

DIFFERENT HAIRS ON THE SAME DOG

THE WORK OF A PUBLIC FOLKLORIST

*Dedicated to Blanton Owen, 1945–1998
Folklorist, fieldworker, and friend*

Written and edited by Meg Glaser, Andrea Graham, and Barbara Mackey

NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL

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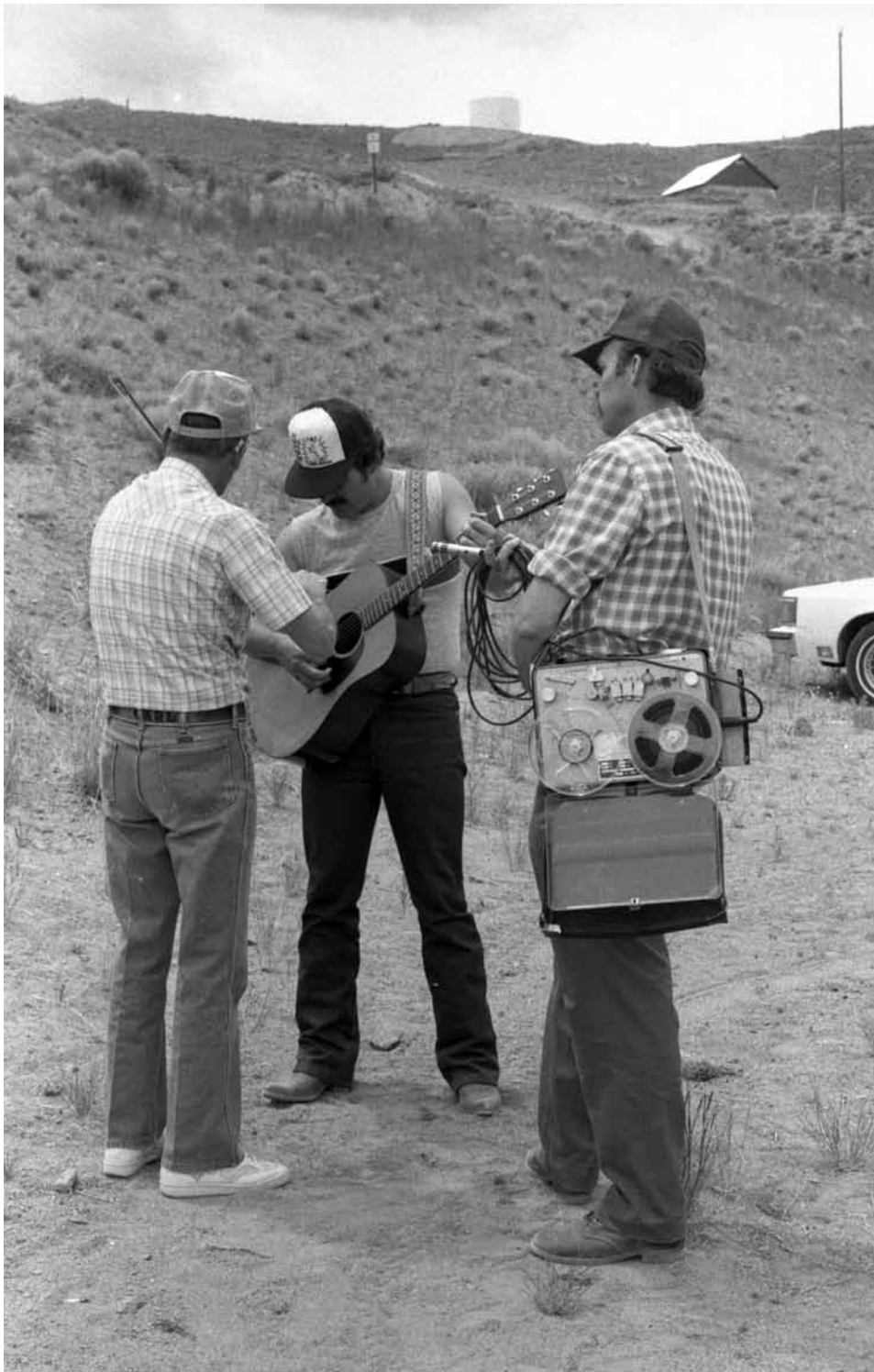
DIFFERENT HAIRS ON THE SAME DOG

THE WORK OF A PUBLIC FOLKLORIST

IL Ranch camp cavy,
Elko County, Nevada
1994

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN





FOREWORD

A number of years ago I was invited to speak at an annual gathering of Nevada cultural agencies and organizations in Las Vegas. My host was Blanton Owen, the folk arts coordinator for the Nevada Arts Council. When evening came, we went out on the town. Presently, Blanton guided me into an attractive older casino and, after surveying the floor, to an active table near the center of the room. The dealer seemed to know Blanton but continued with the business at hand. When he took his break, Blanton introduced him to me. It turned out that the dealer had the longstanding practice of noting down for research purposes the gambling rituals, customary behavior, and lore of his co-workers and customers. He was modest about the value of his work, yet plainly pleased that it was receiving such attention from us. We talked encouragingly, musing on the possibility of a publication drawn from his meticulously recorded notebooks. It was but a moment, yet it suggests to me something important about the work of a public folklorist.

All of us folklorists, as a tribe, are drawn to the creative and expressive realm of people's lives. We love the intimate, informal domains of cultural expression that seem unassuming but, on reflection, tell volumes about the quality of a life artfully lived. We take special pride in having an eye and an ear for the hidden radiances of ordinary life. The delicate shapings of the human spirit, we believe, imbue the simple practice of daily life with an aesthetic dimension—Aquinas's "*splendor formae*."

Thus Blanton, hosting me in a town where gaming is the reigning discipline, wanted to share a bit of the expressive dimension of that world—on both sides of the table. By divining the pulse of this occupation, he was defining by inference the character of Las Vegas as a place. But—again, like all folklorists—he was both drawn to the particularity of the place and keenly mindful of its relationships with other places, people, and practices. He doubtless sensed in our visit to the casino an intriguing instance of the intricate cultural calculus by which tradition creates distinctiveness while reaffirming connectedness.

**Blanton Owen
recording a fiddle and
guitar player at the
Gridley Days Fiddle
Contest in Austin,
Nevada.**

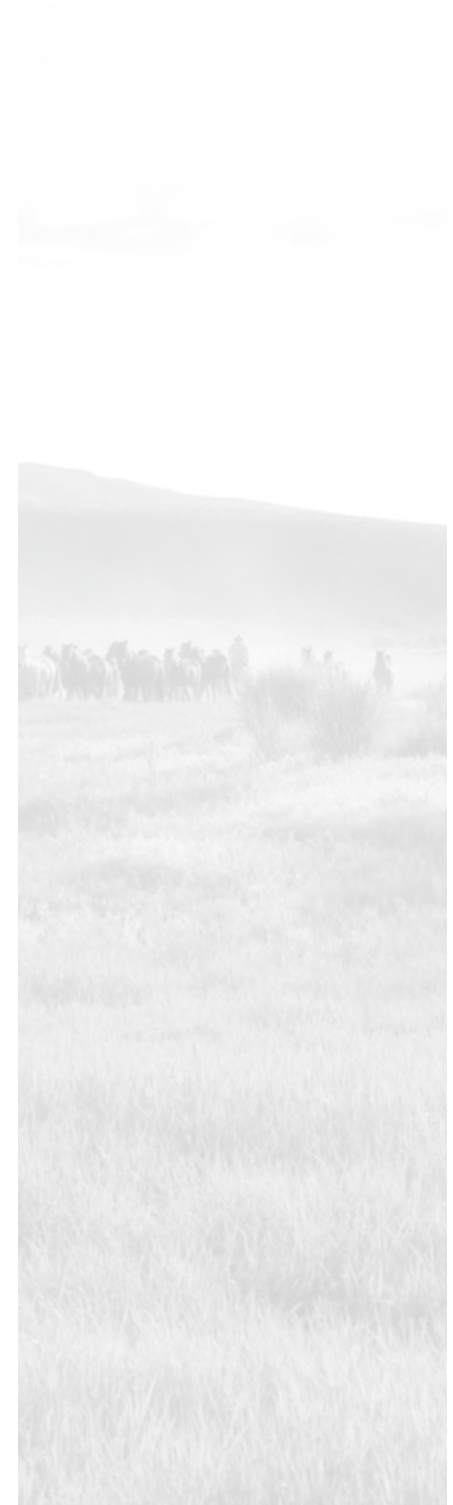
PHOTO BY ANDREA GRAHAM

But if such divining and defining, distinguishing, and connecting, constitutes the habit of mind of all folklorists, what is a “public folklorist?” The term is new enough still to be gathering associations, as if searching out the potential for its own meaning. Some of our tribe imagine a folkloristic universe subdivided into “academic” and “public” domains. Perhaps, for some of us, the academic folklorists teach in universities and publish books and scholarly articles, while the public folklorists work in public agencies and organizations and produce festivals, films, exhibits, and radio programs. Perhaps we even imagine that the academic folklorists debate among themselves and critique the public folklorists, while the public folklorists are busy trying to document, publicize, and help the traditions in their purview. But our categories may prove more fluid than we originally imagined. A teacher at a university deals intimately every day with students who represent cultural communities, and a public folklorist often contributes powerfully to academic discourse.

