifetime contribution to Appalachian literature
1986 <i>The Wolfpen Poems</i>	1991 <i>The Wolfpen Notebooks</i>	1995 named Poet Laureate of Kentucky	1996 90th birthday celebration at Hindman Settlement School

TO DISCUSS

The place James Still calls home -- the mountains of Eastern Kentucky -- shapes all his work. What does your place mean to you? How has it affected you and your family? Think about geography, work, recreation, customs. Do you live on a river? in a city? on a farm? Have you lived other places? How does that influence who you are?

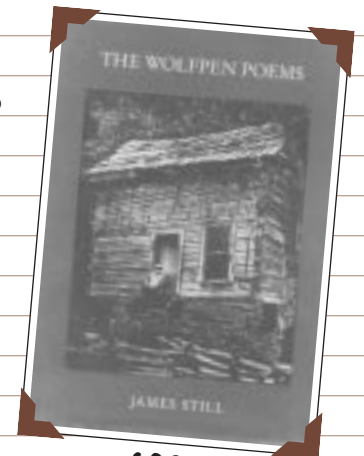


1975

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- On Troublesome Creek* (stories). New York: Viking, 1941.
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- Autobiographical essay. *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*; vol. 17, pp. 231-48. Gale Research.



1986



TO DISCUSS

James Still has been writing and publishing for almost 70 years, but he hasn't gotten rich, had a book on the best-seller list, or appeared on *Oprah*. While widely read and widely traveled, he has chosen to live far from the center of publishing and celebrity. Does this make him less of a success? What does it mean to be a successful person, to have a successful life? How is recognition different from fame? Could fame interfere with a person's work?

BIOGRAPHY

A Kentuckian native to Alabama, a world traveler who has stayed in one place, James Still is a paradox. Born in 1906 in Lafayette, Alabama, the sixth of ten children, Still took a roundabout road to Knott County, where he has lived for 65 years. But roundabout ways are just right for Still, who says in "White Highways":

I have come back to the long way around,
the far between, the slow arrival.

First he came up to Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee, working his way through in a nearby quarry and as the library janitor. Graduating in 1929, he took an M.A. from Vanderbilt and a further degree from the Illinois Library School.

The early 1930s were death on job-hunters, degree or no degree, and James Still wound up coming to Hindman in 1931 with poet Don West to work with kids for the summer. However, when summer was over, the librarian at Hindman Settlement School resigned. It was the perfect opening. Except for his stint in World War II (in Africa and the Middle East), James Still has resided in Eastern Kentucky ever since.

Having grown up with few books, and knowing what a difference those few made, James Still was determined to get more books into the hands of children. As part of his new job, he decided to run a bookmobile. Don't picture a vehicle, now. Sometimes he rented a pony. But mostly he shouldered a box of books and walked from school to school, swapping boxes as he went. For three years, he worked for no pay except room and board. And he began to write.

In 1939, Still moved to the Amburgey log house, built in 1837 and situated between Wolfpen and Little Carr creeks. There he had room for his writing and his garden, and both flourished. Poems, novels, stories, folk collections: all growing from his minute and loving observations of speech and nature (human and otherwise),



GUY MENDES

In the summer, James Still's cabin becomes part of the forest.

TO DISCUSS

Still is originally from Alabama; Kentucky is his chosen home. Is there somewhere else you feel more at home than where you live now? Why?

How does Mr. Still's name fit his personality and his life? How does your name fit you? (If you don't know what your name means, look it up in a dictionary of names.)



1976

JAMES STILL'S PLACE IN APPALACHIAN LETTERS

James Still's publishing career spans almost 70 years, from a 1929 article on "Place Names in the Cumberland Mountains" to the 1996 reprint of *Jack and the Wonder Beans*. He is part of the root generation of modern Appalachian writers (among them Cratis Williams, Harriette Arnow, Wilma Dykeman, and Jesse Stuart) whose work superseded "local color" writing by portraying authentic mountain experience.

But Still is not only at the root, his work nourishing and supporting the new growth of Appalachian letters which began in the '70s. He is also our contemporary; he is at the crown.

