

ACCESSIBLE APPALACHIA : Open Education Resource

Edited by Lisa Day and Jacob Johnson

Acknowledgments

Indigenous people lived for at least 12,000 years in what is called Kentucky, and Shawnee and Cherokee peoples called home the land of Madison County, where Eastern Kentucky University is located. Indigenous people continue to live in Kentucky with latest estimates over 31,000.

As a compilation of scholarship, *Accessible Appalachia: An Open-Access, Introductory Reader in Appalachian Studies* was a combined effort of many minds, who kept it from becoming a casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic. The contributions of consulting editors Dr. Deann Allen, Dr. James Maples, Mx. Valerie Miller, and Dr. Erin Presley tightened the scope of the textbook and offered valuable insights for the authors as they moved from the topic proposal to a full chapter submission.

In Jacob Johnson's crucial role as undergraduate editorial intern, he learned by doing; he tracked down sources, verified the accuracy of quotations, and worked to streamline the chapters into Chicago Style bibliographical format. His interest in the project didn't wane upon his graduation from ECU, and his valuable input continued even as a very busy graduate student in the University of Kentucky's History Department; I trust we'll see his name on many original publications as well as edited compilations in the coming years. All of these key players helped me to move the project from idea to reality.

I will always sing the praises of the Eastern Kentucky University Libraries. From the first conversations in February 2020 about an open electronic resource in Appalachian Studies to its fruition in summer 2024, I worked closely with open strategies librarian Bailey Lake, whose dedication to consistency in format and to fine details matched my own; university librarian Kelly Smith, whose passion for open electronic resources is absolutely contagious and vitally important in ECU's innovations in textbook publishing; associate librarians Laura Edwards and Linda Sizemore, whose vast knowledge in accessibility and copyright issues are surely unmatched by anyone else in the country; and dean's office coordinator and MPA graduate

student Meghan Mariah, whose careful double- and triple-checking of Chicago Style soothed my compulsive bibliographical needs. They provided immense assistance and their sharp expertise throughout the textbook's creation. The librarians at ECU have always been outstanding faculty of the university, staying current with resources and strategies as well as providing fully informed perspectives about research areas. They also make sure their collection and databases are top-notch quality not only in content but also in their availability in different formats. While Jacob and I were checking source material during the editing process, I was consistently impressed (and a bit spoiled!) by our library's readily available research and full range of publications, and on the infrequent occasions when I wasn't been able to find a source in electronic format, I was able to request it through Library Express and Ashley Cole, whose quick attention and acquisition skills put the source into my email inbox with truly impressive efficiency.

The Eastern Kentucky University Board of Regents provided the necessary funding to launch this project, and I am grateful for this support from the university.

The College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences granted me the gift of time in the form of a sabbatical after I stepped down from leadership in Appalachian Studies and Women & Gender Studies. The semester without classroom and service duties allowed me to focus my full attention on this textbook, and while I greatly missed interacting with students, I'm quite proud of the work that will benefit future students in Appalachian Studies.

Finally, I am immensely fortunate to share a home with Dr. Travis Martin, whose love and support during the textbook project came in many tangible and intangible forms. He was my sounding board as a seasoned professional in editing and publishing, and he also served as the voice of wisdom when it came to closing my computer for the night. Witnessing my nearly monomaniacal focus during my sabbatical, he also made sure I was taking care of myself and carving time for walking our two energetic shepherds.

Dr. Lisa Day
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Introduction to *Accessible Appalachia*

Lisa Day and Jacob Johnson

What is Appalachia? Where is it? Who lives there? What happens there? This book won't provide thorough answers to those questions because no book can cover it all; Appalachia is not only a place but also a social construction that is ever changing, ever adapting, ever progressing. Because this book will be used in Appalachian Studies classes and supplemented with other texts, readers will benefit from a fuller, more dynamic, and informative environment that enables discussion and questions.

Many students considering Appalachian Studies classes may ask themselves, "Why do I need to study Appalachia anyway?" Nearly every faculty member who has taught an Appalachia-focused class has frequently heard questions like this one, and even Helen Matthews Lewis, remembered as the "grandmother of Appalachian Studies," encountered it as often as modern professors. In sum, students decide what makes the region important to study, as the authors who contributed to this work have also done. Lewis answers the question this way:

"So if you want to study Appalachia, here is what you do. Start where you live: interview your elders, map your community, write your local history. Who lives where and why? Who owns the land, minerals, and resources? Who is rich and poor? Who has power and who is powerless? Who are the story tellers, the poets, the singers? Who is in jail, who is sick, who is angry and who is throwing the bodies in the river and who is pretending it is not happening? Who is speaking truth to power, who is feeding the hungry, who is healing the sick? Who is writing the poetry, saving the stories, saving the land, singing the songs? Find out who you are. What is your place in this place?"^[1]

The implications of these questions are not bound by the region alone. We agree with historian Ronald Eller in viewing Appalachia as a mirror to the rest of the nation.^[2] Elizabeth Catts expands on Eller's point, positing that this kind of mirroring sometimes "reflects something troubling but

recognizable back to the nation,” sometimes predicting disaster but guaranteeing “extra meaning” in cultural shifts.^[3] Although Americans have often projected national problems as regional issues divorced from individual cities and localities, Appalachia is America and America is Appalachia. The problems of one exist in the other, so that a watershed moment in the region implies a coming change in the nation also. To that end, the field of Appalachian Studies challenges perceptions of the region and also questions how Appalachia reflects evolving national values.

Similar to how Appalachia doesn't exist in isolation, unaffected by the nation around it, this textbook is not limited to one subject matter or approach. An interdisciplinary field, Appalachian Studies encompasses many academic subjects, including the arts, education, health, humanities, physical sciences, social sciences, and recreation. While this resource is first and foremost intended for classroom learning, this work—as an extension of the work of the broad Appalachian Studies field itself—is also a call to action as well as a call to question. Critical questioning in social, political, environmental, and economic contexts as well as at cultural and individual levels remains vitally necessary to foster sustainability and healthy changes in the region, its people, and its future.

Both the region and nation continue to break into uncharted history in the making, amplifying the need for these questions all the more. Since 2020 when this textbook project began, the region has dealt with an unprecedented three consecutive “hundred-year floods” while the coal industry continues a steep decline in employment. Local people now more than at any point in living memory or recent history are questioning the power structures that have led to climate changes, continued socioeconomic barriers, and political responses in the form of infrastructure breakdown. Of these floods, the devastation of a “627-year-flood” in 2022 has come to symbolize this pivotal moment. While we are still far too close to that moment to understand its full implications, the one thing that comes clear is that a change is coming—and is already happening. This uncertainty of what the future of the region will be, combined with the certainty of its coming, has only amplified the need for the questions that Appalachian Studies poses to students.

Pronunciation and Location

Residents, scholars, hikers, and even people who have never been to Appalachia have attempted to map the pronunciation of the region's name to assert the “correct” way to say it. Central Appalachia, or “core” Appalachia, [4] mostly pronounces it “app-uh-latch-uh.” A frequently circulated internet meme quotes Appalachian novelist Sharyn McCrumb, who says, “*Appa-lay-shuh* is the pronunciation of condescension, the pronunciation of the imperialists, the people who do not want to be associated with the place, and the pronunciation *Appa-latch-uh* means that you are on the side that we trust.” [5] Adherents to this pronunciation often argue a defense of residents' speech as opposed to tourists who say the word.

Other sources stir up a North vs. South opposition, claiming that the pronunciation of throwing an “apple atcha” comes from central and southern Appalachia, while the long -a in the second syllable and the ending “shuh” syllable must be derived from “Yankees.” However, not everyone within the central states of Appalachia speaks the word in the same way, and gatekeeping pronunciation is not how the editors of this textbook want students in Appalachian Studies to proceed anyway.

Beyond its pronunciation, defining Appalachia has been the topic of many scholarly discussions in print and in discussion at conferences, and some sources depend on cultural distinctions while others focus on geographical delineations. In general, Appalachia encompasses a long swath of territory on the eastern side of the North American continent and, according to the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) in 2021, includes 423 counties in thirteen of the United States—a number that has grown and

shifted since the ARC's establishment in 1965. [6] Yet, some sources indicate that Appalachia extends as far north as Nova Scotia in Canada's New Brunswick. As with most social constructions of identity, categorization persists: Northern Appalachia, Central Appalachia, Southern Appalachia—and not everyone agrees on the states and counties that fit within each of these three subsets.