My encounter with the casino dealer suggests another way of perceiving what a public folklorist might be. As I review it in my mind today, I realize that while Blanton Owen was a keen observer, he treated the dealer not like an informant, but like a friend and colleague. He was in effect visiting a fellow folklorist, sharing with him the skills and pleasures of observing, documenting, and reflecting on tradition, reassuring him that his private discipline could become a public contribution.

Somehow the quality of that relationship with others goes to the heart of what a public folklorist can be. Such a folklorist may reside in the academy, work in a cultural organization, or simply be a citizen living in any community. A “public folklorist,” in this root sense, is a people’s folklorist, who works with people as fellow citizens and democratic peers, and whose best contributions as a professional provide skilled collegial support for the cultural development of people and their communities.

—ALAN JABBOUR, DIRECTOR
AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, 1999



FORREWORD



INTRODUCTION

Folklife and archaeology [and history, anthropology, sociology, historic preservation, oral history] are different hairs on the same dog. Each discipline attempts to explain human behavior by delving into the details of past and present life. Folklife research, by examining the living traditions of the present (including everything from plows to proverbs, lederhosen to legends) offers unique and intimate insight into the [cultural] record...Folklife includes the creative, expressive aspects of culture that are learned and passed on in small groups, usually in one-on-one situations. A person's stories, music, beliefs, crafts, foodways, occupational skills, games, and worldviews all embody that individual's intimate association with the various small groups within which he or she interacts on a day-to-day, face-to-face level...A folklorist is interested in both traditional culture (what people think) and society (how people behave according to their culture) and is less interested in the 'truth' of a person's stories, beliefs, or remembrances than in what those things say about the cultural group(s) to which that person belongs. People behave according to what they think and believe, even if those beliefs differ with the written record.

—BLANTON OWEN

Blanton Owen.

PHOTO BY ANDREA GRAHAM

As Blanton Owen so colorfully put it with his “hairs on the dog” metaphor, a folklorist looks at the world through the lens of human creativity in all its manifestations and contexts. This publication seeks to show what a folklorist does in his or her work, to share the sense of discovery and beauty as a folklorist experiences them, and to convey the importance of folk culture in all our lives.

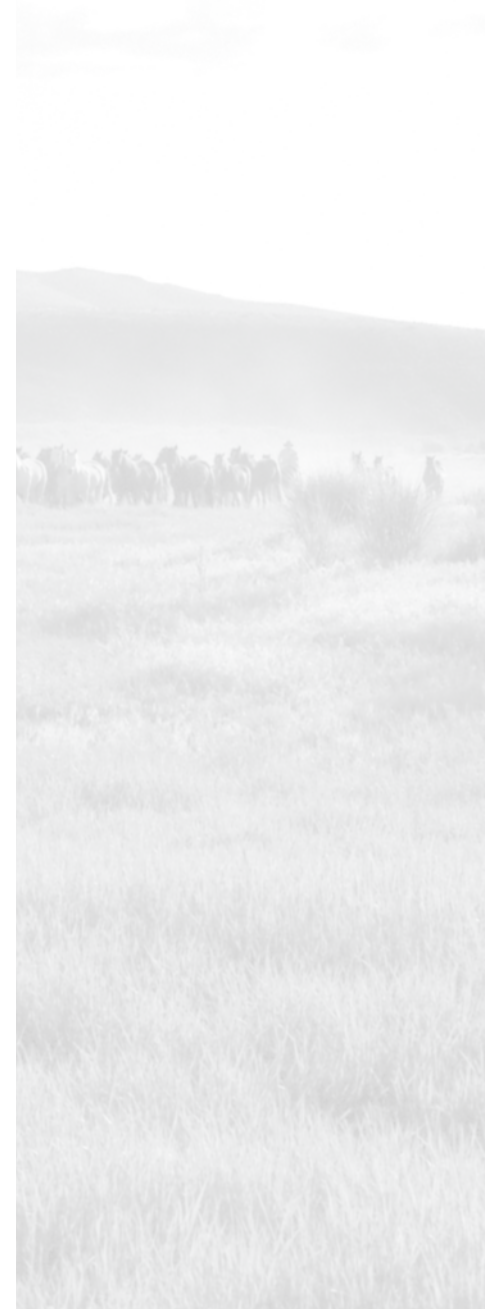
The work of folklorists in general will be explored through the words and photographs of one in particular. Blanton Owen was raised in Tennessee, received his MA in folklore from Indiana University in 1977, and worked for eight years in various parts of the south before moving to Nevada in 1985 to become the first Folk Arts Program Coordinator for the Nevada Arts Council. After five years in that job, he left to work as a freelance and consulting folklorist, oral historian, archaeological technician, and commercial pilot. Those jobs took him all over the west, but his deepest work lay in Nevada and the Great Basin. Blanton died in June of 1998 at the age of 53 when his plane crashed while he was working on an archeological project in Washington State. He left a great legacy of field documentation, writing, and public presentation of the folk cultures of the region.

A folklorist has to travel in order to learn the land, observe the human environment, and talk to people about what makes their lives meaningful. With that in mind, we have structured this publication as a road trip with Blanton to the far corners of Nevada. As you will see, a folklorist has many interests, from music to crafts, from vernacular architecture to the traditions of working people such as cowboys and miners, and to the ways a community celebrates itself and its roots. These are often things people take for granted because they are such a part of their everyday lives, but they are also the very things that make those lives worthwhile, beautiful and creative, giving people a connection to their place and their heritage.

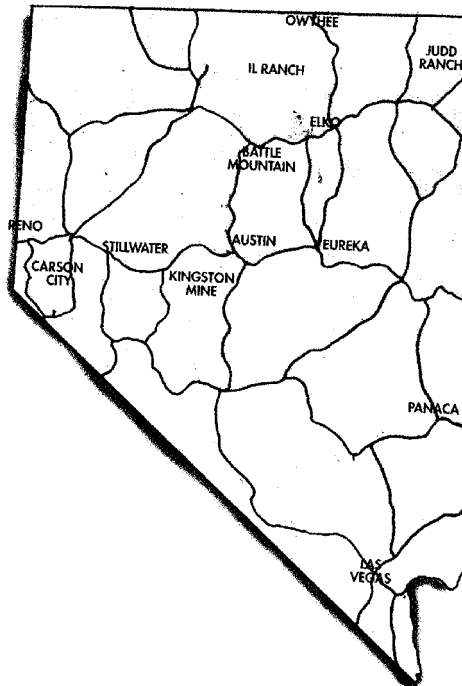
In addition to locating, documenting, and understanding folk culture, a public folklorist also helps people present their traditions to a wider audience. By organizing exhibits, concerts, festivals, media productions, publications and other types of public programs that share, explain, and celebrate traditional arts and cultures, the folklorist helps make sure these living traditions are not forgotten or overlooked in the rush and change of modern life. Folk traditions will always have a meaningful role in human communities, and by paying attention to them and their practitioners we show that we value the place of folklife in all our lives.

With this small booklet, we honor Blanton Owen’s work, his memory, and the land and people he loved. By extension, we also recognize and appreciate the work of public folklorists everywhere.

—MEG GLASER, ANDREA GRAHAM, AND BARBARA MACKEY
DECEMBER 1998



From the Carson Valley to the Ruby Range, and down to Clark County, come along as Blanton Owen meets and understands the people that accompany the geography of Nevada.