His early publications on place names and Christian names show an obsession with local speech, continued in the pocket-sized notebooks—collections of quotations and folkways—he began in 1948, which have fed all his writing and resulted in the 1991 publication of *The Wolfpen Notebooks: A Record of Appalachian Life*, the work Still has said may be his most important yet.

This assertion reveals something fundamental about James Still: He has offered himself as the servant of a place and its people. Besides creating poems, stories, novels, and children's books, Still has steadfastly, for 65 years, been a scribe for Appalachian culture, setting down fragments lest a way of life be lost. It is, in fact, on this work that all his other books rest.

From his long-time association with the Hindman Settlement School has come an involvement with the annual Appalachian Writers Workshop. For nearly 20 years James Still, along with writers such as Jim Wayne Miller, Gurney Norman, and Lee Smith, has been encouraging and guiding a new crop of voices. He has given readings for children and adults throughout the region, and his commentaries on National Public Radio have reached listeners across the country.

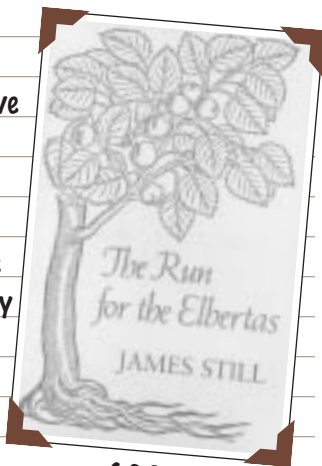
By virtue of the quality, diversity, and longevity of his work, James Still stands at the heart of Appalachian letters.

READINGS HEARD IN THE PROGRAM

- "White Highways"
poem, James Still reads
- Jack and the Wonder Beans*
excerpt from the book,
Still reads
- "River of Earth"
poem, Still reads
- River of Earth*
first paragraph of the
novel, Still reads
- River of Earth*
excerpt from sermon, Jim
Wayne Miller reads
- River of Earth*
continuing excerpt
from sermon, Randy
Wilson performs
- "Spring"
poem, Still reads
- "Wolfpen Creek"
poem, George Ella
Lyon reads
- "Leap, Minnows, Leap"
poem, Still reads
- letter from "Godey
Spurlock's Travels"
Troublesome Creek Times,
Still reads
- "The Nest"
first paragraph from short
story, Still reads
- "The Nest"
last paragraph from short
story, Wilma
Dykeman reads
- "Heritage"
poem, Still reads

TO DO

While the sermon Sim Mobberly preaches in *River of Earth* is fictional (excerpts are heard in the program), it is probably based on many such sermons James Still heard as he took part in the life of his community. All of us have memories of essential voices in our lives and can draw on these for writing. Make a list of significant voices in your life. Consider parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers, friends. Now close your eyes and try to hear those people speak in your mind. You might assign each one a topic (What makes you mad? What do you fear? What's your favorite place?) and then write down what you imagine that person saying about it. Don't worry if you cross over from remembering things your people actually said to inventing new words for them. Likewise, don't worry if you leave the person you started with behind and begin to make someone up. That's one way writers create characters.



1980

BIOGRAPHY (continued)

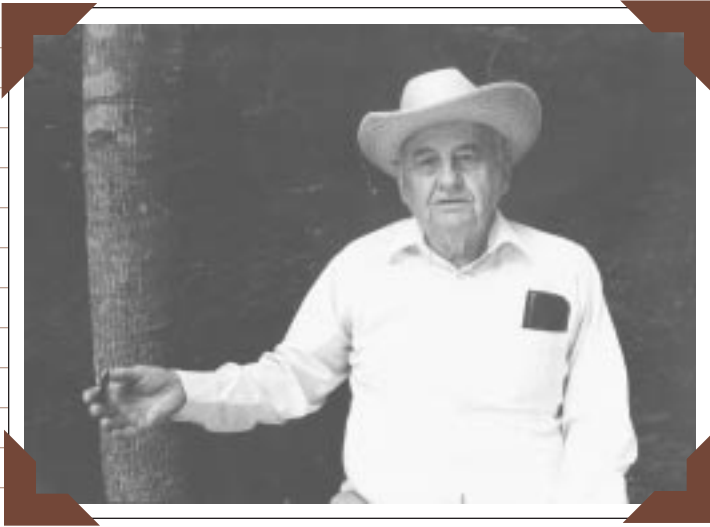
set down in little spiral notebooks and transformed through his compassionate imagination and perfect ear.