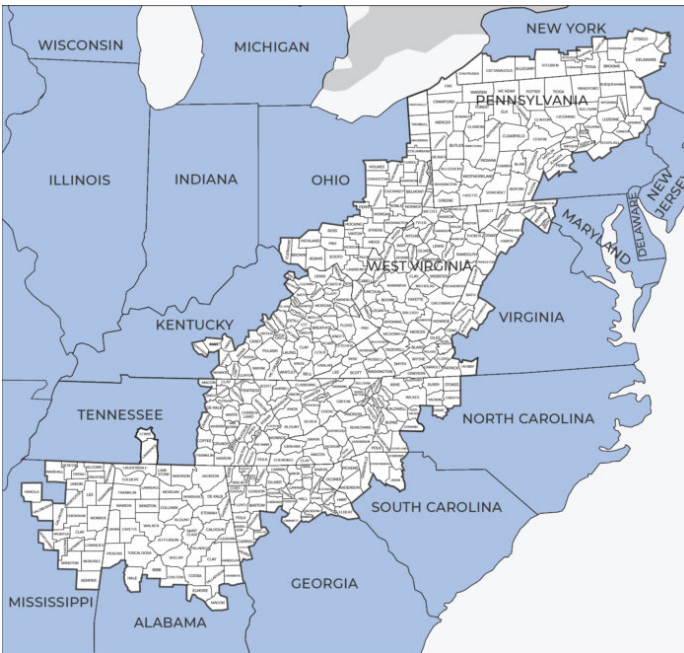


Figure 1. The Appalachian Regional Commission defines Appalachia as the 423 counties in thirteen states depicted on this map. Photo courtesy of Appalachian Regional Commission. [\[7\]](#)

Still, many historians and Appalachian Studies scholars debate the accuracy of the ARC's delineation of counties and the organization's exclusion of other seemingly "Appalachian" counties. To illustrate the complicated attempts to pinpoint the physical location, Virginia Tech offers a dynamic list of maps that trace the geographic boundaries of Appalachia, ranging from the Works Progress Administration's several attempts and the ARC's nine variations since 1964. [\[8\]](#)

Our Approach to Appalachian Studies

As a place-based study, similar to fields rooted in race and gender, no part of this textbook has happened in a vacuum. To that end, students might think of the chapters as scholarly works in communication with each other rather than a series of works that are dedicated to a singular topic in the given place. These chapters are not only in conversation with each other but also with readers. Regardless of being from the region or coming from outside of it, we all come to "know" Appalachia through preconceived

notions, hidden biases, and a boat-load of stereotypes gleaned from popular culture. Dispelling stereotypes about any region or group of people is key to greater acknowledgement of individual commonalities along with differences. Because the book is an open electronic resource, we encourage readers to use its features to highlight sections that seem most significant and to add comments or questions to raise in class.

This textbook's 27 authors introduce a comprehensive exploration of Appalachia, a region abundant in history, culture, and complexity, seeking to challenge pre-existing perceptions across a wide variety of topics that represent the arts, environment, culture, social justice, and health of Appalachia and Appalachians. By intentionally keeping our section headings broad, we hope to provide a framework that not only encompasses the current scope of study but also allows for additional chapters in future editions. This approach acknowledges the dynamic and evolving nature of Appalachian Studies, inviting further scholarship and engagement. Some chapters may seem to contradict lived experiences in the region; however, the goal of this textbook is not necessarily to replace the thoughts of students who come into Appalachian Studies classes but rather to encourage them to question where those thoughts originated and how they know them to be true or untrue. Methodologies across the chapters range from foundational scholarship about Appalachia found in academic journals and books along with the use of archival primary sources and oral histories, interviews, government document analyses, practitioner profiles, data analysis, ethnography, observations, and mixed methods. Readers should consult chapter bibliographies for excellent resources in the disciplinary field.

With the popular tendency to define the region as either cultural or geographic, for the purposes of this textbook anyone that self-identifies as Appalachian belongs here as much as the folks who do not claim Appalachian identity but still want to learn. This individualistic, perhaps simplistic approach to the identity aims to avoid not only gatekeeping but also to prevent further generalizations about the region. As such, the chapters in this book focus on specific areas, people, and topics within the expansive region as a way of conveying cultural multiplicity and widely varying lived experiences within Appalachia.

In the "Arts in Appalachia" section, musician and music historian Esther Morgan-Ellis offers a trilogy of chapters that focus on musical expression distinctive to Appalachia. Her chapter called "The Making of 'Appalachian

Music,’” surveys this distinctive American genre and its influences by and on representations in mass media, then traces its development from ballad collecting to folk festivals, gospel singings, and the recording industry throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Morgan-Ellis’s second contribution in this section is “Fiddle and Banjo Music of Southern Appalachia,” which identifies the origins of the fiddle and banjo as quintessential instruments in Appalachia back to their European and African influences. Morgan-Ellis describes how various individual musicians have contributed unique styles shaped by their diverse cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. Morgan-Ellis’s third chapter, titled “Unaccompanied Singing Traditions of the Southern Appalachians,” explains how traditions of singing without accompanying music, such as ballad singing, lined-out hymnody, and shape-note singing, have deep roots in Southern Appalachia, reflecting diverse themes as well as commonalities in vocal production, song forms, and historical origins outside the region.

Literary scholar Erin Presley shifts the book’s coverage of arts from musical to written expression, providing an overview of Appalachian literature, surveying the earliest authors who lived in and wrote about Appalachia to contemporary writers who have received great acclaim (including a Pulitzer Prize) and who offer diverse perspectives.

No coverage of the arts in Appalachia would be complete without acknowledging the institution of Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky, and historian Catherine Herdman writes about this organization that documents traditions and provides a creative outlet for media depictions of Appalachia.

The second section of the textbook, “Natural Resources and Environmental Justice in Appalachia,” contains five chapters. Anthropologist Amanda Green discusses “Appalachian Agriculture and Food Systems,” illuminating the historical, environmental, and cultural influences on the earliest agrarian practices of Indigenous peoples to contemporary movements that address issues like food sovereignty and climate change. In the following complementary chapter, Green covers “Appalachian Foodways,” offering how Appalachian cuisine has been influenced by globalization and colonization while the region’s diverse populations have built culinary traditions around such foods as soup beans, cornbread, biscuits, sorghum, and wild ramps, along with dishes based on homegrown ingredients. Green closes the chapter by explaining environmental justice and culinary tourism.

Historian Jacob Johnson, the author of “Chestnut Country: An Environmental History of the American Chestnut Tree,” defines and illustrates the Appalachian commons system through a historical treatment of the chestnut tree, once a vital component of the Appalachian ecosystem that underwent catastrophic decline due to a fungal blight, carrying vast ecological and economic repercussions and spurring a reevaluation of the functioning of the commons.

Providing their ethnographic research about illegal distillation, criminologist Carl Root and sociologist Edward Green call their chapter “Shine On: Distilling, Cultural Rebellion, and the Fluid Construction of Criminality” and describe the long tradition of moonshine making in Appalachia, illustrated by their profiles of infamous makers of “mountain whiskey” and closing with descriptions of moonshine’s resurgence in popularity and mass production.

Finally, medical professional Shawn Kimbro and literary and cultural scholar Lisa Day offer their mixed-method analysis of the Tennessee Valley Authority’s impact on east Tennessee illustrated through the Isom family. The chapter came together with interviews, sources, and photos from the collection of William Isom II, the director of Black in Appalachia.

“Cultures of Appalachia,” the third section of the textbook, covers specific populations as well as their traditions within Appalachia. Anthropologists Sarah Gripshover and Kelli Carmean provide coverage of Indigenous peoples and anthropological eras with “Native American Cultures of Appalachia,” critical content in any study of Appalachia.

Folklorists Sarah Craycraft, Jordan Lovejoy, Cassie Patterson, and Sydney Varajon define and illustrate “Folklore of Appalachia,” covering the region’s cultural artifacts and exploring how cultural traditions have been preserved, adapted, and shared across generations.