ON THE ROAD WITH FOLKLORIST BLANTON OWEN

Follow Blanton as he travels the highways and back roads of Nevada, stopping at stores and cafes and post offices to ask about local folks and take the pulse of a place. He keeps a sharp eye out for signs of specialized community life—a saddle shop on a side street, a Basque restaurant, an urban neighborhood full of barbecue joints and a church on every block, a sheep camp visible from the road, businesses with Italian names, a lively Las Vegas craps table, a poster for a pow wow or a Mexican dance or a ranch hand rodeo, a strip mall full of Thai and Chinese stores. These are often the entry points for a folklorist getting to know a place and the people who live there. Looking, asking, and listening as people tell their own stories in their own words about what is important, a folklorist seeks to understand a culture from the inside out. We hope by listening in on some of Blanton's conversations and thoughts as he meets the people of the West that you will come to know and appreciate them too.

By talking to the people who work on the land and use the buildings, a folklorist learns the real meaning of a living landscape. Here buckaroo Randy Everett helps Blanton understand patterns on the LS Ranch in the Thousand Springs drainage of northern Elko County.

PHOTO BY THOMAS CARTER

Just as our misinformed stereotypes and preconceptions of other American regions are corrected by a thoughtful visit, our picture of the West is surely redrawn when there is time to listen, observe, and record the words and the view accurately.

—HOWARD W. MARSHALL
FROM *BUCKAROOS IN PARADISE:
COWBOY LIFE IN
NORTHERN NEVADA*,
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA
PRESS, 1981

COWBOYS AND POETRY

Blanton's first trip is to Elko County, a large expanse of territory with many rich traditional ways of life still in evidence. One of these is ranching, a culture with a long history and unique adaptations to the high desert environment. One aspect of ranching culture is the tradition of cowboy poetry. In 1985, a group of western folklorists organized the first Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko to honor and celebrate this unique art form, and that event has grown to become one of the state's premier cultural happenings. At the 1986 Gathering, Blanton met rancher and poet Ernie Fanning and talked to him about how he wrote poetry. Here is an excerpt from a research paper Blanton produced from that interview.

Cowboy Poets and the Creative Process

A very small percentage of cowboys, buckaroos, or ranchers even recite poetry, and an even smaller percentage actually write poetry. This shouldn't surprise anyone, but it was this fact that really got me to wondering why some cowboys were active in the poetry and others weren't.

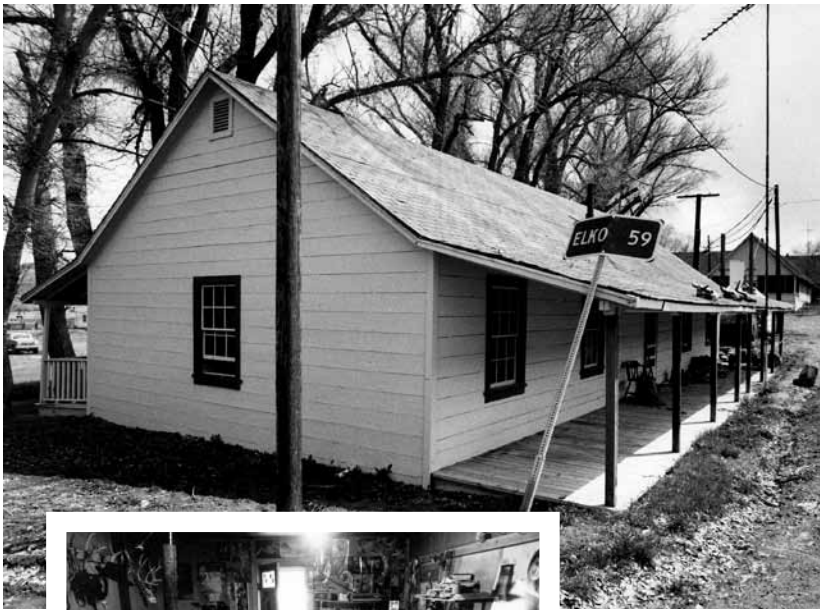
Rancher Ernie Fanning grew up with poetry around him. As he says, "I've heard it all my life. I can remember get-togethers at the house when they'd sing and play and somebody would recite. It's something I grew up with, as a young kid on the ranches in Arizona. ...the guys that I called men, I mean the guys that were my idols, they done it, and that might'a been what got me started doing it."

Here is how Ernie describes his process of composing poetry: "I never think about putting one together. I may be going down this road between ranches and one just comes. And usually when it comes it just rolls. I've tried to sit down and write poetry about certain things, and I can't do it. Something just trips my trigger. And I never write anything down. When one comes it just comes and stays. If I like it. If I decide it was something I don't really care for, I just erase it. ...I like words that click. That's an old Robert Service saying. And that's what they do, they click. There might be one line in a poem that is the part I really like. ...I like the poetry for the same reason I like country music; I like the story."

—BLANTON OWEN, FROM "COWBOY POETS AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS,"
PAPER PRESENTED TO THE AMERICAN FOLKLORE SOCIETY, 1986



Through his poems of contemporary cowboy life, Ernie Fanning is an outspoken advocate for the ranching community and a fine entertainer as well. Ernie's poems honor the past as a way of dealing with the changes modern life brings to his cowboy heritage. (*Ernie Fanning passed away December 31, 2006. He was 71.*)
PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN



BUILDING THE WEST

One of Blanton's particular interests was vernacular architecture, and he documented buildings and landscapes on ranches and in small towns all over the state. His largest project was a book on the ranch architecture in northeastern Nevada. His long-time friend and fellow fieldworker, Thomas Carter of the University of Utah, plans to bring the project to completion.

Vernacular Landscapes

Folklorists like Blanton Owen have played a major role in documenting with photographs, measured drawings, and oral interviews the American vernacular landscape. Landscape is a word that at its most fundamental level means "an expanse of scenery," but increasingly it is used by students of culture to describe the connection people have with a particular place. Landscape in this more active sense refers to the "cultural" or "human" landscape as an expanse of natural scenery shaped, or better yet "retooled," by a group of people for their own purposes. Scenery is turned into place, a process that includes such things as producing food, earning a living, developing transportation systems, building habitations, and forming communities.

Adaptability is a key component of all cultural landscapes. In confronting new and highly variable natural environments, people everywhere are forced to make concessions to climate, topography, the availability of resources, and the social order within which they have chosen to live. And as the surrounding environmental conditions change, so too does the cultural landscape. For example, in northern Elko County, Nevada, a tradition of raising livestock developed around high desert grazing, while in the southern part of the county the discovery of silver ore led to a reliance on the mining industry. In the north, isolated ranches were tucked up against sheltering hillsides, while in the south the population huddled in compact urban centers. The concept of "place" arises then in response to the particular circumstances of settlement and such particularity lends a decidedly local or "vernacular" identity to each segment of the landscape. Just as there are vernacular expressions in language, so too are there vernacular customs, occupational practices, and architectural designs—all signs of the importance of place in American life.

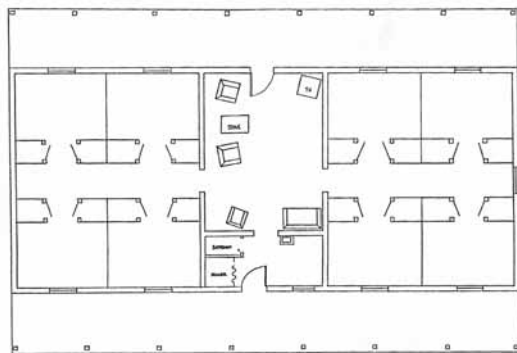
Folklorists study the vernacular landscape for what it says about people. Written in the fences they photograph, the mine shafts they diagram, the houses they measure, and the communities they map is the record of how people in a given time and place have lived, what they have valued, and how they have chosen to treat each other. The medium of things is a powerful one, for the constructed landscape offers insight into the workings of culture in its most open and intimate dimension. Here life takes place, and life becomes place.

—THOMAS CARTER, UNIVERSITY OF UTAH GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

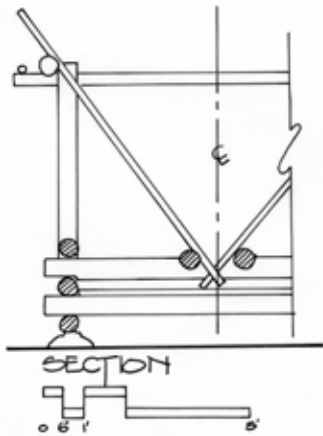


The bunkhouse on the IL Ranch in northern Elko County was documented with photos and measured drawings as part of an in-depth study Blanton conducted of vernacular ranch architecture.

PHOTOS BY BLANTON OWEN



Blanton's field drawing of a ranch hay bunk shows the kind of care and observation necessary to thoroughly document and understand vernacular culture.



The Living Ranch

Too often the West is just the panoramic backdrop against which the antics of the cowboy are portrayed. And whether studies of the cowboy in American life explore the fantasy of independence which stirs the popular imagination or digs into the dirt of occupational existence, until very recently virtually nothing of substance has been said of the landscape within and around which the cowboy lives and works.

