

Artists on Tour

Barb & Russ Childers

Mountain Christmas



STUDY GUIDE

Written by Barb & Russ Childers

Edited & Designed by Kathleen Riemenschneider

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Russ and Barb cook up a recipe for an old-time Appalachian Christmas such as their ancestors might have celebrated. Seasonal tales, regional music, and songs make it a uniquely eastern Kentucky product with food themes that reflect their holiday spirits and songs whose origins were in the British Isles changed during their stay on the American frontier. The Kentucky Wassail Song and The Cherry Tree Carol are two examples. Banjo, fiddle, and lap dulcimer demonstrate unfamiliar carols played the old-time mountain way. Children might participate in an activity that shows how hard everyone had to work to get ready, e.g., The Farmer's Wife. Or children might learn a traditional game or dance to show how hard everyone played when they got the chance. Gifts were simpler then: an orange, a candy cane, or a single homemade toy would please. The tree was itself a gift to the whole family. Cut down on a special expedition into the woods, its boughs were decorated with pictures cut out of magazines, stars made of tinfoil gum wrappers, and popcorn and berries strung in garlands. Real candles on the tree were a constant worry to the family, who sat nearby with a water bucket at the ready!

ARTISTS' BIOS

Russ CHILDERS has been making music since the Beatles came to town in the '60s. He started out with rock 'n roll but gravitated to old-time mountain music when he discovered his love for the music of his Eastern Kentucky ancestors. Now he shares his knowledge of Appalachian traditions through music, stories, and dance. Russ is active in the Ohio and Kentucky Arts Councils, as well as several Cincinnati arts and Appalachian organizations. **BARB CHILDERS** is a storyteller, dancer, musician, poet, singer, booklover, former children's librarian – and, since retiring, a quilter! Russ and Barb are members of the Rabbit Hash String Band and also perform together as Bear Foot.

TEACHER / STUDENT RESOURCES

Here are some useful sources for further reading about Appalachian celebrations. Since some of these titles may be out of print, be sure to contact your public library.

Chase, Richard. *Old Songs & Singing Games*. Dover, 1972.

Chase, Richard. *Singing Games and Playparty Games*. Dover, 1949, 1967.

Dabney, Joseph E. *Smokehouse Ham, Spoon Bread, & Scuppernong Wine: The Folklore and Art of Southern Appalachian Cooking*. Cumberland House, 1998.

Farr, Sidney Saylor. *More Than Moonshine: Appalachian Recipes and Recollections*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983.

Langstaff, John and Nancy. *The Christmas Revels Songbook: In Celebration of the Winter Solstice*. Revels, 1985.

Page, Linda Garland and Hilton Smith. *Foxfire Book of Toys and Games*. Dutton, 1985.

Ritchie, Jean. *Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians*. 2nd ed. University Press of Kentucky, 1997.

Ritchie, Jean. *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*. Geordie Music, 1980.

Wigginton, Eliot. *Foxfire Christmas: Appalachian Memories and Traditions*. Doubleday, 1989.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Branscum, Robbie. *The Adventures of Johnny May*. Harper & Row, 1984.

Burch, Robert. *Renfroe's Christmas*. Viking, 1968.

Caudill, Rebecca. *A Certain Small Shepherd*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.

*Chase, Richard. *Grandfather Tales*. Houghton Mifflin, 1948.

Credle, Ellis. *Tall Tales from the High Hills*. Nelson, 1957.

Houston, Gloria. *Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree*. Dial, 1988.

Houston, Gloria. *Littlejim's Gift: An Appalachian Christmas*. Philomel, 1994.

Justus, May. *The Complete Peddler's Pack: Games, Songs, Rhymes, and Riddles*. University of Tennessee, 1967.

Milnes, Gerry. *Granny Will Your Dog Bite, and Other Mountain Rhymes*. Knopf, 1990.

On Christmas Day in the Morning. Foreword by John Langstaff. Candlewick, 1999

Rylant, Cynthia. *Silver Packages: An Appalachian Christmas Story*. Orchard, 1987

Rylant, Cynthia. *Children of Christmas: Stories for the Season*. Orchard, 1987

Seeger, Ruth Crawford. *American Folk Songs for Christmas*. Oak, 1953.