Sociologist Molly Clever and historian Katherine Antolini’s chapter “The Intersectional Redneck: Appalachian Identity Politics in Historical and Contemporary Perspective” explains the concept of intersectionality as it applies to Appalachia’s diverse populations in socioeconomic class, race, and gender identity through a historical analysis of the “redneck” label from the Blair Mountain protests and a contextual update with the West Virginia teachers’ strike a century later.

Finally, educational data analysts Allison Ricket, Tasha Werry, and Jacqueline Yahn provide “Social Capital for Appalachia’s Youth,” a chapter

that covers the theoretical meanings of capital supplemented with practical application of how young people in the region can accomplish success by networking with different communities in which they are already involved as well as with groups that share their interests.

The fourth section of the book is “Social Justice in Appalachia,” beginning with historian Riccardo Paolo D’Amato’s “The Great Society in the Mountains: Shaping Appalachia through the 1960s and Beyond,” which provides the social and cultural context of the “War on Poverty” along with an overview of grassroots organizing efforts and community action.

Historian Jacob Johnson contributes another chapter to the book with “Ravaged Land and Polarized People: Community Responses to Strip Mining in Eastern Kentucky, 1946-1972,” focusing on methods of coal extraction and its many harmful effects on the land along with the social welfare of Appalachian Kentuckians during the mid-20th century.

Complementing Johnson’s chapter, sociologists Bennett Judkins and Aysha Bodenhamer explain many social and individual effects of coal mining with their “Black Lung: A Continuing Struggle,” including institutions such as health care, the workplace, and government along with illustrating structural effects of poverty, unethical practices in labor, and low educational attainment that seem to accompany coal extraction.

The final section of the textbook is “Health in Appalachia,” with two chapters that focus on some of the many implications of the opioid crisis in the region. Legal scholars Thomas Parker and Lynnette Noblitt offer thorough coverage of case law involving prescription drug manufacturers in “A Matter of Justice: Legal Response to the Appalachian Opioid Crisis.”

Complementing the legal response to the crisis, sociologist Holly Ningard offers practical perspectives in “Revisiting Restorative and Transformative Justice amid Appalachia’s Opioid Struggles,” illustrating alternative strategies of legal, medical, and community responses to addiction and its many effects on public and individual health.

Respectful Language Use

Part of the accessibility in our textbook’s title is the language we use to designate identities that pertain to ability, socioeconomic class, gender, and

race. Like Appalachia, language is dynamic, shifting with emergent issues and questioning traditions that may no longer serve the needs of 21st century populations.

Similar to how this book is available in many forms to ensure optimal access for electronic readers and accessibility software, this textbook aims to avoid language that refers to one type of mobility or sensory ability. Ableism in language usually occurs unintentionally, and some examples include using a sensory expression to indicate understanding (e.g., “as residents *saw/heard*”). Instead, by using cognitive language such as learned or became aware (among other synonyms), we aim for inclusivity instead of inadvertently excluding readers with different capabilities. Similarly, we strive to avoid words pertaining to mobility or physical size when we are conveying a point.

A noticeable tendency in mass media as well as in scholarship is the use of “rich” to describe Appalachian culture and environment (e.g., “rich culture,” “rich tradition”), and while the word usually pertains to abundance or multiple variations, the term in informal usage connotes socioeconomic status. Since the War on Poverty led to stigmas about Appalachia and its residents, such as the phrase “rich land, poor people,”^[9] this textbook omits any mention of “rich” that may inadvertently connote monetary value, wealth, or the lack of wealth.

With the fit of Appalachian Studies within university general education, the editors want to reflect the community membership, integrative learning, and intercultural and global understanding that this interdisciplinary area contains—e.g., the chapters in this book include nearly sixty different countries and tribal affiliations. Wherever possible, the chapter authors convey the public history of Appalachia from the perspective of those who lived it, aiming for representation of different ages, genders, classes, and races. The editors aim for gender inclusivity not only in adding pronouns of contributors but also extending to gender-neutral language throughout the book.

As Appalachian Studies has moved into the 21st century, shifts in language toward greater inclusivity have occurred, including debates about the capitalization of racial identifiers. In the past, style manuals encouraged capitalizing only the place-based identifiers of ethnic origin—e.g., African, Asian, Latin American. However, since the racial reckonings that the United States has been undergoing since 2020, many bibliographical and journalistic

organizations advise that racial designations should receive a capital letter. [10] As a result, throughout this book we capitalize all race-based identifiers, including Asian, Black, Brown, Indigenous, Latine, White, and similar designations. We also capitalize “Other” and “Otherness” when the word refers to a person or a group of people who are divergent from the norm or the majority. By capitalizing all races, we agree with the MacArthur Foundation’s recommendations: “Language itself is radical. It can be used to either support or challenge the systemic racism we seek to dismantle. We hope that by consciously choosing to capitalize Black, Brown, Indigenous, and White, we can take a small step towards a more just and inclusive world.” [11] Appalachia contains many identities, and we aim to recognize and respect the region’s pluralism across populations.

Editing the First Edition, Anticipating a Second Edition

Inspired by the publication of *Slavery to Freedom: The African American Experience*, the first open electronic resource at Eastern Kentucky University, Lisa Day began conversations in February 2020 with ECU Libraries faculty Kelly Smith, Laura Edwards, and Linda Sizemore about a similar resource for Appalachian Studies. She then gathered a team of Appalachian Studies faculty affiliates, including anthropologist Deann Allen, sociologist James Maples, Appalachian Studies scholar Valerie Miller, and English professor Erin Presley, and the group sent out a call for submissions and then vetted nearly 70 proposals. Nineteen of those proposals became the chapters that fill this textbook. Jacob Johnson initially served as an undergraduate editorial intern, learning about the editing process as he tracked down sources and verified authors’ use of material; after he graduated from Eastern Kentucky University and began graduate school at the University of Kentucky, he continued in this vital role and offered additional contributions. English associate professor and freelance editor Lisa Day edited the chapters for their consistency in style, clarity in language, academic rigor, use of sources, and coverage of topics within the field of Appalachian Studies.

Battling the retirements, departures, and job changes influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, this textbook project still managed to follow nearly the same timeline as other open electronic resources (OER) due to the persistence of many talented folks at ECU and the patience of the contributing authors. This textbook format enables students, scholars, and interested readers from all over the world to access this resource free of charge through the ECU Libraries' open educational practices and the Manifold digital publishing platform.

We have already identified some gaps in coverage; these missing components are not shortcomings but opportunities—both for instructors to individualize their curriculum with supplemental sources and for scholars to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Appalachia. These topics serve as a call to action to delve deeper into areas that have been overlooked or underexplored: the significant military contributions of Appalachian service members and veterans; the transient and complex existence of mining company towns; the challenges of accessing reproductive healthcare in rural areas; the burgeoning visibility and influence of the LGBTQIAAP2S+ community; the growing communities of specific non-hegemonic cultures; the region's distinctive linguistic traits; migration patterns; biodiversity; educational history and advancements; the haunting silence surrounding violent crime; and much more content that should be explored in an introductory-level textbook in Appalachian Studies. A second edition will hopefully cover some of these gaps and also contain a section of creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry from Appalachian authors.

As we anticipate the contributions that a second edition will bring, it is our hope that this collection will not only serve as an academic resource but also inspire paper topics and research projects within Appalachian Studies classes. By shedding light on multifaceted experiences and identities within Appalachia, we aim to foster a deeper appreciation for the region's complexity and resilience. This edited collection of original scholarship is but the beginning of a conversation that we hope will invite further understanding of Appalachia and its place within the broader narrative of the United States.

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[1] Engle, “Why Study Appalachia?”

[2] Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 4.

[3] Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*, 9.

[4] Williams, “Counting Yesterday’s People,” 9.

[5] Williams, “Appa-latch-uh or Appa-lay-shuh: What Is the Correct Way to Pronounce Appalachia?”

[6] “Appalachian Counties Served by ARC.”

[7] Ibid.

[8] Scales, Satterwhite, and August, “Mapping Appalachia.”

[9] NET, *Rich Land, Poor People*.

[10] “Black and White: A Matter of Capitalization,” *Chicago Manual of Style*; “Racial and Ethnic Identity,” *APA Style*.

[11] Mack and Palfrey, “Capitalizing Black and White.”