The cowboy as American icon has been presented, prodded, and dissected for generations, but the bunkhouses and cookhouses in which the symbols live and eat are absent in the literature.

Vernacular means things—words or buildings, for example—that are created and used according to local and regional dictates rather than standard national prescriptions. Vernacular architecture, therefore, embodies the cultural and environmental preferences of its builders as manifested within a specific community context.

Studying buildings for their own sake is fun and personally rewarding; but unless that study connects the building with people, it rings hollow.

—BLANTON OWEN, FROM *THINGS GREAT AND SMALL: RANCH ARCHITECTURE IN NORTHEASTERN ELKO COUNTY* (UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT)

Field Documentation

As the country slips beneath the plane, the enormity and openness of the land hits hard, like a revelation. Below, the narrow gravel road follows the drainage which restricts the view from the window of a pickup truck. But from the air, looking down, the green meadows along the creek sharply delineate the transition zone between green, irrigated alfalfa fields and the blue-green hue of the sagebrush beginning to climb up the canyon slope.

—BLANTON OWEN, FROM *THINGS GREAT AND SMALL: RANCH ARCHITECTURE IN NORTHEASTERN ELKO COUNTY* (UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT)

One of Blanton's unique contributions to folklore fieldwork in the West was his aerial perspective. An expert and adventurous pilot, he took his single engine plane all over the region, visiting small towns and remote ranches, and using aerial photography to gain a broader and richer view of the Great Basin's distinctive landscape and the human impact upon it. This photo shows the IL Ranch in winter, with the corrals, barns, and stables in the foreground, and the living quarters, bunkhouse, and cookhouse in the trees behind.

PHOTO BY ANDREA GRAHAM

Detailed photos, drawings, measurements, and notes are the tools of the folklore fieldworker. Here Blanton Owen and Steve Simmons measure a small bunkhouse on the Gamble Ranch. PHOTO BY THOMAS CARTER



One thing that folklorists know—at the very core of their being—is that creative expression is central to the lives of individuals and communities. To the folklorist, art is the great window into culture, for societies carry memory and values in images, stories, dances and songs. Individuals and communities use art to express themselves, and to communicate—to craft a “face” and a “personality” for community life. Societies carry collective memories in their art, their customs and ceremonies, myths and legends, and they use art as a vehicle to transfer values and traditions from one generation to the next. Through their artistic expression, communities create a cultural identity as their members tell stories, sing songs, and paint images, and it is through their art that they communicate to the world their beliefs, hopes, and dreams. The arts are especially important in a complex democracy like ours. Democracy offers the promise of equal participation to hundreds of cultural traditions that share our landscape—Native American to Asian, European, black and Hispanic—and this promise translates into an endless process of negotiation and accommodation.

—BILL IVEY, FOLKLORIST, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, FROM SPEECHES GIVEN TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF STATE ARTS AGENCIES AND THE NATIONAL MUSIC EDUCATION SUMMIT, 1998

REFLECTIONS OF ETHNICITY

Elko is host each year to the National Basque Festival, held on the Fourth of July weekend. One of the oldest and most distinct ethnic cultures in northern Nevada, the Basque community shares its music, dance, friendly competitions, food, and drink with its neighbors at a series of summer festivals in towns across the state.

Bernardo Yanci

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, people from Europe’s Basque region came to America to work as ranch hands and sheepherders throughout the West. Some of the more lasting elements of old-world culture that they brought with them to this new and different country are traditional foods, their unique language, and music. Basque dancing and music are the highlight of any Basque get-together.

Bernardo Yanci, who lives in Elko, is an accomplished accordion player and is a regular performer at Basque celebrations throughout the Great Basin. He moved to the United States in 1950, when he was 24 years old.

When he talks about his life here as a sheepherder for an uncle in California and as a bartender in San Francisco and Elko, he smiles and his eyes shine with the memories. Music has always been an important part of Bernardo’s life, and his love of the piano accordion remains strong. Of the many types of traditional Basque music which he plays, Bernardo Yanci likes the fast-paced jotas the best. As he explains, the jota, which is sometimes called a fandango by Basque musicians, makes him feel happy and good. “It’s kind of happy music for me, I see them dancing there and it’s a good feeling,” he says. “I think that’s my favorite music in Basque.” (Bernardo Yanci passed away on January 17, 2016 in Garden City, Idaho. He was 89.)

—BLANTON OWEN, FROM “HOME MEANS NEVADA” RADIO SERIES, NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL, 1986

It is little details, like the special knot in the headscarf of a Basque dancer, that identify members of a folk community and add artfulness to their daily lives.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN



Bernardo Yanci’s accordion keeps the Elko Basque Dancers in step and entertains the crowds at the annual National Basque Festival. No Basque gathering would be complete without music.

PHOTO BY CAROL EDISON



Food in all its manifestations—from gathering, storing, and preparing, to eating and sharing—is one of the most distinct and personal elements of any culture, and food traditions tend to be kept long after other traditions are lost. Basque celebrations and restaurants are known for their hearty fare and quantities of red wine.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

NEVADA'S NATIVE AMERICANS

Spider's shop.
PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN



Spider Teller's saddle shop in Owyhee is a convivial place where the local Indian buckaroos often drop in for a visit. Through the Nevada Arts Council's Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program, young buckaroo Ira Walker (right) got to spend time learning the saddle making trade from Spider so those skills could be carried on in his community.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

Nevada's indigenous tribes—the Western Shoshone, Northern Paiute, Washoe and Southern Paiute—make up a small percentage of the state's population but have a high profile culturally because they are proud of their traditions and work to maintain them. Join Blanton Owen as he visits the Duck Valley Reservation in northern Elko County and the Stillwater Reservation in Western Nevada to meet with some talented artists. The road up to Duck Valley goes past Wildhorse Reservoir and through a spectacular canyon of the Owyhee River, and then comes out in a rich, broad valley that surrounds the town of Owyhee. Shoshone and Paiute families moved onto the Duck Valley Reservation at the turn of the century. These homesteaders cleared land and built homes while they started herds of cattle and horses that continue to thrive today. Cattle and horses graze in the meadows, Indian buckaroos drive by in the pickups, and the Rec Hall and burger bar is the center of social activity.

Baby Baskets

Martha Dick is a Shoshone Indian living on the Duck Valley Reservation in northern Nevada. She speaks with quiet dignity about her family's heritage and skills, including the construction and use of cradleboards, a practice passed down in her family for many generations. Martha and her son Richard recently made a cradleboard, which they call a baby basket, for Richard's son Bodagwitche. They used willow to weave the frame, but Martha points out that her family, which is Shoshone, has certain traditional preferences which differ from those of Richard's wife's family, which is Paiute. "They make the frame and the willows that they put inside here; they run it up and down, where we run it across."

Baby baskets are a material, physical expression of both Paiute and Shoshone culture, but they are also symbolic and play an important role for many non-material beliefs and traditions. Martha Dick explains, "The use of the cradleboard is one of the things that we have besides the language, and the language is dying out pretty fast...the kids should know something about their own people...it gets away from you." (Martha Dick passed away on September 26, 2000. She was in her 70th year.)

—BLANTON OWEN, FROM "HOME MEANS NEVADA" RADIO SERIES, NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL, 1986

Cowboys Are Indians

Every saddle maker has his or her leather stamping design preferences; no custom saddle is complete until the decorative finishing touches are done. Spider Teller makes saddles in a tiny shop on the Duck Valley Shoshone-Paiute Reservation in northern Elko County, and he has very specific, well-thought-out ideas about what makes a good stamping design.



The boy in this cradleboard, held by his grandmother Martha Dick, is now a young teenager on the Duck Valley Reservation in northern Elko County. From his earliest days in a traditional baby basket, his life has been shaped by the traditions and values of his Shoshone-Paiute heritage as embodied in his elders and the land that surrounds him. PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

Since folk art develops directly out of everyday life with all its human and practical contours, it is in turn directed back at everyday life. Quilts end up on beds, pies get eaten, beaded bags are used and worn out, whittled canes break or get buried with their makers...Most folk arts are done because they exist in the stream of life as an integral part of their reality; that is to say, items of folk art are thrown away, the same way life itself is. One does not expect to live forever; neither does one expect a saddle to last forever... In a certain sense, all of folklore, like all the cells in a body, may be said to be continually dying. Perhaps our awareness of this accounts for some of our interest in putting it on display and insisting that it is important.