Still, James. *An Appalachian Mother Goose*. University Press of Kentucky, 1998.

***Stories from the Grandfather Tales have been published as separate titles in many versions by various authors. Some examples are Old Dry Frye, Sody Saleratus, Soap, Soap, Soap, The Green Gourd, etc. Check with a children's librarian.**

RECORDED MUSIC

Kentucky Christmas: Old and New. Jean Ritchie family and friends. CD. Greenbays Recordings, n.d.

Wassail! Wassail! Early American Christmas Music. Directed by John Langstaff. CD. Revels Records, 1982, 1988.

ACTIVITIES

Books on all these activities may be found in the public library. Make friends with a children's librarian!

1. Make and serve traditional wassail / eggnog / mulled cider. See "Mulled Cider" recipe in *Smokehouse Ham, Spoon Bread, & Scuppernong Wine: The Folklore and Art of Southern Appalachian Cooking*. Adult assistance is needed to heat the mixture.
2. With needle and thread, string popcorn and cranberries for the birds.
3. Fold and cut paper stars from tinfoil or gum wrappers.
4. Recycle gift-wrap, tinfoil, or colored sheets of newspaper by making them into paper chains to decorate the room.
5. Make a pomander ball. Push the spike ends of whole cloves into an orange until entire surface is covered, then roll the orange in arrowroot and tie with a hanging ribbon. The spicy scent of pomanders was used to freshen closets and drawers.
6. Make pre-electricity dipped candles. Melt wax in coffee tins and dip a 12-15" long wick in wax. Let cool, dip, let cool, dip, let cool, until enough wax is built up. Adult supervision is needed for this.
7. Make cornbread or biscuits with recipes from an Appalachian cookbook. Then spread with homemade apple butter or home-churned butter. If you don't have a churn, *Joy of Cooking* claims you can make butter in an electric blender from whipping cream.
8. Fashion homemade Appalachian toys from ideas in *Foxfire Book of Toys and Games*.

GAMES

1. Play a game of forfeits: "When 12 Days of Christmas" or "Children Go Where I Send Thee" is sung as a forfeit game, it becomes a true test of developing memory skills! For a flavor of Appalachian entertainments, read through the preface of Ruth Seeger's *American Folk Songs for Christmas* or Jean Ritchie's chapter on Kentucky Christmas in *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*.
2. Hold an old-fashioned spelling bee: Can you spell Appalachia? Wassail? Quilt? Gee-Haw Whimmy Diddle? Turkey Buzzard? Grasshopper? Hint: find the West Virginia version of the last two words in *Granny Will Your Dog Bite?*
3. Divide into teams and guess riddles from the Appalachian tradition. Refer to James Still's *Appalachian Mother Goose* or May Justus's *Complete Peddler's Pack*.

STORYTELLING & CREATIVE WRITING

1. Collect family traditions from class members to compile in handmade books to give to each child's family. Trace where these traditions have traveled on a map.
2. Collect a class cookbook of favorite family recipes and accompany each recipe with a family anecdote or memory or a related story. The map idea is fun to try here, too, and can become part of the book.
3. For either of the above activities, have each class member bring in a small piece of material to make a patchwork cover. Maybe there is a story connected with the fabric that needs to be told! Books from the children's department of the library can supply many ideas about creating books and covers.

MUSICAL/RHYTHMIC EXERCISES

1. Have a play party, e.g., sing and dance "Glory to the Mountain" (described in the *Christmas Revels Songbook*).
2. Dance the Virginia Reel or another longwise dance from Richard Chase's collection of *Appalachian Old Songs & Singing Games* or *Singing Games and Playparty Games*.
3. Act out The Busy Farmer's Wife—cooking apple butter, churning butter, chewing taffy, shoeing chickens—a cumulative movement activity found in many children's game books, e.g., *Juba This and Juba That* by Virginia Tashjian.

See more ideas on Russ Childers's web page: <http://home.fuse.net/russchilders>