The Making of Appalachian Music

Esther Morgan-Ellis

In 2021 in my Music in Appalachia class, I asked students, "When you hear the phrase 'Appalachian music,' what comes to mind?" Their responses reflected old-fashioned notions and cultural stereotypes. One student described "twangy guitar or banjo accompanying lyrics about alcohol, cheating women, and 'working for the man.'" Another imagined "a group of old men sitting around on the porch of a mountain cabin, strumming guitars and picking banjos." "The singer will sing in a thick Southern accent," wrote another, accompanied by "a variety of string instruments such as the fiddle, banjo, guitar, and mandolin." According to another student, Appalachian music consists of "lots of bluegrass, ballads, hymns, and jigs being played to the delight and enjoyment of the crowd as the lightning bugs glide lazily to the tunes."

Every student had a clear impression of "Appalachian music," and in addition to types of singers and songs, they all agreed about its general characteristics: "Appalachian music" is communal, meant to be shared by family and friends; it is recreational and informal, performed by amateurs for their own entertainment; it is acoustic, relying on plucked and bowed string instruments; and it is closely tied to its rural mountain setting. However, my students were also keenly aware of how their impressions had been influenced by mass media. One provided a long list of films—*Sergeant York* (1941), *October Sky* (1999), *Songcatcher* (2000), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), and *Cold Mountain* (2003)—that have shaped her ideas about Appalachian life and culture. Others described their experiences with Appalachian music from watching television, reading novels, and attending festivals.

As is the case with most popular stereotypes, my students' ideas about Appalachian music are not wrong. However, they are incomplete. While the sorrowful balladeer and front-porch banjo picker have their place in the story of Appalachian music, theirs is only one chapter in a complex and still-developing narrative. But how did the popular notion of "Appalachian music" come to exist in the first place? Although mass media

plays a large role in perpetuating narratives today, people living outside of the Appalachian region have been shaping, defining, and publicizing a narrow concept of “Appalachian music” for well over a century. These people have included educators, record company executives, scholars, tourism officials, and musicians, and they have been driven by diverse and conflicting motivations. As a result, the idea of “Appalachian music” has proven to be highly malleable, changing with the goals and ideologies of the artists who make use of it.

Ballad Hunting

Before the **Civil War**, most Americans had no interest in Appalachian life. Indeed, the concept of “Appalachia” as a distinct cultural region did not even exist. Between 1870 and 1890, however, **local color** writers introduced the general public to life in the mountains by means of travel sketches and short stories.[1] Early accounts portrayed mountaineers as simple and lazy—out of step with modern life, but essentially harmless. In the 1890s, however, narratives that focused on moonshining and feuding suggested that Appalachian society should be viewed as a threat, while mountain dwellers should be abhorred as primitive and dangerous.[2] Such people could not possibly possess cultural practices of any value, and it is hardly surprising that their music was ridiculed or ignored. However, the public perception of Appalachia shifted yet again with the writings of **William Goodell Frost**, who served as president of **Berea College** in Kentucky from 1892 to 1920. Frost—who came to Berea from Ohio—regarded mountaineers as descendants of the noble Americans who had fought in the **Revolutionary War**, and he believed that they preserved important music and craft traditions.[3] In his most famous essay, published in 1899, Frost described Appalachians as “our contemporary ancestors,” thereby capturing in a single phrase the idea that mountaineers preserved the genetics, manners, speech, and songs of the nation’s Anglo-Saxon founders.[4]

Although Frost was only tangentially interested in music, his new characterization of the Appalachian region caught the attention of early folklorists, who had just begun the project of documenting rural American cultural practices. In the Appalachians, collectors, or “**ballad hunters**,” set about searching for musical artifacts that would link mountaineers to their **British** forebears—evidence, in fact, that they were indeed “our

contemporary ancestors.” Specifically, collectors were looking for **ballads**: unaccompanied songs in which verses telling a story were sung to a simple melody.^[5] Interest in British ballads had first been piqued by Harvard rhetoric professor Francis James Child, who scoured ancient manuscripts for ballad texts for inclusion in his ten-volume magnum opus *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, published between 1882 and 1898. As a result, collectors were most eager to find living representations of what were termed “**Child ballads**.” Their work was supported by universities and folk song societies, and new discoveries were published in the *Journal of American Folklore*. As the ballad craze intensified, collectors became engaged in fierce turf wars, concealing the identity of their informants and rushing their finds into print before they could be scooped.^[6]

Most ballad collectors had no interest in the lives or futures of their informants, regarding them merely as imperfect vessels bearing timeless musical artifacts. The role of the collector was to “rescue” these artifacts from destruction. However, the most influential collectors were those who lived and worked in the mountains—in particular, the **women** who founded and operated **settlement schools**. The settlement school movement had begun in England, and its mission was to educate and uplift working-class youth. Although the first settlement schools were urban, early 20th-century reformers—inspired in part by Frost’s call to serve the educational needs of “mountain whites”—opened institutions throughout the Appalachians. Settlement workers both collected ballads themselves and hosted visiting collectors, thereby providing access to what had become a much sought-after natural resource.^[7] However, they did something else that was of even greater significance: They integrated ballad singing into school curricula and encouraged students to recall old ballads and learn new ones. As a result, ballad singing became more common and gained prominence in Appalachian life.^[8] Settlement women performed other acts of **cultural intervention** as well. They discouraged fiddle and banjo music, which they associated with Saturday night carousing, and instead encouraged mountaineers to build and play the **mountain dulcimer**, a plucked string instrument held on the lap. As a result, the mountain dulcimer—previously unknown in most parts of the Appalachians—came to be widespread, and was adopted by influential ambassadors of Appalachian music.

Settlements also played a key role in the most significant ballad collecting expedition, undertaken by **Olive Dame Campbell** (1882-1954)

and **Cecil Sharp** (1859-1924) in 1916. Campbell first toured Appalachia in the company of her husband, who had been engaged to conduct a social survey of mountain life. In 1908, she visited the **Hindman Settlement School** in Knott County, Kentucky, where co-founder **Katherine Pettit** had been collecting ballads since the school opened in 1902. Pettit arranged for a student to sing the Child ballad “**Barbara Allen**” for Campbell, who found herself overcome by the music; she later described the performance as “so strange, so remote, so thrilling.”^[9] Campbell set out on her own collecting project, quickly amassing a library of ballads, and in 1916 she convinced the famous English ballad expert Cecil Sharp to visit **Southern Appalachia**. The two of them began their collecting expedition at Hindman, where Sharp, too, was entranced by the children’s singing. They subsequently spent nine weeks recording ballad texts and tunes in Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, publishing their finds as *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* in 1917.^[10] Sharp would undertake several additional expeditions over the next two years, and it was his scholarly stature that established ballads as the first significant exemplar of “Appalachian music.”

When Sharp went into the mountains, he was explicitly searching for remnants of British musical traditions. He believed that the isolation of Appalachian mountain life had preserved ballads just as they had been sung centuries earlier in the British Isles, and that the versions he collected in the United States were therefore the most “authentic” in existence. Sharp’s mission, however, was extremely narrow, and he turned away all musical practices other than unaccompanied ballad singing. He described the difficulty of convincing his informants to sing anything other than hymns, and lamented the influence of popular songs, which found their way into the lives of mountaineers via phonograph recordings and traveling performers. He also ignored instrumental music, commenting only briefly on the guitar, fiddle, and mountain dulcimer.^[11] Finally, and perhaps most significantly, he collected exclusively from **White** informants, despite the fact that **Black** residents made up 13.4% of the mountain population in 1910. By doing so, he helped to establish the persistent myth that Appalachian music is exclusively the music of White people.^[12]

The Birth of "Hillbilly" Records

The myth of “hillbilly” music was reinforced in the 1920s, when record companies discovered the commercial potential of Appalachian music. In 1923, **Ralph Peer**—recording director at Okeh Records—traveled to Atlanta to capture the playing of local musician **Fiddlin’ John Carson**. He came at the behest of an Atlanta phonograph retailer, who felt sure that there would be a market for Carson’s recordings.^[13] Carson himself was something of a local legend; he was a perennial favorite at the annual Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers’ Convention and could attract a crowd anywhere in the city.^[14] Although Peer personally found Carson’s records abhorrent, the first thousand sold almost immediately. Clearly, there was money to be made from rural styles and repertoires.