—BARRE TOELKEN, FROM
"IN THE STREAM OF LIFE:
AN ESSAY OF OREGON FOLK ART," IN
WEBFOOTS AND BUNCHGRASSERS:
FOLK ARTS OF THE OREGON COUNTRY,
OREGON ARTS COMMISSION, 1980



Folk arts are often deceptively simple in appearance, but to do them well takes years of learning and practice, dedication, and great skill. Here Shoshone basket maker Agnes Foster splits willows in the way she learned from her mother. The split willow "threads" will be used to weave larger willows into a cradleboard.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

He runs his hand through his short black hair, settles down at the stamping stone on his work bench with the light streaming in through the window, and talks about leather tooling as he demonstrates his stamping techniques and design principles.

"I've seen a lot of saddles that, you'll see big old flowers on [them] with no designing. I'm standing here and I know just about where all the stems are going to go, even though they're not there. You have to have a good imagination. I know where all my leaves are going to go. I've always been like that, from the time I started to learn, I knew just where everything was going to go. You've got to make the right cuts. If you don't, you just ruin a bunch of leather."

In addition to knowing and understanding design principles, and knowing what working cowboys like, Spider says, "I'd know just about what a cowboy would want, 'cause I done a lot of buckarooing when I was younger. I been all over the place."

—BLANTON OWEN, FROM INTERVIEW WITH SPIDER TELLER,
NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL, 1986

Willow Baskets

Agnes Foster was born in 1913 in Cloverdale Canyon, about thirty miles east of Lone, Nevada. She continues her Shoshone family's tradition of making and using twined willow baskets. She now lives at Stillwater, near Fallon.

"My mother did quite a bit of willow work. She did real nice baskets, you know, the round baskets. And then I used to help her, that's how I learned. And she used to show me how to split the willows and how to scrape them, and all that. You want willows that come right straight up from the ground. You get the reddish-brown ones; those that are dying aren't any good, they're gray. It's hard. Like I told the girls last year, even if your work doesn't look very good, don't give up. Because the next time it'll be a little better."
(Agnes Foster passed away on November 16, 2005. She was 92.)

—BLANTON OWEN, FROM "NEVADA FOLK ARTS APPRENTICESHIPS 1988-1989," NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL

BUCKAROO ARTS

One of Blanton's earliest acquaintances when he came to Nevada was rancher, poet, and braider Randy Stowell, who was then living on a ranch in northern White Pine County. Randy and Blanton got to be good friends and the line between professional visits and social visits became ever more vague. Blanton even helped with gathering and branding cattle on occasion.

Randy Stowell

Randy Stowell was born in 1949 and raised on his family's ranch in Rowland, northern Elko County, Nevada. He grew up in the buckaroo tradition of cowboying and remains active in the cattle business in Elko and White Pine counties. Randy has earned a reputation as one of the country's best braiders of beautiful and functional rawhide horse gear.

Randy says, "There's two parts to rawhiding. The one part is learning how to braid, tying the buttons. And the other part is learning to work your rawhide, having it in the right condition. That's real important in making smooth work, having your rawhide in the right condition. You can't just pick a piece of rawhide up and braid it. You have to wet it, dampen it, and then let it mellow, and get in the right texture. If it's too wet then when you braid it and it dries, it leaves gaps in the rawhide. And if it's too dry and you try to braid it, then it doesn't braid tight."

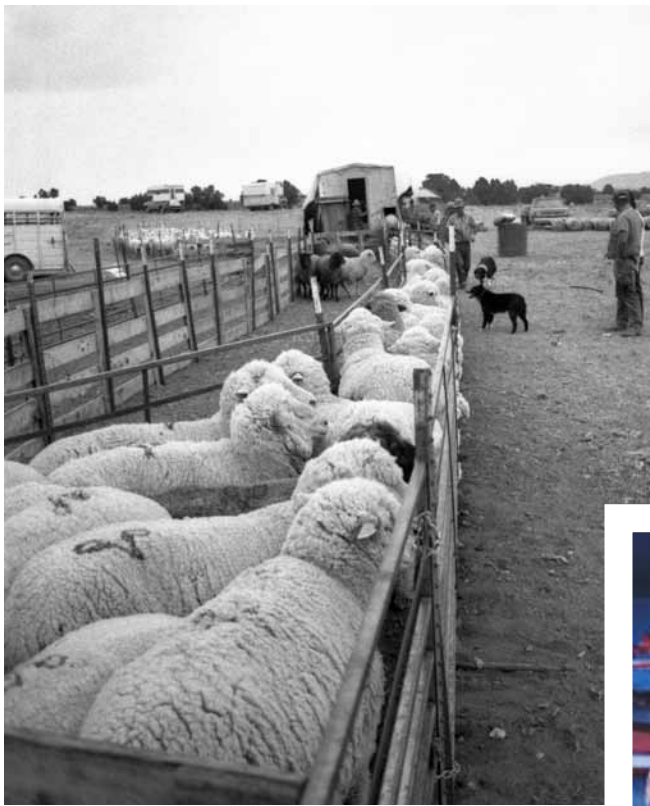
—BLANTON OWEN, FROM "NEVADA FOLK ARTS APPRENTICESHIPS 1988-1989,"
NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL

The process of creating a piece of braided rawhide horse gear is long, detailed and exacting. Randy Stowell is one of the best braiders in Nevada and has been a master teacher for three different students in the Nevada Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program. Here those apprentices show some of the many steps needed to transform a cowhide into a piece of gear for a working cowboy. Clockwise: Pedro Pedrini practices braiding around a dowel. PHOTO BY ANDREA GRAHAM; Randy (on the right) shows Hank Brackenbury how to start a bosal. PHOTO BY ANDREA GRAHAM; George Nix scrapes the hair off a damp hide. PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN; The finished product: a rawhide reata for roping. PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN



Randy Stowell, on horseback, has roped a young steer which the crew on the ground is now branding. The occupational traditions of buckaroos have developed over generations of working in the unique Great Basin environment, and despite wide acceptance of modern conveniences, sometimes the old ways still work the best.
PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN





Most Nevada sheep men now bring in shearing crews from Australia and New Zealand, whose seasons are opposite from ours. The shearers work in self-contained semi-trailers, and a good one can shear a sheep in a couple of minutes.

PHOTO BY ANDREA GRAHAM



Shepherding is a lonely business. Today many herders are from Mexico, or, as with this man, Peru, and work on three-year contracts before returning home. In the early days of Nevada sheep ranching, most of the herders were Basque.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN



A hearty stew and a large loaf of shepherders bread, all cooked in Dutch ovens, make for a warm and welcome break during a long, cool April day at the shearing camp of Pete Paris in central Nevada. (Pete Paris passed away in Ely, Nevada on September 28, 2013. He was 87.)

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

HERDING SHEEP IN THE NEVADA DESERT

The basin and range environment provides excellent conditions for raising sheep, but bands must keep constantly moving, and therefore so must their keepers. Thus developed a unique way of life and a distinct form of rolling architecture that is often encountered on Nevada's back roads. Blanton made a point of stopping to visit when he came across a herder in his wagon, and eventually researched the history of sheep camps and documented a number of them.

Sheep Camps

The whole idea of architecture implies permanence and stability; even the word is heavy. And the range of constructs subsumed under the term architecture is huge—from log corn cribs to dressed stone courthouses, from willow fences and stockade corrals to formal gardens and hedges. Even when the term is modified with the adjective vernacular, the scope is hardly lessened. But mobile things, Airstream trailers and 19th century Gypsy wagons, for example, are architecture, too. So, too, is the western sheep camp, a prime example of rolling vernacular architecture.

Surprisingly little has been written about the business of herding sheep, and virtually nothing at all about the ubiquitous herder's camp. The solitary life of the herder is practically invisible to most people. For months at a stretch, one or two herders work and live virtually alone, with only the regular weekly visit of the boss bringing supplies, or the unexpected visit of a trapper or lost folklorist to break the routine. [A sheep camp is] a covered wagon in which sheep herders live. The wagon is entered through a split (Dutch) door in the front from which draft animals can be reined as they pull the camp. The interior arrangement of wood or gas cook stove on the right (as the camp is entered), cabinets on the left, and bed spanning the rear is almost ubiquitous. A table either folds up or slides underneath the bed frame, and there are bench seats along the walls with storage beneath them on either side of the central table.

With rare exception, the form of the sheep camp has remained unchanged for the past 100 years. Its use on the range continues, and its use as a traditional symbol continues to grow. The western sheep camp has evolved, in a little over a century, from a solution to a pressing need to a symbol for an industry. Most importantly, however, the sheep camp continues to be an efficient, even comfortable, "Home on the Range" for many sheep herders in the Great Basin.

