

# folk heroes

The Folk Heritage Award honors nine North Carolinians whose music, stories, and artistry keep our most cherished traditions alive.

*by Miriam Sauls*

I

feel like I'm on vacation now," answers Neolia Cole Womack in her pottery shop at Sanford, when asked if she ever leaves her work behind for a vacation. Such is the integration of art and life to her and the eight other recipients of the 2002 North Carolina Folk Heritage Award. Along with expertise in their individual art forms, a zest for life and bountiful humor and humility bind them together as well.

The current honorees, like those who have preceded them since the N.C. Arts Council began the awards program in 1989, span the state and represent the patchwork of cultural threads that form our heritage. Possessing skills honed from decades of experience, these Folk Heritage Award recipients rank among the most expressive artists to be found anywhere in the country. North Carolinians can feel pride in the richness and diversity of life in our state as we get to know these nine who embody different aspects of our traditional culture.

## JERRY WOLFE

As a small child, Jerry Wolfe sat around the fire with his father after supper and listened to stories. Wolfe was born in the Sherrill Cove community on Cherokee lands known as the Qualla Boundary, and his father would tell the stories of his people in the Cherokee language. “We didn’t have a TV or radio or phone, so we talked,” says Wolfe in his gentle, but commanding, voice. “I’d sit and I’d listen to so many stories, and I’d remember them.”

Now Wolfe shares those stories with thousands of people: from children in schools, to university professors who seek him out, to visitors at the Museum of the Cherokee Indian in Cherokee where he works several afternoons a week.

Wolfe is also known for maintaining the 500-year-old traditional Cherokee stickball game. North Carolina’s oldest sport, it’s still practiced by

members of the Eastern Band of the Cherokees. He “calls,” or announces, the games and also carves ballsticks from hickory for players. Some of his sticks are in the permanent collection at the American Craft Museum in New York City.

As a tribal elder whose prayers, stories, oral history, games, and knowledge of plants are much in demand, Wolfe is passing along his culture to a younger generation. And he is helping preserve the past as a consultant to the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian. Harvey Markowitz, a museum specialist at the Smithsonian, says Wolfe’s “knowledge of traditional Cherokee lifeways makes him a treasure to the Qualla Boundary and the people of North Carolina. And through his work with us, he has become a national treasure as well.”



Roger Haile



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## OSCAR “RED” WILSON

If you run into traditional fiddler Red Wilson, you’re likely to see him in bright red suspenders. “The girls had quit looking at me. Now they look at me again — and laugh,” says Wilson, with a trademark twinkle in his eye.

His humor and his music are inseparable. Recently asked to play at a 60th wedding anniversary celebration, he opened with “I Wish I Was Single Again.” His devoted wife Marie was in attendance and says she thought to herself, “Dear God, what has gotten into him?”

Born in 1920 in Powdermill Branch, a holler in Avery County, Wilson learned music at his father’s knee. And as soon as he was old enough, he often walked across the mountain into Mitchell County to learn from his grandfather and uncle, as well. “Somebody was always playing music at my granddaddy’s,” he says. “From

the time I can remember anything, I loved music. It’s deep in my genes.”

Wilson’s father carved him a banjo with a pocketknife when he was little, and then he borrowed a fiddle from a neighbor who had ordered it from Sears, Roebuck. “I loved that fiddle so good, I could taste it,” says Wilson. “I was 12 years old and had the song ‘Red Wing’ in my head and sat there all day ’til I picked it out.”

Wilson’s early playing led to decades of making music with various groups, all the while working at a radio station, running a small recording studio in his garage in Bakersville, and making fiddles for others. Still playing in a style true to his predecessors, Wilson has been recorded and his music will live on in the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where future generations can go to learn from the old pro.

## THE BRIARHOPPERS: DWIGHT, DAVE, DON, ARVAL, AND “WHITEY”

Do y’all know what time hit is? Hit’s Briarhopper Time!”

Sixty-seven years ago, radio listeners all over North Carolina started tuning their radios to WBT in Charlotte to hear the introduction that signaled the fiddle breakdowns, gospel tunes, lively waltzes, and sweet love ballads that characterized the Briarhoppers. Three surviving members of the original band — Don White, Arval Hogan, and Roy “Whitey” Grant — are being honored for the joy they’ve brought music lovers over the years.

The Briarhoppers are an integral part of North Carolina musical history. At the show’s peak, when WBT offered a picture of the band for a dime and a box top from a sponsor’s product, as many as 10,000 people a week responded. And rumor has it that Billy Graham says the cows on his childhood farm milked better during “Briarhopper Time.”

The radio show ended in 1951 and the group dispersed for a while, but in 1970 their spouses devised a scheme to



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get the Charlotte musicians back together. They thought they were just gathering for a friendly visit, but the wives had made sure their instruments were there. “We saw we could still play a tune or two,” says Whitey Grant, and the rest is indeed history as the Briarhoppers are still playing with

two new members — Dwight Moody and Dave Deese — at museums, festivals, schools, churches, and rest homes.

Grant’s comment about the group’s rest home appearances characterizes the Briarhopper spirit: “If we can just see a smile on those old folks’ faces, we feel like we are well paid.”

