

Commissioners Office  
Gilmer County Board of Commissioners  
1 Broad Street, Suite 106  
Ellijay, Georgia 30540

June 16, 2011

Dear Gilmer County Board of Commissioners,

On behalf of the members of the Appalachian Studies Association, I am writing in support of the permanent protection of the homeplace of Don West in Gilmer County, Georgia. Mr. West's importance as an educator, poet, and civil rights defender is well documented and widely known. The citizens of Gilmer County, the State of Georgia, and the United States as a whole can be proud of Mr. West's contributions to education, art, and justice, and those elements of Mr. West's life are important reasons for protecting the West homeplace. As president of the Appalachian Studies Association, an organization of approximately one thousand scholars and community leaders, I would like to call your attention to another reason for providing permanent protection for the West homeplace, one that impacts students, scholars, and citizens who love the North Georgia mountains, in particular, and the Appalachian Mountains, in general.

As a native of Gilmer County, Mr. West remained connected to his homeplace and community throughout his life. He found inspiration for his acclaimed poetry in the woods and fields he and his family tended and in the relationships and cultural expressions he observed among people in his community. He took this personal relationship with and experience of place and adapted it to help all people who love mountain life—from North Georgia to West Virginia—recognize and value their cultural heritage. Working from the Danish folk school model, West established the Appalachian South Folklife Center in Pipestem, West Virginia. The Center combined local service projects for citizens with workshops and programs designed to encourage a positive Appalachian mountain identity. West also contributed essays to the Appalachian Movement Press. Through his deep professional and personal commitment to mountain life and community work, and through his seminal role in co-founding the influential Highlander Folk School in Mouteagle, Tennessee, West was a founder of the Appalachian studies movement.

Don West's legacy remains strong for all Appalachian people and for the scholars and community leaders who follow in his footsteps. The Appalachian Studies Association supports the permanent protection of the West homeplace in Gilmer County, Georgia, the site of one of our intellectual forefathers' inspiration and an inspiration for us all.