—BLANTON OWEN, FROM "SHEEP CAMPS: ROLLING VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE," PAPER PRESENTED TO THE AMERICAN FOLKLORE SOCIETY, 1988, AND PUBLISHED IN THE "SHEEP CAMP" ENTRY IN *AMERICAN FOLKLORE: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA*

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Folklife is the informal culture held by a group of people who have something in common, whether it be location, occupation, ethnicity, family, religion, or some other element. In the case of religious folklife, the traditions go beyond those associated strictly with religious services and celebrations, and include secular cultural elements that always develop when a group of people spends time together. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or Mormons, form a distinct cultural group in the American West because of their shared history and their strong sense of community. While at the Nevada Arts Council, Blanton organized a folklife survey in Lincoln County, Nevada, which has a substantial Mormon population; folklorist Mike Luster documented some of that community's informal traditions.

In a High and Glorious Place: Folklife in Lincoln County, Nevada

If you asked a folklorist to construct a model of the forces at work in the modern American West, I doubt he or she could improve on what already exists in Lincoln County, Nevada. Tiny geometric settlements where houses of log, frame, brick, stone or adobe stand shoulder to shoulder with mobile homes and reused old boxcars. Surrounding these, the deep green valleys of alfalfa—the air alive with birds and a constant wash of irrigation waters—contrast sharply with the dusty pink of the government-regulated rangelands and the clumps of sage, pinion pine and juniper that dot the mountainsides where mills and mines sit idle.

In the early summer, men who have achieved the rank of High Priest in the Panaca Ward of the Enterprise Stake of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints celebrate with a picnic. Seventy or more members of the church drive their pickups and cars to the Panaca Summit, near where their pioneer forefathers crossed the mountains to build their new homes. The men build fires and cook the traditional meal for such occasions: hamburgers grilled on black iron griddles and potatoes cooked in bacon fat inside Dutch ovens with glowing coals heaped on the lids. The women bring their salads—“set” (molded) and tossed—their prize jars of chili sauce and relish, their brownies and their carrot pudding. The fires are carefully tended by Frank Ernst, who made the griddles, most of the cooking utensils, and many of the Dutch ovens in the machine shop at the Castleton Mine where he was once employed, back when the mine was operating. In true neighborly fashion, Frank gives away most of what he makes.

After the meal Joe Wilkin is often persuaded to lead some songs with his black-and-white piano accordion. While he plays, standing next to a bonfire with one leg up on a folding chair and his accordion balanced on the lifted knee, a semi-circle of people face him and sing some of their favorite popular songs and Mormon hymns.

—MIKE LUSTER, FROM *IN A HIGH AND GLORIOUS PLACE: FOLKLIFE IN LINCOLN COUNTY, NEVADA*, NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL, 1987

This little adobe house in Panaca follows a vernacular form found all over Utah and other Mormon communities of the Great Basin. It was probably built by the people who lived in it, using a floor plan and construction techniques inherited, along with hymns and recipes and values, from a community in common.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN



At the High Priests' Picnic in Panaca, members of the Mormon church celebrate their pioneer heritage by cooking in Dutch ovens with hot coals.

PHOTO BY MIKE LUSTER



Neon may seem like ultimate popular art form, but by going behind the scenes in the business a folklorist learns that the art of making the signs is a trade learned through long apprenticeship and involving subtle skills.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

one way or another, each is an instance of the way the “folk process” of transmitting knowledge and expressing creativity responds to and reflects modern, perhaps we should say ultra-modern, life.

—RUSSELL FRANK, FROM *NEON QUILT: FOLK ARTS IN LAS VEGAS*, NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL, 1991

The Lore of Gambling

The language of gambling is staggering; literally thousands of folk terms, phrases, and expressions are used by twenty-one, roulette, and—especially—craps dealers. A craps table usually has four people working it; two dealers (the people on the ends who handle the check or chips), a stick man (on the opposite side of the table from the dealers and the person who manipulates the dice and who does most of the talking), and the box man (who sits at the center of the table and who is the first line of supervision). Tom Martinet is a fast-talking, fast-thinking box man working at the Horseshoe in Las Vegas. He has worked in the gambling business for many years and is outspoken about the pros and cons of the business. Language is his hobby, and he has collected almost twenty-five hundred folk terms used on the craps tables alone. The language of gambling is passed on just like any other folk art form. “Stuff is passed on from dealer to dealer, and from generation to generation, and house to house, because there’s been a lot of movement in the business traditionally, and so they pass that stuff around,” Tom explains.

URBAN FOLKLORE

Blanton didn’t spend much time in Las Vegas—he was more interested in rural life and more comfortable in smaller communities—but he did do preliminary fieldwork there that eventually led to a major research survey and a folklife festival. And as usual, he looked for, and found, creativity and community in the most unexpected places—a neon sign shop, a casino, and an urban neighborhood.

Las Vegas

Las Vegas and folk art would seem to be mutually exclusive realms. But folklorists assume, and regularly demonstrate, that the need for tradition, for membership in communities, for creative play, for making meaning, is constant. If there are no bonds of religion, ethnicity, and locality, the question becomes, what new bonds have taken their place? How does the constant need to create and connect with others adapt to, and manifest itself in, the brave new world of Las Vegas?

Las Vegas, that most anomalous of cities, where casinos with tropical themes flourish in the desert and condominium complexes with names like Harbor View exist far, far from any harbor, is a wonderful testing ground for ideas about folk art. Neon glass benders, magicians, craps dealers, and a cantor/casino entertainment director all push at the definitional boundaries in

Las Vegas' African American community began in the 1940s when blacks arrived to find work in the war industries, and because they were segregated on the city's west side there grew up a tight-knit community. Churches are still a central social, civic, and artistic force on the Westside, and gospel music, quilting, woodcarving, soul food, and other traditional pursuits remain strong, although not always evident to outsiders.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

Not only does a new dealer have to learn the mechanics of his job, the handling of the chips, manipulation of the stick and paying off bets, but in order to join the ranks of the experienced hands, he must not only know the in-group language, but he must also be able to use it properly. "It has to communicate essential information," Tom says. "Some of the ones, like 'high diddle, right down the middle,' they're rhymed so they're easy to remember. There's a lot of rhyming phrases in the dice pit. There's all kinds of them. They're cute. They need to have a sense of cuteness about them. [But] if they're picked up by the players, we tend not to use them too much, so they have to remain our property in a sense. They're part of our repertoire. The stick man, in a sense, is on stage...and everybody has their own particular style of doing that. And you'll watch new stickmen trying different styles to find one that fits. Some things, we'll just say 'shut up.' It's so bad, they just don't have the rhythm or timing to say it. And other people can say the same thing and get away with it."

—BLANTON OWEN,
FROM "HOME MEANS NEVADA" RADIO SERIES,
NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL, 1986



Neon may seem like ultimate popular art form, but by going behind the scenes in the business a folklorist learns that the art of making the signs is a trade learned through long apprenticeship and involving subtle skills.