## THE COLE SISTERS: NEOLIA COLE WOMACK AND CELIA COLE PERKINSON

Neolia Cole Womack and Celia Cole Perkinson have been making and selling pottery since the 1930s. Representing the fifth generation of Cole family potters, the sisters have been turning since their father, A.R.

Cole, stood them on platforms so they could reach the wheel. A.R. passed away in 1974, leaving Celia and Neolia to operate the pottery shop they had helped him found when they were children.

Their father not only left them the shop, which they still run as Cole’s Pottery on Hawkins Avenue in Sanford, but also the high standards that would continue to serve them well. “I used to make things when I was young, and I thought they were so pretty. Daddy would come and look and tear them up and make me do them over,” recalls Neolia. “I’d cry and run home and swear I was never going to make anything again, but I always came back. When I got older, I understood. If he had let us get away with second-rate work, we would have thought we had it made and never gotten better.”

Neolia, her sister, and her grandson Kenneth are so good they can barely keep their shelves stocked. “The pottery just flies off the shelves,” she says. “When Christmas starts coming, we move from a six-day workweek to a seven-day week. But we enjoy every minute of it.”



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## BISHOP DREADY MANNING

You may have been going to church all your life, but chances are you have never attended a church with as much spirit as Bishop Dready Manning's St. Mark Holiness Church outside Roanoke Rapids. Manning, a traditional guitarist, harmonica player, and gospel singer, has infused his church with music; and the spirited singing, often of tunes written by him, is a joy to behold.

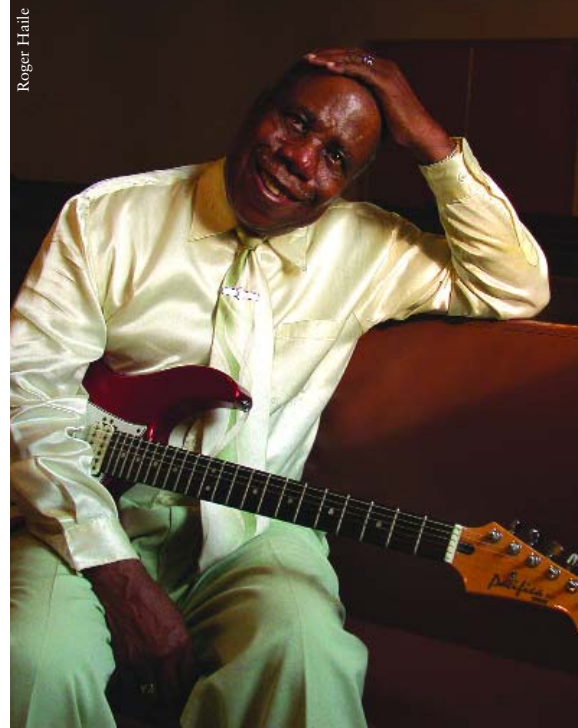
"The Lord gave me this way of playing," he explains in his velvety voice, "and He told me to use it in His service. So that's just what I'm doing." But Bishop Manning didn't always use his extraordinary musical talent to serve the Lord. In his early days, he was a blues musician playing in clubs and piccolo joints and selling moonshine, and he was "out of hand," according to his wife Marie who is an integral part of his church.

A big change came when he suffered

a mysterious hemorrhage in 1962 and was saved both physically and spiritually when some neighbors came to pray over him. "I had a converted mind right then," he says.

His family is a big part of his musical life. He and Marie and their five children toured for years and produced numerous 45s, albums, tapes, and CDs. They still sing together in church every Sunday. His church services are rebroadcast on radio and cable TV and he has a recording studio as well.

Timothy Duffy of the Music Maker Relief Foundation sums it up when he says, "Besides his tremendous musicianship of guitar and harmonica, Dready is a powerful singer and songwriter. His recorded work has been given rave reviews throughout the world and earned the state of North Carolina great praise for being a home to such a wonderful musician."



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## EMMETT JONES

Emmett Jones recalls the early days helping his father with blacksmithing and wheelwrighting in Gates County. "I remember my dad putting me on a cottonseed bucket made of wood to crank the forge," says Jones who now lives outside of Edenton. "I used to think my dad was hard on me 'cause I always had to work in the shop and couldn't go out and play baseball. But he also advised me to learn to enjoy my work, and if anybody ever enjoyed their life's work, it's been me."

His life's work has moved from wheelwright to welder to aircraft technician to educator, then back to wheelwright and craft demonstrator. Since carts and wagon wheels are rarely used anymore and the craft of making

them is dying out, Jones has become a valuable commodity for museums and historic sites, where his reconstructed wagons, carts, and wheels can be seen up and down the East Coast.

Jones is generous with his time and knowledge for anyone who wants to learn about his craft. He constructed a mobile workshop to demonstrate the wheelwright's trade at festivals and craft shows, and he helped the Museum of the Albemarle in Elizabeth City design an exhibit celebrating the rural artisan's service to the farmer by lending his tools, wheels, and expertise.

His love of his work is keeping him busy into his 88th year. "My doctors don't want me to work," he says, "but I truly believe that's what has kept me alive." 🗺️

*Miriam Sauls lives in Raleigh.*