FILM REVIEWS

Two Films by Carl Fleischhauer

All Hand Work. Produced by West Virginia University. 15 minutes. 16mm. Color. Distributed by University of California Extension Media Center, Berkeley, CA 94720. 1974.

How to Make Sorghum Molasses. Produced by West Virginia University. 20 minutes. 16mm. Color study guide with bibliography 9 pp. Distributed by University of California Media Center, Berkeley, CA 94720. 1971.

Reviewed by Betty Jane Belanus and Harry Gammerdinger

"All Hand Work" is a portrait of Jenes Cottrell, a 73-year-old wood craftsman in West Virginia. Cottrell lives, we are told by an introductory paragraph, in a traditional manner in an isolated area. The film, all shot in one day in August 1970, shows his home, wood shop, and the surrounding farmland, and features Cottrell talking and playing the banjo.

The film is very engaging because of Cottrell's appealing character. He is a man who is not only skilled with his hands, but witty and entertaining as well. He clearly enjoys his work and playing the banjo he made out of old car parts, walnut wood, and factory-made tuning keys. Cottrell plays to the camera on occasion, at one point jokingly playing the banjo while walking around his lawn.

Technically, the film is excellent. The sound is very clear and the shots are focused and well composed. Our major criticism with the film is that too much time is taken up with close-up shots of Cottrell talking. While the dialogue is interesting, and a few close-ups of Cottrell's face are in order, it is unnecessary to see him simply talking for so long. The time could have been spent showing Cottrell working at his wood craft or some other activity, perhaps with his own explanations as a voice-over.

In general, the film successfully introduces us to Cottrell. Among the best glimpses into the man's life is a sequence of views of the interior of his home showing the furnishings and photos on the walls. Cottrell gives us a brief
life history of his former farming activities and the reasons he had for choosing to devote his life to woodworking. Another strength of the film is the footage of Cottrell's sister, Sylvia O'Brien, preparing and serving dinner made up mostly of regional foods. This portrayal of the meal treats an important aspect of folklife often ignored in studies.

The weakest aspect of the film is the lack of a complete treatment of Cottrell's craft. We are to believe that woodworking is one of the most important parts of this man's life, yet we see relatively little of his craftsmanship. The only work that is photographed is Cottrell briefly turning a piece of wood on his foot-powered lathe. The student of material culture will be disappointed by never seeing any of Cottrell's finished products except for his whistles. He never discusses the technique, aesthetic, or traditionality of his craft during the film.

"How to Make Sorghum Molasses" documents the process of making molasses in central West Virginia. The film was shot on 21 and 22 September 1970 on Johnny and Bernard Weaver's farm. The Weavers, assisted by neighbors, cut the cane, bring the horse to the mill, and begin squeezing the juice from the cane. We see the leveling of the boiling pan, starting of the fire in the furnace, and boiling down of the syrup.

The filming of this important traditional process is valuable, but the film is uneven. Like "All Hand Work," the film is technically excellent. The shots are more balanced than those of "All Hand Work," containing a good blend of close-ups and long shots. The uneven quality is in the choice of emphasis. For instance, while a relatively short time is spent showing the boiling down, there is one scene where a man struck four matches trying to ignite the fire. A disproportionate time is spent filming the repair of the horse-powered mill, which accidentally slips off its base while the grinding is being done. As soon as the first jar is filled with molasses the film ends abruptly, much to our surprise.

During the film, there is little talk by the men about the sorghum. One of the participants tells how to judge when the boiling is done, but that is the only discussion of the process. We have little idea of the men's thoughts about the sorghum making or even their evaluation of the finished product.

A strength of the film is that it brings out the community aspect of the work. While the men are working together they
discuss dogs, horses, and old times. Unfortunately, in this short a film the diffuse focus does not allow us to become familiar with the individuals involved.

With the film is distributed a study guide, which "presents the participants' attitudes towards the event and sketches some of their views of its context and history." This necessary aid raises the question of whether such a guide should be necessary for short documentary films. The filmmaker defends the choice by explaining that he is "presenting this information here instead of in a condensed (and possibly oversimplified) soundtrack commentary so viewers may concentrate on the film's pictures and natural sound." It seems probable, however, that during the course of the filming the men would have talked about sorghum making and that this dialogue could have been used as natural sound without distracting from the film's visual impact.

Judging the films together, their weakness seems to be a superficial treatment. We don't see Cottrell actually making a wooden item, nor do we hear the men talking about the making of the molasses. The films have the slick appearance of being made for television viewing rather than folklore study, and even the study guide was an afterthought for which the sorghum makers were interviewed three years after the film was finished. Part of the problem may be that only one day was spent in the field filming "All Hand Work" and two for "How to Make Sorghum Molasses." In a day or two the filmmaker has little time to learn about his subjects, few opportunities to record and photograph them. Following Cottrell to a craft fair where he sells his goods, or the Weaver family to the table where they enjoy their molasses could have been invaluable.

While we feel that "All Hand Work" is a good character portrait, it offers little meat for serious folklore study. "How to Make Sorghum Molasses," along with the study guide, would be useful in showing students how a traditional craft is performed.