PHOTO BY RUSSELL FRANK



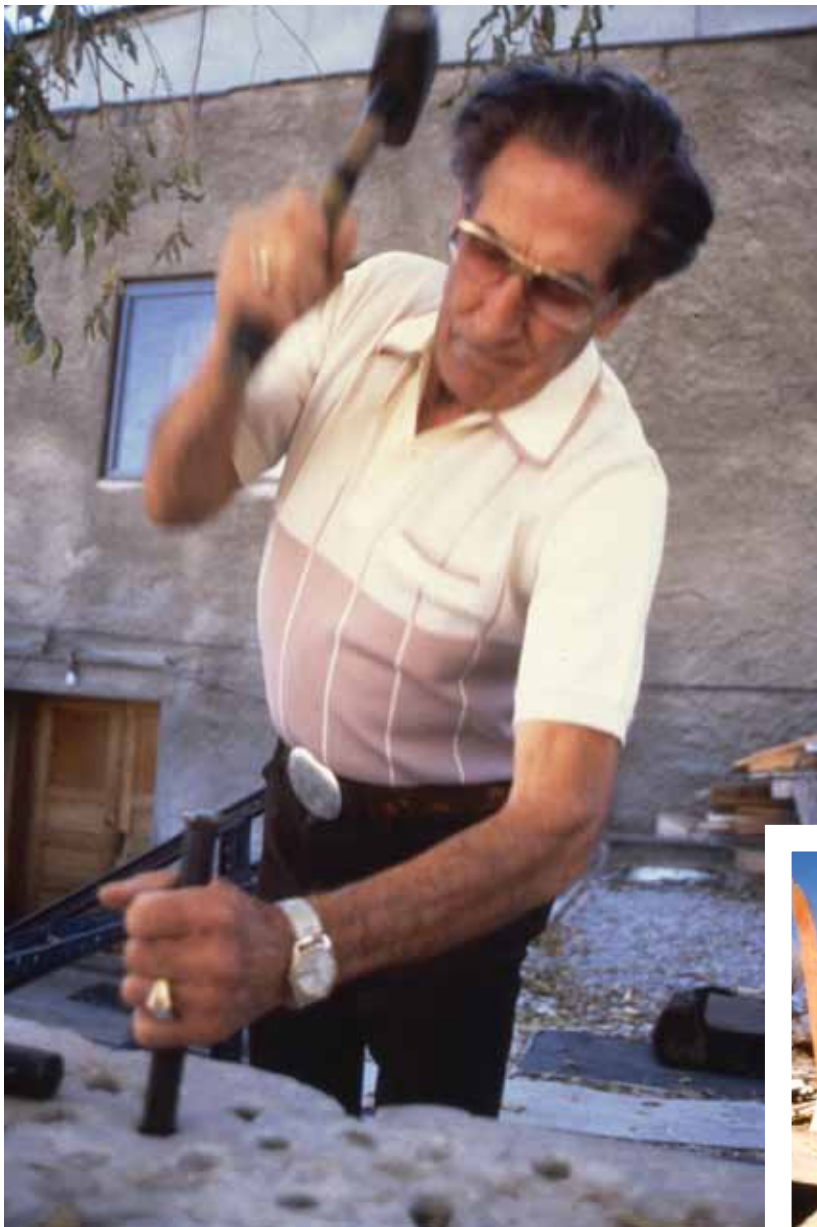
That ultimately is what multiculturalism is about. Making sure that everybody, on the one hand, has an opportunity to check back to his own roots every once in a while, for comfort, and dignity, and presence, and on the other hand, gets a chance to revel in the glories of the inventiveness that other cultures have to share with us. It's a really nifty system. We just have to keep on trying to ensure that everybody always gets their turn.

—BESS LOMAX HAWES,
FORMER DIRECTOR,
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM, NATIONAL ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS, FROM "TRADITIONAL ARTS IN MISSOURI 1991"



A look at occupational folklife in Nevada would not be complete without considering the gaming business, and Blanton was eager to push the boundaries of traditional research in his adopted state. Fortunately he had the help of Tom Martinet, a craps boxman and amateur folklorist in his own right, who had been studying the specialized language and traditions of those working in casinos.

PHOTO BY DAVID BROWN



MINING LORE

Nevada's history and communities are inextricably entwined with mining. It has affected everything from the layout of towns to their architecture and ethnic enclaves, from the landscape to politics to social institutions. The continuum of occupational lore and practices among miners remains strong, as Blanton's research into mining traditions shows.

The Nevada Day Drilling Contest

Louis Gibellini ascends the platform where the cube of granite sits, four feet on a side. It's the annual World Championship Single Jack Drilling Contest in Carson City (held each year on Nevada Day, October 31). He arranges his eleven steel drills, hammer, and water bucket, assisted by his grand-daughter, Jacqualeene, who paces his drilling and maintains the proper flow of water into the hole. The gun sounds and Louis begins a steady, driving rhythm, the sound of steel against steel ringing over the audience. He hardly seems to exert himself, but the four-pound hammer keeps swinging and the hole keeps sinking, one steel replacing another. He maintains sixty-five strokes per minute, turning the steel after each blow. Louis never stops and the rhythm never falters. As the final minute starts, Jacque coaxes him to speed up his pace to seventy-six strokes per minute. He does. When the final gun sounds, Louis simply stops drilling, removes his steel, stands erect, and gives the crowd a huge smile and waves. The audience goes crazy. They know they have seen the real thing, an honest-to-God hard rock miner who learned to drill in the mines, the hard way, not just for exhibition. (Louis Gibellini passed away in 1996. He was 89.)

—BLANTON OWEN, FROM "THE MELTING POT WORKS"
IN *OLD TIES, NEW ATTACHMENTS: ITALIAN-AMERICAN FOLKLIFE IN THE WEST*,
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, 1992



Following Louis to Eureka

Louis Gibellini was born in Prospect, Nevada in 1907. While in Prospect, a heavily Italian settlement of about one hundred people, his family and several others migrated in the summers over the mountain to the Windfall Mine. There they raised a small garden and worked until fall, at which time they returned to Prospect, where the kids attended school. Most of the mining activity in Prospect was shut down and the school was closed by 1921 when Louis moved with his family to Eureka. Even after this move, however, Louis continued to work in Prospect at the small two- or three-man "Gypo outfits" that persisted there. When Louis started his career

Louis Gibellini's grandfather came to America from southern Switzerland, along the Italian border. As a young man Louis used to ski over the mountains west of Eureka to work in the mines in the winter, using these long homemade skis and a single long pole, just as in the old country.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

Louis Gibellini, long since retired from mining and from competitive single-jack drilling, keeps in practice on a block of granite in his yard in Eureka. Friendly competitions of skill exist in many occupational groups—rodeos, catfish skinning contests, lobster boat races, and log splitting contests—in addition to drilling contests among miners.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

Folk culture is nothing if not continuous. Of course all of human culture is constantly changing, but it is the thread of history and tradition that keeps us creatively linked to each other and our pasts. A modern open-pit mine south of Battle Mountain looks very different from the underground slopes of Virginia City, but much of the same language and skills are used—just on a different scale. PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

as a miner in the early 1920s, many of the mines around Eureka still drilled by hand. It wasn't until the late 1930s and 1940s that mechanized drilling equipment was commonly used in smaller mines.

—BLANTON OWEN, FROM "THE MELTING POT WORKS" IN *OLD TIES, NEW ATTACHMENTS: ITALIAN-AMERICAN FOLKLIFE IN THE WEST*, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, 1992

Modern-Day Mining

[Before we went underground at the Kingston Canyon Mine in Lander County] we stopped at the machine shop, which is carved into the rock just inside the mine, to be outfitted with battery powered headlamps. The next stop was the "doghouse," where the men eat lunch and keep their slickers (waterproof overalls and jackets worn underground). The huge entrance chamber stretched 10 or 15 feet over our heads, and drifts ran out of it in several directions. Each drift is identified by large spray-painted numbers, but we'd have been lost in a minute without a guide. The air was slightly hazy with moisture and graphite dust. Diesel-powered muckers and haul trucks roar through the mine, briefly illuminating the darkness that is normally cut only by the beams of our headlamps.

Our guide, safety director Darrell King, talked about mine etiquette. "You don't shine your light in other people's eyes. You'll see a lot of times...people who used to work in the mines will not look right at you, you know, head on like this; they'll kind of keep their head turned off to the side. I get laughed at because sometimes if I'm talking to somebody and I said, 'Well, you know, look over there,' [he looks to the side and shakes his head], and we're out like this—well, what the hell is that about? Because underground you use that with your light on, you're shaking your light, to point out something."

There are currently no women working underground in the Kingston Mine itself, but they do work in the mill and assay lab. Ore from every blast is assayed to determine its grade and how it should be processed. Assaying is partly an intuitive art, much like cooking, and an experienced assayer relies as much on feel and appearance as on the delicate electronic instruments in the lab.

Since we had the experience of seeing an underground mining operation, we thought it would be enlightening to tour an open pit mine as well, if only for contrast. It's easy to see why underground miners sometimes chafe when their open-pit brothers are called miners; in theory the same processes are used—drill, blast and muck—but the environment is completely different. A grid of 32-foot-deep holes is drilled with a big drill rig; powder is loaded and blasted much like underground, although using different patterns and on a much larger scale; and the ore is loaded onto 75 ton "haul packs" to be taken to the waste dump or the primary crusher for the mill.

—ANDREA GRAHAM, FROM *LANDER COUNTY LINE: FOLKLIFE IN CENTRAL NEVADA*, NEVADA ARTS COUNCIL, 1988



Assaying ore at the Kingston Mine. As with any occupational skill, assaying is as much art as science, and most of it is learned on the job, from more experienced workers.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

Whether sung or told, enacted or crafted, traditions are the outcroppings of deep lodes of worldview, knowledge, and wisdom, navigational aids in an ever fluctuating social world. Conferring on community members a vital sense of identity, belonging, and purpose, folklife defends against social disorders like delinquency, indigence, and drug abuse, which may be symptoms of deep cultural crises. Ultimately particular traditions endure because someone chooses to keep them alive, adapting them to fit changing circumstances, continually crafting new settings for their survival. Working to inform the public about folklife and its significance, folklorists can assist this process.

