Traveler's find: Miracles of Kentucky's hills

An American family

Middlesboro, Ky. — You wouldn't turn off Highway 25E if you didn't know that James Miracle was down there in that unpainted wooden cabin, under a sign that reads "Miracles Mountain Crafts."

From the road, you would only see a blur against the Kentucky Hills: the craft shop, a wood pile, a litter of cars, an outbuilding with sun shining through the cracks and a house out back under the trees. Go closer, and it all takes on a soft grey patina, like the floorboards of the wooden porch where James' sister Janice sometimes sits on the swing and makes hickory nut dolls, with dried herbs hanging over her head and a roil of hickory splints in the corner against the porch rail.

I DIDN'T buy anything much there, but I brought an important souvenir home. Souvenir is the French word for "to remember," and memories are the best gifts to buy for yourself when you travel. We found this place, one of thousands of craft shops in the Kentucky hills, because Janice Miracle is a seasonal park ranger at Cumberland Gap National Historic Park five miles down the road and she played one of James' hand-made dulcimers for us at the Visitors' Center there.

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When you open the door to Miracles Mountain Crafts, you smell the 1860s woodburning stove. At the same time, you see the black-and-white tick hound called Tyke asleep on the bare floor 'n front of the big stone fireplace.

Tyke belongs to one of the mem-bers of the Miracle family, and every time the door opens, he thinks he's supposed to come in.

YOU'LL SEE some of the customers sitting on the cane-bottom rocking chairs James Miracle makes, but most of them will be listening to James talk about bow he makes dulcimers out of walnut,



cherry and maple trees that he cuts down himself.

James is a big man, with a waistline that says he likes good down-home cooking, and he talks in that very courteous way that Kentucky people do. He probably will have a not-quite-finished dulcimer in his hand, standing there in front of shelves of cornshuck dolls, hand-carved wooden toys and other crafts that the family make by hand.

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The Miracle family, which is pronounced 'my-ra-cul' in these hills, was a coal-mining family working their own small mine in the Appalachian Mountains a few miles from here until the mine closed in 1955.

IT WAS an isolated place where It' was an isolated place where the grandparents, parents and six Miracle children knew how to do everything with their hands; build a house, wire it for electricity and make their own furniture.

James was 7 when his grandfa-ther first took him into the woods to strip hickory splints for chair seats. He was in his teens when the family opened a grocery store, gas station and fruit stand on old Highway 25 and when the man from the Smithsonian Institution drove in with a flat tire and bought all their handmade furniture out from under

them.
James' daddy, Homer, thought it was a hoax and hung up the telephone when another man from the Smithsonian called shortly thereafter to ask him to bring the family to the first Americal Folklife Festival.



James Miracle makes dulcimers with love, patience and skill.

FORTUNATELY, THE man from the Smithsonian called back. Within a few weeks, the Miracles were making and selling crafts from a festival booth in Washington. Homer made hand-carved wooden bowls, the kind your greatgrandmother might have mixed bread dough in. Homer's father made cornshuck dolls and wooden flowers; James made hand-built

chairs with seats made of bickory

chairs with seats made of hickory splints.
When the new highway stranded them on the old road in the late 1960s, the Miracles ate the stock from the grocery store, sold the store, the gas station and the fruit stand and built this little shop on the new highway. It was supposed to be temporary, but they've been there since 1967.

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Mrs. Miracle lives in the shop, making dolls eight hours a day. Janice lives in the trailer out back. James lives in the house out back, making plans by night for the log house he wants to build under the trees. By day, he canes chairs and makes dulcthers.

HE DOESN'T play the dul-cimers much, because he mangled a finger on a woodworking ma-chine, and "When it gets to a cer-tain speed, my head and my hands won't go together," but musicians like them. You might have to wait two

like them.

You might have to wait two years to get one after you put your name on the list, depending on whether you want an unusual size, a special wood or a lot of carving.

If you don't need those things, the dulcimer will cost you about \$150. James once made a dulcimer in five days, dropping everything else and working day-and-night, but it usually takes two months from first cut to last loving polish.

"If you charged for every hour you actually spent making them, you couldn't sell them because no-body could afford to buy them," James said.

"But I only spend \$3 buying parts, and the rest I make. I cut down the trees myself and go from there."

PEOPLE SAY, "I suppose you really like doing it, though," as they always do to artists, as if that was enough to justify sometimes making as little as 50 cents an hour for your work. But James answers with that straight talk and courtesy that mountain people often have:
"That's true. We don't owe any-

body anything, and we eat well enough. We can't afford to buy a new vehicle, we always have to go on maintaining the old ones, but we do all right."

