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INTERAGENCY RESOURCES DIVISION
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Lair, John, House and Stables

other names/site number n/a

2. Location

street & number Northeast corner of U.S. 25 and Hummell Road not for publication

city or town Renfro Valley vicinity

state Kentucky code KY county Rockcastle code 203 zip code 40473

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

David L. Morgan David L. Morgan, SHPO and Executive Director, KHC 9-20-95
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Kentucky Heritage Council: State Historic Preservation Office

State of Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register. See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain): _____

Edson A. Beall Signature of the Keeper Date of Action 11-7-95

Entered in the
National Register

Lair, John, House and Stables
Name of Property

Rockcastle, Kentucky
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
2	2	buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
2	2	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

n/a

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC: single dwelling
AGRICULTURE: animal facility

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

vacant/not in use
vacant/not in use

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

No Style

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation limestone
walls limestone, log,
and weatherboard
roof asphalt shingles
other limestone chimneys

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Entertainment

Period of Significance

1944-1945

Significant Dates

1944

1945

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Lair, John

Cultural Affiliation

n/a

Architect/Builder

Lair, John (conceptual design)

Haffler, Wayne W. (architect)

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Helm-Cravens Library

Western Kentucky University

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 7 Page 1

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INTERAGENCY RESOURCES DIVISION NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky**

Narrative Description

The **John Lair House and Stables** are situated at the intersection of U.S. 25 and Hummell Road in Renfro Valley, Kentucky. The property, which remains in the hands of Lair's descendants, is adjacent to the Renfro Valley Entertainment Complex, now privately owned by Renfro Valley Entertainment Center, Inc. A short rock wall extends along Hummell Road and the yard is shaded by large trees. The design of the two-story house is more reflective of Lair's eclectic tastes than a particular style from America's architectural past. The exterior walls are made of both limestone and log. Board and batten, as well as clapboard siding, are used at the gables. The shingled roof has five gables and seven dormer windows. An enclosed breezeway connects the house to a one and one-half story, two-car garage. A tennis court and swimming pool were once located directly in back of the house. The stables are located approximately one hundred-fifty yards behind the house. The exterior stable walls are limestone and board and batten. A perpendicular limestone gable, capped with an octagonal cupola, bisects the stables in the center. Though both the house and stables are currently vacant, they remain structurally sound. The house has undergone few changes since it was constructed in 1944. The exterior of the stables, built in 1945, has had little alteration. The interior of the stables' southern end was converted into two apartments around 1976-1978, but the northern end still houses six original stalls. The buildings maintain a high degree of integrity in terms of location and design, and particularly due to their association with John Lair. Two non-contributing buildings are also located on the Lair property. A four room house dating from the 1950s

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 7 Page 2**Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky****Narrative Description, continued**

is located behind the stables. The house was used for hired workers and is not noticeable from U.S. 25 or Hummell Road. A small garage, also built in the 1950s, is located near U.S. 25 off the northwest corner of the Lair home.

Though Wayne W. Haffler, a Lexington, Kentucky, architect, assisted in the planning of Lair's home, Lair himself was the principal designer. Built in Renfro Valley, where Lair grew up from age five, the house suggests Lair's commitment to community. He sub-contracted local builders to do the bulk of the construction. Logs were cut and hewn and limestone was hauled from the Renfro Valley area. However, despite these nods toward traditional building practices, the product of their labor was hardly bound by local tradition. Rather, the result was a large, eclectic home reflecting Lair's individuality.

Lair's house measures roughly 20' X 75'. An 18' square bay is located toward the front of the house and an 18' X 15' bay is located at the rear. The downstairs consists of a kitchen, breakfast nook, dining room, sunken living room, bathroom and office. A partial basement is under the house and five bedrooms and a bath are upstairs. Total living space (excluding the basement) exceeds 3500 square feet, a large home even by modern standards. A 15' X 20' stone-floored breezeway leads to the two-car garage (24' square). The house has three outside porches and a second-story deck.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 3

**Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky**

Narrative Description, continued

Though the exterior walls are partially log, one would be mistaken to assume the John Lair home is typical of log construction in Renfro Valley in the 1940s. Actually, the house bears the signature of Lair's own personal preferences. Square-notched logs are mixed with stone and wood siding to create a building which challenges stylistic categorization. The board and batten siding which covers several gables is cut to resemble the fish-scale motif of Victorian architecture. Heavy timbering frames the exterior porches.

The interior of Lair's house indicates upward mobility. Most floors are either hardwood or carpeted. Walls are wood panelled, plastered or wallpapered. The upstairs has many features that were uncommon in the small community of Renfro Valley. The tile floors in the full-size bath remain in excellent condition. Bedroom closets are lined with cedar. A laundry chute runs from the upstairs to the basement, and the upstairs hallway has a built in ledge for a telephone.