Still wrote of his place and for the world. And the world took some notice. He was regularly published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *Poetry* and, after the publication of *Hounds on the Mountain* (poems) in 1937 and *River of Earth* (novel) in 1940, he received the Southern Authors Award, the Academy of Arts and Letters Award, and the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award, along with two Guggenheims and a Bread Loaf Fellowship. He spent time at the prestigious artists' colonies, Yaddo and MacDowell, where he became acquainted with writers such as Katherine Anne Porter, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, and Elizabeth Maddox Roberts.

So James Still became a visible part of the national literary circle early in his career. He just chose not to court it, not to locate himself, geographically or psychically, where he could vie for attention in what some have called Po Biz. As the narrator says of Jack in *Jack and the Wonder Beans*, James Still is "independent as a hog on ice" and has written what he felt *had* to be written, not what someone thought would attract attention or fill out a publisher's list.

Besides writing and library work for Hindman Settlement School, James Still taught for ten years at Morehead State University and has given readings and workshops throughout the country. He has also been devoted to his 31 acres of land. In addition to growing most of his own food for years, Still has planted trees, kept bees, and experimented with wild violets and wild strawberries. His notebooks reveal the field notes of a naturalist, as well as records of local speech and customs. A devoted student of Mayan civilization, he made 14 trips to Central America to study the ruins. He also traveled to Europe five times to visit World War I battlefields.

In 1974, Still's empathy with children and his labor as a collector bore fruit in *Way Down Yonder on Troublesome Creek: Appalachian Riddles and Rusties*. In 1975 came *The Wolfpen Rusties: Appalachian Rusties and Gee-Haw Whimmy-Diddles*, followed in 1977



GUY MENDES

TO DO

The way people talk reveals both place and character in James Still's work. As you've seen, he studied Appalachian speech by being a careful listener and recorder of people around him. Buy or make a pocket notebook to carry with you. Really listen to the people around you: at home, at school, in the grocery, at the ball game. Whenever you hear something that catches your interest -- whether it's what someone says or how they say it -- write it down. In class, compare notes and consider the following: Are certain words or phrases associated with your area? Do people talk differently in different settings? Does age make a difference? What can you tell about people by how they speak?

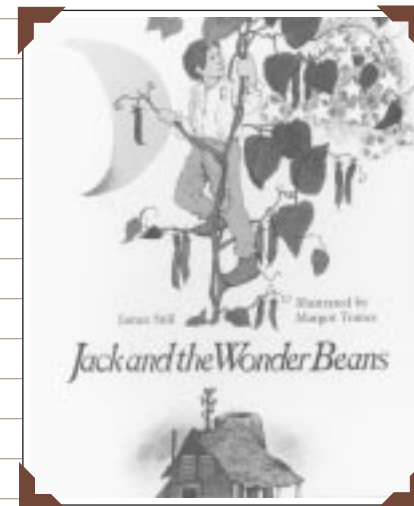
After you've been keeping your notebook for several weeks, look back through to see whether you have an entry that seems complete in itself. Could you make a found poem out of it? That is, could you shape it in such a way (by deleting or rearranging words and by adding line breaks) that it looks and reads like a poem?

BIOGRAPHY (continued)

by *Sporty Creek: A Novel about an Appalachian Boyhood* and *Jack and the Wonder Beans*, the latter illustrated by Margot Tomes and chosen by the *New York Times* as one of the Best Illustrated Books of the Year.

But writing for children did not supplant Still's work for adults. In this period he focused on gathering and selecting from his stories to form the collections *Pattern of a Man* (1976) and *The Run for the Elbertas* (1980). Poems likewise were brought together in *River of Earth: The Poem and Other Poems* (1982-83) and his definitive collection, *The Wolfpen Poems* (1986). Most recently, Still has published *The Wolfpen Notebooks: A Record of Appalachian Life* (1991). Here we find his field notes about the rich ground from which all his other work springs.

Flannery O'Connor says the artist must focus on "the thing being made," not fashion, schedule, or future criticism. This is what James Still has done. He has labored long to serve his gift and his place, and we are all the richer for it.



1977