I don't know whether James Miracie is a good dulcimer maker or not, but when I poke around in the smell of wood smoke, touching the hickory splints hanging from half-finished chairs, kicking the leather thongs mixed with the wood shavings, watching the tick bound dreaming in front of the fire, I don't really care whether he's good or not.

or not.

I might buy a \$6 cornsbuck doll or a \$4 toy to put under the Christmas tree, but what I'm really bringing bome from Miracles Mountain Crafts is a Kentucky mountain gift that you can't wrap with a ribbon.

IF YOU tried to photograph it, you could capture the dog and the dolls and the dulcimers, but you couldn't photograph the way it feels to be here, because there's not a camera in the world that would catch it, in black-and-white or col-

catch it, in black-and-white or colothere may be a thousand places like this in hill country, but if you want to visit this one, you must get off interstate 75 at the Corbin exit, not far north of the Tennessee border, and drive 40 miles south on Highway 25E, past Pineville, to the curve in the road between the six and seven mile marker.
You could call James at (606) 248-2971 or write to him at Miracles Mountain Crafts, Route 2, Box 151, Middlesboro, KY 40965. But if you really want to see a Miracle, you should find it for yourself.

UP — a mixture of ethnics, flavors

Ethnic flavors add to the charm of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, spicing lis foods, showing off to good advantage its varing architecture, churches and celebrations. What would the peninsula be without Cornish pasties, hard-crusted Italian cornettis, Finnish Pannukfukfu fover nancakes) and

Pannu-Kuku (over pancakes) and Slovenian walnut breads? They show up at most bazaars and festivals as well as many bakeries and restaurants from Ironwood to St.

Ignace.
The Upper Peninsula was settled The Upper Peninsula was settled by immigrants from many nations. Marks from their picks and shovels are left in walls of iron and copper mines and in the Soo Canal, along with axe and saw marks in the deep forests. Cities wear their signature. Piles of stones along farm rows bear testimony to the farmers who hauled them aside to plow the cround.

ground. Ethnic cultures include the early Chippewa Indians, French trappers, traders and missionaries. The English and French set their military men to explore this jewel of peninsula believed for many years to be the "wasteland of the continent".

Cornish miners arrived in the 1850s followed by waves of Irish,

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travel notes

German, Finnish and immigrants from all the Eastern European

countries.

For many years, they maintained their separate festivals.
Each nationality sponsored baseball teams and other athletic events, dances, bands and picnics.

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THE ETHNIC FLAVOR has taken on a more subtle touch, but it remains. It is reflected in historical museums and libraries. It can be felt in a subtle way by strolling through the early winter landscape of the Fayette State Park townsite and though the light some covering historical cemeteries.

The National Ski Hall of Fame at Ishpening tells of early eastern European settlers and their contribution to skiing in the Americas. They brought with them the skiing traditions of the old country and fashioned skis from boards and harrel staves to ski or jump from snow-covered piles of rocks dug from the mines.

from the mines.
Read the names of men and

women in the U.P. Sports Hall of Fame at Northern Michigan University in Marquette for a sampling of the Peninsula's heritage. Feel the presence of the pioneers in the exhibits at the A.E. Seaman Minerological Museum at Michigan Technological University in Houghton.

The Finnish heritage is pre-served in the Finnish-American Historical Library at Suomi College in Hancock.

Influence of ethnic culture is evident in the architecture, in color and design. Finnish immigrants brought the love of color. Brightly colored houses, especially in bold blues and greens, can be seen in many parts of the western and central peninsula.
Ethnic signatures are also left on the barns they bullt, and many remain.

SOME MINING companies built lookalike houses for workers. Many towns and cities in the Keweenaw

Peninsula have rows of early mining houses. Ethnic streets are easily spotted at Trimountain, Atlantic Mine, South Hange, Ishpeming, Negaunee and many other areas. The entire downtown area of Calumet is a historical district.

Men from New England heard of the mineral finds and brought their wealth to the wilderness. They built mansions in the new land which still stand at Marquette, Iron Moutain, Houghton, Hancock, Escanaba, Ironwood and across the peninsula. Sault Ste, Marle and some other cities have self-guided tours past these homes which can be walked or toured by auto on a winter's day.

ter's day.
Traditions continue. Italians still make wine. Bakeries sell English saffron bread on holidays. Finnish saunas become more popular with

saunas become more popular with
the passing years.

Discover more about ethnic flavors of the peniasula in a 94-page
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