The stables measure approximately 120' X 36'. The lower three feet of the exterior walls are stone, with board and batten siding continuing to the roofline. The roof of the building is shingled. Originally, the building housed twelve individual stalls, each measuring 12' X 12'. A tack room and buggy storage area were located in the gabled section in the center of the stables. The floor of the building is concrete. Around 1976-1978, the southern half of the stables was converted into two apartments. Each apartment has two levels with a kitchen, dining area and living room on the first floor. The second

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 & 8 Page 4

Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky

Narrative Description, continued

floor has two bedrooms with closet space and a bathroom. The walls are drywall and the floors are carpeted. Heating and air conditioning have been added and a second-story deck was built at the south end of the stables. These changes are not sympathetic to the integrity of the stables. However, the exterior remains relatively unchanged and the northern half of the building has not been altered.

Statement of Significance

The **John Lair House and Stables** in Renfro Valley, Rockcastle County, Kentucky, meet National Register criterion B and are significant within the historic context **Commercialization of Country Music in the United States, 1937-1966**. John Lair was the founder of the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*, a country music variety show which was first broadcast on the radio in 1937 and continues to run in 1994. Beginning in 1939 Lair oversaw the development of a large entertainment complex in Renfro Valley. This complex included the Old Barn, a rustic auditorium where the program was held; a Lodge which included a restaurant; and Cabins for tourist lodging. When Lair saw that this business venture would prove successful, he built a spacious home and stables in the Valley. Lair was actively involved in the design process of his house, and its style and form tell us much about his ideas and convictions. The entertainment complex itself was sold to commercial investors in 1966, later repurchased by Lair around 1976, and then sold again to Renfro Valley Entertainment, Inc., in 1989. While the entertainment complex

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 5

**Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky**

Statement of Significance, continued

at Renfro Valley maintains some association with Lair, that association has been compromised by numerous changes. Consequently, the house and stables which Lair designed can help us better understand his role in the country music industry in 1944-1945. John Lehr (1894-1985) lived in the house from its construction until almost the time of his death.

Historic Context: Commercialization of Country Music in the United States, 1937-66

With the commercial recordings of such artists as Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family in the 1920s, hillbilly and old-time music were evolving and gaining popularity within the broader heading of country music. As these commercial recordings, as well as live performances, were broadcast over the radio, country music reached countless American households. Though the Grand Ole Opry figures prominently in the minds of many Americans when they consider the history of country music, it is important to realize that it was by no means the only radio show of the 1930s and 40s. Neither is the Grand Ole Opry the only show that has survived through the years; John Lair's Renfro Valley Barn Dance is still thriving in Kentucky.

A brief outline demonstrates the growth the tremendous growth of the country music industry in the three short decades between 1937 and 1966. The popularity of such radio broadcasts as the Grand Ole Opry (on Nashville's WSM) and the National Barn Dance (on Chicago's WLS) in the 1920s paved the way for more people to make music a

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 6**Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky****Statement of Significance, continued**

profession rather than a hobby. The legendary Roy Acuff gained popularity in the 1930s, and Kentucky's Bill Monroe, along with his Blue Grass Boys, began perfecting the sound that would later be known as "bluegrass" music. Performers like Hank Williams and Ernest Tubb, drawing on blues and western influences, were developing the harder "honky-tonk" sound in the 40s. Significant developments in the 50s and 60s were the efforts of entertainers like Eddy Arnold, Chet Atkins and Patsy Cline who were creating the sweeter, more orchestrated "Nashville Sound." Contemporary performers often cite the diversity of this critical period as a major influence on their own music.

John Lair worked within the time frame sketched above and, like other country music entrepreneurs, his roots were firmly planted in a mixture of old-timey music and radio. However, Lair's greatest contribution on the national scene was likely the things he refused to change, rather than any inclination toward progressive styles. As music around him was changing Lair continued to book acts that shared his vision and values, often helping them construct "more traditional" images. Due to his narrow views he lost many performers who preferred to shoot for the glamour of Nashville, but Lair was not inclined to compromise. Importantly, despite his conservative stance, Lair was successful. While he operated the Renfro Valley Barn Dance, there continued to be an audience for this music he recalled so fondly from his childhood.

Lair was born in Livingston, Rockcastle County, Kentucky, on July 1, 1894, and his family moved to Renfro Valley when he was five years old. As a child he was drawn

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
Continuation SheetSection number 8 Page 7**Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky****Statement of Significance, continued**

toward his older aunts and uncles who entertained him with stories and songs. Though he stayed near home throughout his childhood, Lair left Kentucky with the Army during World War I. While in the Army, Lair was assigned to the production staff of a Zigfield's Follies show. Lair wisely wrote himself into the script and was soon in the company of such artists as Eddie Cantor and Will Rogers. This interest in show business continued after his discharge from the Army when Lair's fascination with radio took him to Chicago.

In Chicago, Lair became manager of the WLS radio station and appeared on the WLS National Barn Dance with the Cumberland Ridge Runners. The Cumberland Ridge Runners were comprised mainly of musicians Lair knew from his home in Renfro Valley, and other Kentuckians often appeared on the National Barn Dance. One frequent performer, Clyde "Red" Foley from Berea, Kentucky, eventually left Chicago to join the famous Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee.