The discovery of Carson followed closely on the heels of the first recordings of Black performers, which had likewise proved commercially successful. In 1920, Okeh’s recording of **Mamie Smith** singing “**Crazy Blues**” birthed an entire new marketing category: “**race**” records. Imitators soon flooded the market with recordings of Black blues singers, who were often promoted as being more authentic than their White counterparts.^[15] When Peer began to record rural White musicians, he again declined to list their releases in Okeh’s general catalog, surmising that rural records would have only niche appeal. To accommodate performers like Carson, therefore, the category of “**hillbilly**” records was invented.

The designations of “race” and “hillbilly,” like musical **genres** today, were marketing categories, designed to connect consumers with music that they could expect to enjoy. However, these categories did not reflect actual musical practice, which was not divided neatly across racial lines. Just as White musicians often sang the blues, Black performers played **fiddle** and **banjo**, formed string bands, and sang sentimental songs. Indeed, Black fiddlers were foundational in the development of Appalachian playing styles, and the banjo is an Afro-Caribbean instrument. Unfortunately, the new categories determined which performers were allowed to record which types of music. Black musicians were often recorded only if they were willing to perform styles of music associated with the Black community—namely, blues and jazz. White musicians were given greater latitude, although they, too, had to accommodate stereotypes in a bid for commercial appeal. **The Skillet Lickers**, a string band from North Georgia who made their first record in 1924, serve as a prime example. Bandleader Gid Tanner was always willing to put on a “rube” act to win applause, and many of the band’s records

contain skits portraying comical scenes of mountain life; even the band's name was meant to evoke the hillbilly stereotype.^[16] However, these performers were at least able to make a living. Black musicians who played "hillbilly" music were usually turned away by record company representatives.^[17]

"Hillbilly" music was not necessarily Appalachian music, but the music of White mountaineers certainly qualified as "hillbilly," and a large number of mountain musicians sought out careers as hillbilly recording artists. At the same time, Appalachia and the hillbilly stereotype were inextricably bound together in the imaginations of many Americans, such that hillbilly records were perceived as the soundtrack of mountain life. The segregation of rural musicians into "race" and "hillbilly" categories, however, meant that the music of Black Americans was excluded from the emerging Appalachian soundscape. By necessity, social constructions of music genres said that if music was "Black," it could not also be "Appalachian."

White Appalachian musicians could also find employment and publicity on hillbilly radio programs. In 1923, the first "**barn dance**" program was broadcast out of Fort Worth, Texas, and the model was firmly established in 1924 by *National Barn Dance*, which could be heard across much of the United States and **Canada**. Significantly, however, *National Barn Dance* broadcast not out of Appalachia, or even the South, but out of Chicago. Founder Edgar L. Bill anticipated that urban Americans, disillusioned by modern city life, would find solace in the nostalgic sounds of rural music. He was also responding to the influx of rural Southerners who came to the Midwest looking for work. These migrants—who included **Bill Monroe**, the father of **bluegrass**—brought their musical tastes and abilities, providing both an audience and a talent base for hillbilly music.^[18] In 1925, *National Barn Dance* announcer George D. Hay moved to Nashville and founded *The Grand Ole Opry*, which would go on to become the most famous and influential country radio (and later television) program in the nation. Appalachian musicians could also find employment on local radio programs, although traveling between stations to satisfy a demanding schedule of live broadcasts was exhausting work.^[19] In all cases, hillbilly radio served to further cement the racial divide and establish Appalachian music as White and Anglo-centric.

The Rise of Folk Festivals

While the 1920s saw the popularization of Appalachian musical styles by means of commercial recordings and radio programs, the 1930s witnessed a reaction against these forces. Many folklorists and collectors were horrified by the entrance of Appalachian performers into the world of mainstream commercial music. They feared that commercial forces would warp and contaminate pure folk culture, and they dismissed hillbilly records as inauthentic and crass. In an effort to stem the flood of commercial folk representations, advocates of “genuine” folk music established festivals for the purpose of encouraging the preservation of what they believed to be the finest and most authentic folk practices. The specific motivations and goals of each festival organizer, however, were unique, as were the limits they placed on the concept of “Appalachian music.”

The first **folk festival**—not just in Appalachia, but in the entire United States—was founded by **Bascom Lamar Lunsford** (1882-1973), a native of Madison County, North Carolina. Lunsford was well-educated, eventually earning a law degree, but his fascination with rural music and dance kept him in the area, and he dedicated most of his time to seeking out local musicians in order to learn their tunes and songs. He undertook several formal collecting expeditions, touring the mountains with Robert W. Gordon, the first head of the Library of Congress Archive of Folk Song, in 1925, and with Dorothy Scarborough of Columbia University in 1930. A musician himself, Lunsford also recorded hundreds of traditional songs for Columbia Records and the Library of Congress.^[20] As a member of what Appalachian music scholar David Whisnant has termed the “bi-cultural elite,” Lunsford had access to institutions and funding networks, yet also identified with his sources. He held a deep respect for Appalachian people and culture, and he fought against hillbilly stereotypes throughout his career.^[21]

In 1928, Lunsford was invited by the Chamber of Commerce in Asheville, North Carolina, to contribute a program of music and dance to the first annual **Rhododendron Festival**. The object of the festival, which constituted a small part of a broader advertising campaign, was to promote tourism and boost local businesses, and overall it was a highly artificial affair. Lunsford’s evening of regional music and dance was one of few events that reflected local culture, but it also proved to be extremely popular: About

five thousand spectators crowded into Pack Square to watch groups of square dancers compete for cash prizes to the accompaniment of string band music.^[22] The program also included fiddlers, string bands, and singers, each hand-picked and presented to the spectators by Lunsford himself. In 1930, Lunsford left the Rhododendron Festival behind to found Asheville's **Mountain Dance and Folk Festival**.

Competition was at the heart of Lunsford's festival design. This approach had a practical benefit: Lunsford did not pay most of his performers, so cash prizes were necessary to lure skilled participants. Although there was a history of fiddle contests in the region, Lunsford's model was novel in many ways. **Square dancing** had not previously been presented in a concert setting, and there was also no precedent for competitive dancing (other than the informal **buck-dancing** duels that might take place at square dances in private homes). As a result, Lunsford's festival changed local practices. Dancers began introducing buck-dance steps into the square-dance patterns, and they abandoned street clothes in favor of coordinated uniforms. Within a generation, locals were more likely to participate in formal square-dance teams than to attend the private house dances of Lunsford's youth. The potential rewards for becoming an accomplished square dancer, however, extended beyond prizes and local celebrity. As folk culture gained national cachet, polished practitioners gained access to meaningful career paths and elite sponsorship—a new reality exemplified by Lunsford's 1939 White House presentation of square dancing for no less an audience than the President **Franklin Delano Roosevelt**, First Lady **Eleanor Roosevelt**, and Great Britain's King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.^[23]

Lunsford's intervention transformed the practice of Appalachian square dancing while simultaneously elevating it to the level of national culture. He also shaped the contents and character of Appalachian instrumental music. While traveling the countryside seeking out possible festival performers, he would give advice to developing musicians, thereby influencing their future repertoire and style. He strictly controlled the material presented on stage, forbidding overt references to alcohol and sex. He also required that performers dress according to his standards, rejecting both hillbilly garb and the "revealing" clothes of the modern woman. As a result, Lunsford's Appalachian music was significantly more chaste than what might be encountered outside of the festival. Finally, although Lunsford collected

music from Black informants and reportedly spoke well of them as individuals and performers, no Black musicians ever took the stage while he led the festival.^[24]

Lunsford's festival served as an important model for others. In 1934, **Sarah Gertrude Knott** (1895-1984)—a relative outsider with no real background in Appalachian music—would take the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival as the model for her **National Folk Festival**. Although Knott sought to recruit performers from diverse traditions, the music of White mountaineers occupied a central role in her efforts; it had come, after all, to stand in for “American” folk music. Lunsford himself brought a contingent of square dancers to participate in Knott's inaugural event, and he also facilitated some of the regional festivals that were established for the purpose of selecting the finest representatives of each tradition. The artists' participation had to be subsidized by local arts councils or business leaders; like Lunsford, Knott did not pay performers. Although the regional festivals were not staged as competitions, the fact that only a few local artists would be invited to participate in the National Folk Festival led participants to carefully curate their presentations. The incentive of a national stage encouraged hopefuls to revive forgotten songs and purge popular influence from their performance styles. As a result, Knott and her collaborators—like Lunsford—changed the practices of folk musicians just as they sought to preserve them.^[25]

Knott incorporated diverse performers and traditions into her festival from the start. Indeed, the Black novelist **Zora Neale Hurston** was one of her first collaborators, participating in the 1934 festival and later serving on the festival board, while the inaugural event opened with music and dance by members of the **Kiowa** tribe of Oklahoma.^[26] The same cannot be said of the decade's other prominent folk festival, the **White Top Festival**, which took place annually in Grayson County, Virginia, from 1931 until 1939. Although it lacked the staying power of Lunsford and Knott's festivals, both of which persist into the present day, the White Top Festival was significant and influential while it lasted. It also embodied a darker side of the 1930s-era folk revival.