—MARY HUFFORD, FROM *AMERICAN FOLKLIFE: A COMMONWEALTH OF CULTURES*, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, 1991

THE ROAD GOES ON

This road trip with Blanton has only visited a tiny fraction of the people and place he came to know in his 13 years of work in the West, and all of those are only a fraction of the people still out there, quietly carrying on and passing on the traditions that define them and their communities. Just as those traditions will continue (although they will certainly change), so too the work of a folklorist goes on forever.

Exploring just one of the hairs on the dog that is human culture can take a lifetime and more. Blanton devoted his too-short life to that task, and we are the richer for the record he left of the creative life of this time and place. But the artists and tradition bearers are the greatest beneficiaries of his work.

We close with a tribute to the impact a folklorist had on the life of one artist, cowboy poet Linda Husa. Linda used to write in school, but stopped abruptly when her favorite English teacher gave her a failing grade for a poem because he thought it was too good for her to have written herself. Thirty years later, Blanton Owen helped bring her back to her art. There are many more artists like her—singers, dancers, craftspeople, as well as writers—out there on back roads and in big cities—who, with a little recognition, encouragement, and support, can have their voices added to the American story. That is a folklorist's job. As Bess Hawes puts it, "to ensure that everybody always gets their turn."

From An Artist

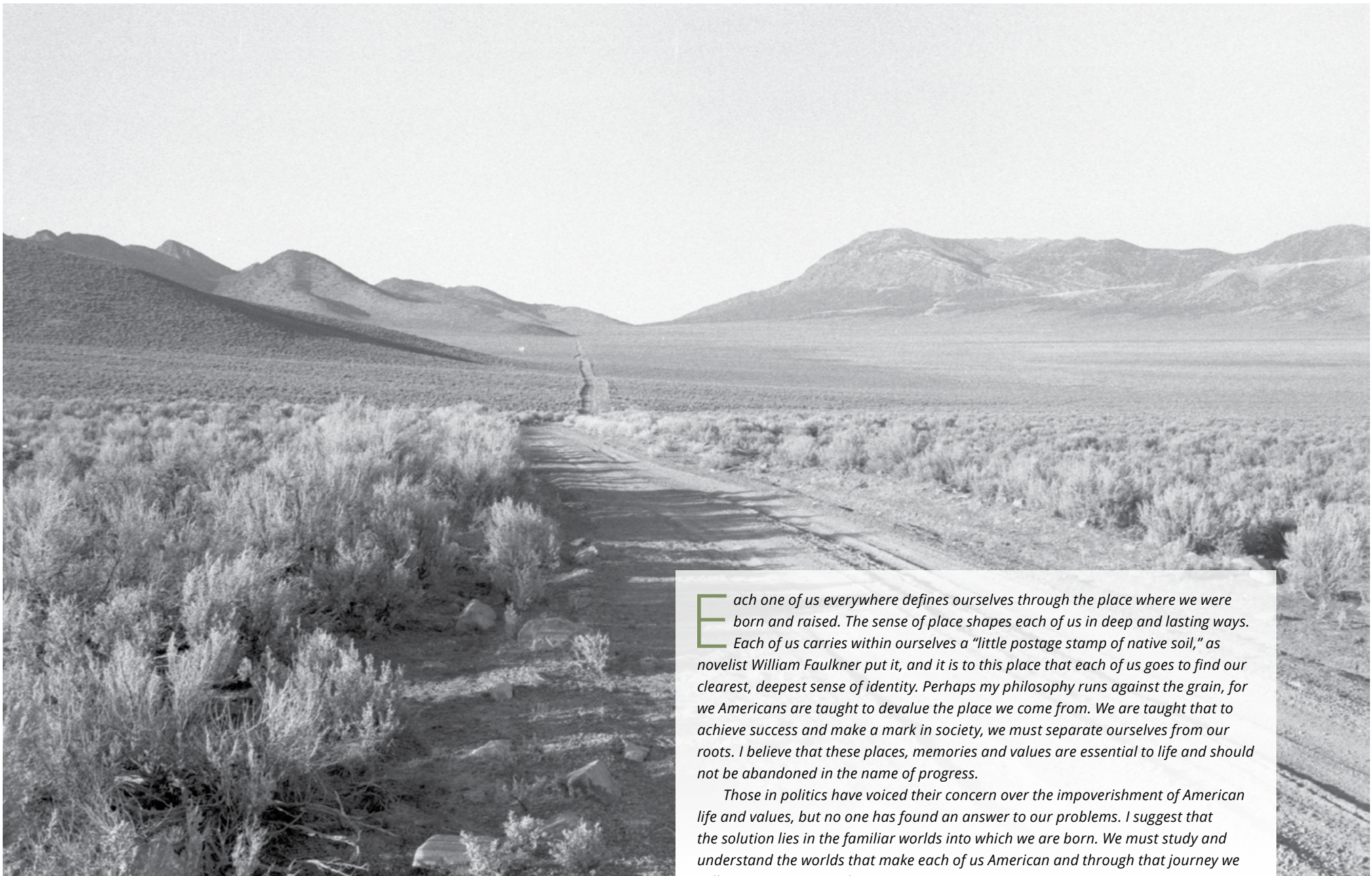
In the summer of 1990 I got a phone call from Blanton. He described himself as a folklorist traveling through the country, said he was in Cedarville and asked if he could come see me. I didn't know what a folklorist was or why he would want to meet me but he sounded friendly on the phone so I gave him a verbal map to our place. I made some coffee and tidied up our catch-all kitchen table. He had such a nice smile as he came up the walk, and knew the dog by the gate barked a greeting, not a warning—almost as if he had been there before.

He sat across the table and told me about some of the projects he had been working on. We talked for an hour or so. Finally he said, "Why haven't you sent some poetry to us at [the] Elko [Cowboy Poetry Gathering]? I said I didn't write poetry. He said, "I bet you could."

After he left I started supper. Almost without knowing I was doing it I took out a paper and pen as the potatoes came to a simmer. I began to write as if a gate opened. At first it was frightening. Words I had never thought or spoke flowed from my mind. All the days of my life on this ranch—saved up—uncoiled from the forgotten places. I was too late for Elko that year. The woman said, "I'll keep your poems in the file for next year, is that okay?" It was. I was invited the next year, 1991. Scared beyond imagination I went and I found Blanton's warm smile. I found a place where people understood the things I live for.

I told Blanton each time I saw him how much I owed him but he never seemed convinced. Or he was too kind and generous to accept my thanks. I wish I could have been his friend the way that he was mine. I wish I could have given him something of the measure he gave me.

—LINDA HUSSA, CEDARVILLE, CALIFORNIA, FROM A LETTER SENT TO MEG GLASER AFTER BLANTON'S DEATH



Grass Valley landscape.

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN

Each one of us everywhere defines ourselves through the place where we were born and raised. The sense of place shapes each of us in deep and lasting ways. Each of us carries within ourselves a “little postage stamp of native soil,” as novelist William Faulkner put it, and it is to this place that each of us goes to find our clearest, deepest sense of identity. Perhaps my philosophy runs against the grain, for we Americans are taught to devalue the place we come from. We are taught that to achieve success and make a mark in society, we must separate ourselves from our roots. I believe that these places, memories and values are essential to life and should not be abandoned in the name of progress.

Those in politics have voiced their concern over the impoverishment of American life and values, but no one has found an answer to our problems. I suggest that the solution lies in the familiar worlds into which we are born. We must study and understand the worlds that make each of us American and through that journey we will renew American culture.

—BILL FERRIS, FOLKLORIST, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES,
FROM “CHAIRMAN’S CORNER, FEBRUARY 1998” ON NEH WEBSITE

A real advantage of folklife studies is the synthetic power of the discipline. Students of folk culture, be it tangible or intangible, borrow freely from linguistics, architectural history, cultural anthropology, history, archaeology, geography, literary theory, and art to form a unified program for the study of human behavior. This study casts a wide loop and while any study naturally begins in division, when done properly the artificially fabricated categories eventually slip and fade. Left in their place is a single experience where traditional buildings, occupational skills, belief systems, history, and art meld into one.

—BLANTON OWEN, FROM
*THINGS GREAT AND SMALL: RANCH ARCHITECTURE IN
NORTHEASTERN ELKO COUNTY*
(UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT)

PHOTO BY BLANTON OWEN