The Renfro Valley Barn Dance actually began in 1937 on Cincinnati's WLW radio station, which broadcast at 500,000 watts. Lair's dream, however, was to produce the show directly from the small community of Renfro Valley, his childhood home. Lair felt that his audience would respond to a broadcast featuring local performers in their own community. Following a brief move to Dayton, Ohio, his dream became a reality on November 4, 1939 when the Renfro Valley Barn Dance took up permanent residence in Renfro Valley.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 8

**Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky**

Statement of Significance, continued

It is important to note that Lair was an ambitious businessman. He constructed the large barn from which the Barn Dance was broadcast, but noted that he built it with a sturdy floor in case his venture failed and it was destined to become a warehouse. Failure, however, was not in Renfro Valley's future. The community as well as tourists were supportive of this venture and flocked to Renfro Valley each weekend. In 1939-40 Lair constructed a lodge and cabins for use by out of town guests. In 1943 he began the Sunday Morning Gathering, a radio program with a sober, religious message. Also in 1943, Lair began publishing a newspaper, The Renfro Valley Bugle. Within three years this newspaper had 15,000 subscribers. The Bugle, which is still published monthly, complimented the values of country music by promoting such themes as community, folk wisdom and humor. Another of Lair's efforts was sending performing groups out on road shows. Lair's groups toured throughout the 1940s and grossed as much as \$5,000 weekly.

Many popular acts were associated with Renfro Valley in its early days. Homer and Jethro, Molly O'Day, and Whitey Ford ("The Duke of Paducah") as well as Red Foley, appeared at Renfro Valley. Yet one of Lair's most significant achievements was as promoter of the Coon Creek Girls, an all-girl string quartet, throughout the 1930s and 40s. Lair managed to overcome the popular belief that young ladies should not perform and tour alone by packaging them in an innocent, untainted fashion. The girls were given flower names--Lily May, Rosie, Daisy and Violet--and wore long high-collared dresses. It was this display of down-home goodness (whether real or contrived) that characterized

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 9

**Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky**

Statement of Significance, continued

Renfro Valley as a whole. Lair seemed to believe in--and made every effort to present--a wholesome, stable, rural appearance.

With the Renfro Valley Barn Dance an apparent success, Lair constructed his house and stables in 1944 and 1945, respectively. Yet the buildings are important beyond their function as the place Lair lived or housed his livestock. The house and stables reflect much about Lair's philosophy toward the music industry. Implied authenticity, individuality, and the commercial success of country music are manifested in Lair's property as well as his business ventures. The architecture of John Lair's home, as well as the Renfro Valley entertainment complex itself, demonstrates a sort of implied authenticity. Though the style of the house is not traditional, it does retain traditional elements: log construction, local materials, and local builders. Lair appealed to his own nostalgia through architecture as he appealed to others' nostalgia through music. A musical example of this implied authenticity was the Coon Creek Girls, who were modelled after the public's image of chaste, wholesome, country women. The Coon Creek Girls, like Lair's architecture, were designed to represent an ideal rather than a common reality. Lair's eclectic taste in architecture indicates his confidence in his own individuality. Lair was a man with his own ideas, whether building a home or planning a business venture. His was willing to take the risk of producing a radio broadcast from the small, rural community of Renfro Valley, and it seems that Lair's risk paid off.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 10

**Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky**

Statement of Significance, continued

The ultimate success of the Renfro Valley Barn Dance is seen in the Lair house and stables. The large home with cedar-lined closets, laundry chute, upstairs phone, tennis court and swimming pool were the result of Lair's investment in the country music industry. Again, the twelve-stall riding stables suggest a man who was both prosperous and intent on staying near Renfro Valley. Lair may have promoted a superficial idea of tradition through both his home and his music enterprise, but it was an idea he believed in. "The overtly architectural contrivance covertly embodies the norms of beauty, social order, and political propriety with which the architect as a person has learned to feel at ease.... All things embody their creators and become for the period of their existence active images of their creators' wishes" (Glassie 1985:48). The structures Lair built are representative of a created worldview he shared with the tourists who came through Renfro Valley and the fans who listened to the Barn Dance on the radio. John Lair is significant for his contributions to the commercialization of country music. His house and stables are significant because they connect us to the man and his ideas.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 11

Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 10 & 11 Page 12

**Lair, John, House and Stables
Rockcastle County, Kentucky**

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundaries of this property correspond to the tax listing in Book 138, Page 525, of the Property Valuation Office in Mount Vernon, KY.

Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes the portion of John Lair's estate which contains his home and remains in the hands of his descendants.

Photographic Documentation

3. David Baxter
4. 13 November 1994
5. Negatives in Baxter's possession, Bowling Green, KY.
6. #1 Southern view of house
#2 Northern view of house
#3 Detail of southern view of house
#4 Western view of stables
#5 Southeast view of stables
#6 Detail of western view of stables