The White Top Festival began as little more than a fiddlers' contest, although the organizers had loftier aims for their endeavor. All three of the festival's architects belonged to the social elite: John Blakemore, who first fielded the idea for a contest, was an attorney; Annabel Morris Buchanan,

who did most of the organizational work, was a clubwoman who had long been interested in traditional music; and John Powell was a respected classical composer. From the start, they strictly limited the repertoires and styles that would be allowed into White Top. They favored solo performers over string bands, welcomed the dulcimer, barred popular compositions, and tried to eliminate all traces of the influence of hillbilly records and radio. Over the years, the organizers were successful at encouraging the music they approved of to proliferate, and when academic folklorists gathered at the 1934 festival they were able to congratulate one another on their efforts to preserve mountain culture.[27]

Although White Top was successful from the start, a visit by Eleanor Roosevelt in 1933 really put the festival on the map. Rumors of her appearance attracted the national press and swelled the crowds from 3,000 to as many as 20,000. Eleanor Roosevelt's decision to attend should come as no surprise: Her husband, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, had just been elected President, and it was fitting for her to take an interest in the cultural practices that were believed to represent working-class Americans.[28] Roosevelt's presence put the stamp of approval on White Top, and the festival continued to expand its offerings in the coming years, adding programs of **shape-note singing**, of hymns and **sword**, and of **Morris dancing**. The latter is particularly fascinating, as these archaic English dance forms had no history in Appalachia whatsoever. They had been introduced by Cecil Sharp to students at the Hindman Settlement School and had then quickly spread to other settlement and folk schools. Sword and Morris dances were regarded as companions to the ballad—the dance equivalent to the music so highly valued by collectors.[29]

The introduction of archaic English dance into the White Top program, however, was of great symbolic significance. It represented the organizers' commitment to an explicitly **Anglo-Saxon** strain of Appalachian music. It also brought the omission of all other cultures and traditions into stark relief, for White Top explicitly barred the participation of Black musicians. This exclusion was due to the influence of **John Powell**, who was a committed segregationist and anti-miscegenation activist. In 1924, Powell had helped to design Virginia's **Racial Integrity Act**, which defined "White" and "colored" races and prohibited any "mixing." The Act established that a single drop of "colored" blood meant that an individual was legally "colored" and therefore subject to **Jim Crow** segregation ordinances.

[30] When Powell barred Black musicians and their traditions from White Top, he likewise sought to prevent mixing. His aim was to preserve the so-called purity of what he believed to be superior White culture.

Unfortunately, Powell was not the only prominent cultural organizer to deploy Appalachian music and dance for the purpose of upholding White supremacy. Although White Top collapsed in the second half of the decade due to a combination of bad weather and interpersonal strains, the mission to promote Anglo-Saxon folk culture as an antidote to Black influence was being carried out on other fronts. The most famous advocate of Appalachian culture to oppose racial mixing was most certainly **Henry Ford**, who in 1923 embarked on a well-funded campaign to promote old-time music and dance that would end only with his death in 1947. In the early 1920s, Ford established himself as the leading American anti-**Jewish** fear-monger by publishing a series of overtly **antisemitic** articles in the *Dearborn Independent*, a Michigan newspaper that he had recently purchased.[31] He used the same newspaper to trumpet the virtues of the fiddle, banjo, and square dance, and he explicitly framed his **revivalist** efforts as an offensive against the onslaught of Black music and dance (namely, jazz). Ford had widespread influence: In addition to funding recordings and radio broadcasts, he inspired a surge of new fiddle contests and was largely responsible for the incorporation of square dancing into school curricula. [32] His contributions to the folk revival, however, were driven by the belief that Appalachian culture—viewed narrowly—was a powerful tool for upholding White supremacy.

The Urban Folk Revival

The ideologies of Powell and Ford are particularly fascinating in the light of the urban **folk revival**, which commenced in the 1930s and gained national momentum in the 1950s and 1960s, eventually exerting a significant influence on mainstream popular music. Although all of the activities described in the previous section constituted “revivals,” they were largely confined to the South and centered in rural communities. During the **Great Depression**, however, urban youth with left-wing political leanings became increasingly fascinated with folk music in general and Appalachian music in particular. They viewed it as the music of the working class and believed that it was the ideal vehicle for radical political messages. Although they were

often frustrated by the real-life politics of the musicians they revered, urban folk revivalists were successful in cultivating widespread interest in Appalachian music among well-educated, White, middle-class Northerners. These revivalists not only listened to recordings but adopted Appalachian musical practices as their own, playing fiddle and banjo in traditional mountain styles, singing ballads and songs as the mountaineers did, and mastering the steps of the flatfoot and buck dances.

Urban folk revivalists took a broader view of Appalachian music than those who had come before them, embracing artists and repertoire that had been rejected by the ballad collectors and festival organizers. For example, some of the first Appalachian musicians to become celebrities in folk music circles were the coal miners whose political songs had fueled the labor struggle in Harlan County, Kentucky. After participating in the so-called **Harlan County War** of 1931 and 1932, **Aunt Molly Jackson**, **Jim Garland**, and **Sara Ogan Gunning** all relocated to New York City, where they were active as performers and organizers.^[33] Along with **Florence Reese**, who remained in Kentucky, these musicians wrote new verses to traditional melodies in order to inspire members of the coal miners' unions to action.^[34] Their songs concerned the harsh conditions of life in the mining camps—a far cry from the nostalgic ballads first sought by Sharp.

The singers from Harlan County—especially Aunt Molly Jackson—had a significant impact on two young revivalists who would go on to shape the movement in the mid-20th century: folklorist **Alan Lomax** (1915-2002), who recorded the bulk of Jackson's repertoire when he was only nineteen, and folk musician **Pete Seeger** (1919-2014), who met Jackson as a fifteen-year-old and transcribed many of her songs. It is worth considering the contributions of these two men in considerable detail, for they were representative of the activities and interests of urban folk revivalists as a whole.

Both **men** came to the study and performance of American folk music through their parents. Alan Lomax was the son of John Lomax (1867-1948), who had studied at Harvard under the ballad expert George Lyman Kittredge (himself a disciple of Francis James Child). Although John Lomax's initial interest was in **cowboy songs** of the Western frontier, his fascination with American folk culture quickly broadened. In 1933, he and his son embarked on the first of many tours through the rural South for the purpose of making sound recordings. Unlike the collectors who had come before, the Lomaxes

were expressly interested in documenting Black music, which they primarily sought among the incarcerated. Also novel was their commitment to recorded media. While early ballad hunters had prized the text and perhaps tune of a song as the authentic musical object, the Lomaxes believed that folk authenticity resided just as much in performance style, and their recordings preserved both songs and the unique ways in which they were rendered. In this way, the Lomaxes' work served to move attention from artifacts (ballads, fiddle tunes) to individual musicians, who were revealed to be more than mere vessels for the preservation of culture. This shift was a significant change in thinking that would characterize the activities and values of the folk revivalists for decades to come. Alan Lomax would go on to become the most influential American folklorist of the 20th century, making countless recordings of Appalachian musicians on behalf of the Archive of Folk Song of the Library of Congress and popularizing Appalachian tunes and styles by means of live performances, recordings, books, radio broadcasts, and documentaries.^[35]

Pete Seeger would likewise embrace a broad range of American folk styles, although much of his work was rooted in the Appalachians. His father, Charles Seeger (1886-1979), was a music scholar, while his step-mother, Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953), was a leading American composer. During the 1930s, both were employed by the U.S. Government to work on behalf of music projects funded by the New Deal, and much of their work concerned the collecting and study of folk music. Pete Seeger, who was profoundly influenced by his parents' interests, is remembered primarily as an activist and performer. However, he did a great deal to promote and shape engagement with Appalachian music. In 1948 he published the popular instruction manual *How to Play the Five-String Banjo*, which inspired generations of folk revivalists to pick up the instrument and master authentic Appalachian playing styles. At the same time, Seeger made his own changes to the banjo, extending the neck in order to accommodate a greater range of musical material. Seeger was also associated with the **Highlander Folk School** of Tennessee, where he deployed folk music in support of the burgeoning **Civil Rights Movement**. And in the mid-1960s he featured Appalachian musicians—including guitar player **Doc Watson**, banjo player **Roscoe Holcomb**, and dulcimer player **Jean Ritchie**—on his television program *Rainbow Quest*.^[36]

It was Pete Seeger's half-brother **Mike Seeger** (1933-2009), however, who would set the standard for revivalist engagement with Appalachian music. In 1958, Mike Seeger joined with fellow New Yorkers John Cohen and Tom Paley (later replaced by Tracy Schwartz) to form the **New Lost City Ramblers**, a string band dedicated to the preservation of authentic playing styles. Seeger and his friends would study old recordings of Appalachian musicians, seeking to imitate the details of their singing and playing.^[37] Significantly, they embraced the hillbilly records of the 1920s, accepting them alongside field recordings as authentic folk documents.^[38] The Ramblers spent a great deal of time rummaging through record bins and visiting the collections at the Library of Congress long before recordings of Appalachian music were widely available. A generation later, the first major commercial collection to include historical recordings of Appalachian music, the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, was released by Harry Smith on Folkways Records in 1952.

Soon, however, the Ramblers became discontent with mere recordings and set out to find the artists who had made them, with other revivalists following close on their heels. This turn led to the “rediscovery” of a host of rural musicians who had first been recorded in the 1920s, many of whom were presented with new opportunities to make recordings, undertake concert tours, and appear at folk festivals.^[39] In some cases, folk revivalists encouraged old musicians to pick up long-forgotten instruments, or even revert to more traditional styles. The folklorist Ralph Rinzler, for example, convinced Doc Watson to give up rock 'n' roll and return to the acoustic repertoire he had played with Clarence Ashley decades earlier. The switch paid off for Watson, who became a folk music star.^[40] Other Appalachian musicians were discovered for the first time—most notably the fiddler Tommy Jarrell of Surry County, North Carolina, who had worked as a road grader for 41 years and never considered music as a viable career.^[41]

The New Lost City Ramblers did not just sell records and concert tickets. They inspired countless Americans to pick up Appalachian instruments and seek to master traditional repertoires and playing styles. This legacy resonates into the present day. The Ramblers' efforts, however, have done more than sustain participatory engagement with Appalachian music. As well-educated, White, liberal Northerners, the Ramblers naturally inspired imitators who were essentially like them—a partial explanation for why even today the community of old-time music revivalists is for the most part

racially homogenous and dominated by liberal politics. Similarly, their obsession with authenticity—direct contact with tradition-bearers, careful imitation of historical models, and reverence for tradition—has set the standard for 21st century revivalists.

Conclusion

Appalachian music is a story of increasing inclusion. While early ballad hunters ignored instrumental music, record executives eagerly sought out fiddlers and string bands. Although festival organizers excluded newly-composed songs, Appalachian songwriters had a formative influence on the early folk revival. And while collectors of all types neglected Black musical traditions for many years, those traditions were finally documented by the mid-century folk revivalists.

All the same, “Appalachian music” as a public concept is still narrowly bound and governed by long-standing stereotypes. Whole genres of music—especially Black genres, such as blues, jazz, soul, and R&B, as well as Indigenous musical practices—have been largely excluded from the mainstream narrative.^[42] Relatedly, Black participation in the genres that *are* included has long been erased, although there is reason to hope that these injustices are being rectified. Recent decades have seen a proliferation of scholarship on influential Black musicians, including studies of guitar player Arnold Shultz and fiddler William “Bill” Livers.^[43] Likewise, the origins of the banjo in West Africa are now thoroughly documented.^[44] And although not everyone reads scholarly books, many are learning from the Black fiddlers and banjo players—including **Rhiannon Giddens**, **Earl White**, and **Jake Blount**—who have dedicated their careers to elucidating the histories of Black Appalachian music.^[45]

The historical exclusion of marginalized musicians and practices, however, is not the only challenge in defining an inclusive and fully representative “Appalachian music.” It is all too common to locate “Appalachian music”—indeed, Appalachia as a whole—in the past, and to identify Appalachian-ness as being a historical condition. To do so, however, is to ignore the people who live in the region today and to deny the Appalachian identity of their traditions. For example, immigration from Latin America has reshaped Appalachian demographics in recent years, introducing a range of new musical practices. When will these join the

ballads and fiddle tunes of Scots-Irish immigrants as representatives of “Appalachian music”? Performers and scholars are already at work establishing the Appalachian identity of music with **Latine** roots.

[46] However, there are many other contemporary musical practices—especially those that might be denigrated as “popular” or “mainstream”—that have yet to be admitted to the “Appalachian music” canon.

Modern institutions reinforce received ideas about what constitutes “Appalachian music.” These include tourism bureaus, historical centers, music camps, music festivals—yes, even Appalachian Studies courses and textbooks. Every year, visitors to Appalachia drop in to the **Ralph Stanley** Museum in Clintwood, Virginia, take banjo classes at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, and attend the **Appalachian String Band Festival** in Clifftop, West Virginia.[47] None of these institutions presents an inaccurate version of “Appalachian music,” but each is incomplete, and each has been informed by the history outlined in this chapter. How might we reshape our notions of “Appalachian music” to include the musical activities of *all* Appalachians, past and present?

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- [1] Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 30.
- [2] Ibid, 34.
- [3] Wilson, "William Goodell Frost."
- [4] Frost, "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains."
- [5] Morgan-Ellis, *Resonances*, 144.
- [6] Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine*, 112.
- [7] Ibid, 54.
- [8] Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 16.
- [9] Stoddart, *Challenge and Change in Appalachia*, 87.
- [10] Campbell and Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, iv.
- [11] Ibid, ix-xi.
- [12] Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 27.
- [13] Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 201.
- [14] Campbell, *Music and the Making of a New South*, 128.
- [15] Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 192.
- [16] Cohen, "The Skillet Lickers," 242.
- [17] For a complete account of recorded Black string band musicians, see Huber, "Black Hillbillies."
- [18] Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 41.
- [19] Lightfoot, "The Three Doc(k)s," 186.
- [20] Horton, "Lunsford, Bascom Lamar."
- [21] Whisnant, "Finding the Way Between the Old and the New," 136.
- [22] Ibid, 138-39.
- [23] Jones, *Minstrel of the Appalachians*, 71-73.
- [24] Whisnant, "Finding the Way Between the Old and the New," 144.
- [25] Williams, *Staging Tradition*, 23-26.
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- [28] Ibid, 191-93.
- [29] Ibid, 199-201.
- [30] Morgan-Ellis, *Resonances*, 240.
- [31] La Chapelle, *I'd Fight the World*, 55.
- [32] Ibid, 30.
- [33] Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 89, 130.
- [34] Morgan-Ellis, *Resonances*, 369-72.
- [35] Library of Congress, "Alan Lomax Biography."
- [36] Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, "A Tribute to Pete Seeger."
- [37] Jones, "Finding the Avant-Garde in the Old-Time," 409.

[38] Allen, "In Pursuit of Authenticity," 292.

[39] Ibid, 295.

[40] Lightfoot, "The Three Doc(k)s," 186-87.

[41] Morgan-Ellis, *Resonances*, 455.

[42] In 2003, an entire issue of the *Black Music Research Journal* was dedicated to "Affrilachian Music," or the music of Black Appalachians. Individual articles in the issue sought to undertake or make way for serious research on Affrilachian musical practices. See, for example, Pearson, "Appalachian Blues"; Wright and Higby, "Appalachian Jazz"; Zolten, "Movin' the Mountains"; Davenport, "A Candle for Queen Ida"; and Hay, "Music Box Meets the Toccoa Band."

[43] Lightfoot, "A Regional Musical Style"; Brady, "Contested Origins"; Keith, "Fiddling with Race Relations in Rural Kentucky."

[44] Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*; Winans, *Banjo Roots and Branches*.

[45] Mack, "She's a Country Girl Alright," 145.

[46] Enriquez, "'Penned Against the Wall.'"

[47] Chaney, "Straightening the Crooked Road," 388.

Fiddle and Banjo Music of Southern Appalachia

Esther Morgan-Ellis

The pairing of fiddle and banjo is at the heart of the Appalachian instrumental music tradition (see Figure 1). Although the two instruments are often played together, their histories could not be more different: the fiddle is a **European** instrument, brought to the United States primarily by **British** immigrants, while the banjo was developed by enslaved **Africans** who adapted their indigenous lutes to the New World. It was also musicians of African descent who first paired the fiddle and banjo, and their approaches to playing each have defined the sound of Appalachian music. However, there are as many styles of fiddle and banjo playing as there are individual musicians, each of whom develops a unique approach to music-making that is shaped by their own particular contexts.

Fiddle and banjo player Samantha Bumgarner, for example, took advantage of the burgeoning “**hillbilly**” record industry to become the first woman to make a commercial recording of traditional Appalachian music; her style reflects her experience as a dance musician and caller in her North Carolina community. Gribble, Lusk, and York, a Black string band from Tennessee, maintained separate repertoires for Black and White audiences, changing their style as necessary to please listeners and dancers. Manco Sneed, a Cherokee fiddler who lived on tribal lands in North Carolina, developed an unusually intricate solo style as a result of his isolation from other musicians. Finally, Clyde Davenport, a Kentucky fiddler and banjo player who built instruments, set out to imitate the smooth playing of his favorite local fiddler, which he applied to a repertoire inherited from his father and grandfather. Davenport attracted the attention of folk revivalists in the final decades of the 20th century, passing his technique and tunes onto a younger generation of players from outside Appalachia. As a result of the recordings they left behind, however, each of these musicians has become influential, and their tunes and styles are widely circulated among players today.

The Instruments

Fiddle

In terms of construction, the **fiddle** and the **violin** are the same instrument. The body is constructed out of carved wood, and modern strings are usually steel although before the 19th century they were made out of dried animal intestines. The bow is strung with horsehair. The violin was developed in 16th century Europe although today it is used all over the world to make many different types of music. Fiddlers at first brought European instruments into Appalachia, but soon they were building their own fiddles, either according to the same body plan or with modifications to make the job easier. Fiddles were sometimes constructed out of gourds and even cornstalks. [\[1\]](#)

The real differences between the fiddle and the violin lie in the ways that the instrument is used. The strings on a violin are always tuned to the same four pitches; fiddlers, however, adjust the tuning of their strings according to the **scale** (set of pitches) in which they are playing. This adaptation allows the player to use open strings frequently, which can have many advantages. Open strings resonate well, meaning that they can greatly increase the volume of the instrument. They can be played at the same time as the melody notes. By playing more than one string or frequently striking adjacent strings, a fiddler can add rhythmic interest to their playing. [\[2\]](#)

The left-hand techniques used by fiddlers are generally simple. Unlike violinists, fiddlers will usually keep their hand in one position and play melodies using notes that their fingers can reach; a violinist will move their hand to other positions to extend their range. For most fiddlers, however, rhythm is more important than melody. Rhythm comes from the right hand, which controls the bow, and the bowing techniques of fiddlers can be very complex. The bow must frequently change direction as the fiddler plays, and the patterns of these direction changes—which can be infinitely varied—have a significant impact on the sound of the tune. Some fiddlers will change bow direction for every note, a technique known as “sawing.” “Long-bow” fiddlers will string many notes together without changing bow direction. Some fiddlers will change bow direction on strong beats in the tune, emphasizing the natural rhythm, while others will change bow direction between beats, which can produce a feeling of great rhythmic excitement.

This **syncopated** style reflects the influence of **Black** fiddlers, and similar rhythms can be heard in ragtime and jazz. Finally, fiddlers also use different parts of the bow (the tip, the middle, or the whole length) and hold it in a wide variety of ways. Each of these elements contributes to the unique sound of a given fiddler.^[3]

The influence of Black musicians and musical traditions on Appalachian fiddling cannot be overstated. The origins of Black fiddling can be traced all the way back to West Africa, where musicians play various indigenous fiddles.^[4] In the United States, enslaved **Africans** had adopted the violin by the 1690s, applying their inherited techniques and aesthetic preferences to the interpretation of European tunes. Enslaved musicians played an important role in antebellum American life, providing music for dances and social occasions.^[5]

The image pictures a Black fiddler providing accompaniment for White dancers. The room is very crowded with happy guests watching four men and women dance in the center of the room.



Figure 1. William Sydney Mount's *Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride* (1830) depicts a Black fiddler providing accompaniment for White dancers. In this era, most dance musicians were Black. Newspaper records from the 18th century reveal that enslaved fiddlers not only acquired a high degree of skill but also frequently read music, crafted instruments, and taught others.^[6]

Although Appalachian fiddle tunes tend to reflect the musical heritage of **Scots-Irish** immigrants, the style in which they are played often owes a

greater debt to Black traditions.^[7] This cultural blending is due to the unique conditions under which 19th century mountaineers lived their lives. The concentration of Black people in Appalachia between 1820 and 1860, when they constituted about 17.5% of the population, was much higher than after the **Civil War**. Black and White Appalachians worked side by side, socialized, and engaged in cultural exchange.^[8] There are also many individual accounts of **White** mountaineers acquiring instruments, techniques, and tunes from their Black neighbors.^[9]

The **banjo** traces its roots to West Africa, where a variety of related **spikdutes** are built and played by Indigenous musicians into the present day. (a spike lute is a stringed instrument in which the neck penetrates or even runs straight through the body). The banjo has no single ancestor—indeed, banjo player and scholar Shlomo Pestcoe has recently documented eighty distinct West African spike lutes, and there are likely to be even more awaiting description.^[10] However, it is most frequently compared to the West African akonting, which bears an obvious relationship to the banjo.



Figure 2. This akonting player was photographed in Bagaya, Senegal, very near the west coast of Africa.

The two instruments share both a general shape and the distinctive short drone string, which is played using the thumb. They also share a “downstroke” playing style—known as **frailing** or **clawhammer** among banjo players—for which the musician strikes strings with the nail of their index or middle finger in a knocking motion to play melodies.^[11] The major differences lie in the neck, which constitutes a round pole on the akonting but is flat on the banjo, and the headstock, which is absent altogether on the akonting. While the strings of the akonting are tuned using movable rings, those of the banjo are attached to pegs in a headstock, which can be turned to adjust the tension and, consequently, the pitch of each string.

Both of these characteristics—the flat fingerboard and headstock—were adapted from European lutes (such as the guitar) during the early years of the banjo’s evolution in the **Caribbean** islands, where newly enslaved Africans built instruments using local materials. They were influenced by spike lutes brought from Africa (enslavers quickly learned that permitting music onboard the ships reduced mortality rates), memories of instruments they had played at home, and the instruments that they saw around them. The result was the **gourdbanjo**, the drum-like body of which was constructed out of a hollow gourd with dried animal skin stretched across the top.^[12]

The earliest description of a banjo was recorded in the late 1680s by the **Irish** collector and naturalist Sir Hans Sloane, who spent fifteen months in **Jamaica**. There, Sloane described and sketched an instrument played by enslaved Africans that he termed a “strum stump,” and the engraving published in his 1707 volume *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica* constitutes the first known image of a banjo. Over the next century, written accounts would assign a wide variety of names to the banjo, including the “bangil” (**Barbados** and **Jamaica**), “banshaw” (**St. Kitts**), “banza” (**French Antilles**), “creole bania”

(**Suriname**), and “merry-wang” (**Jamaica**).^[13] It appears that the banjo had arrived in the United States by the early 18th century, and the earliest reference to a “banger” was made in a New York City newspaper in 1736. During this period, most enslaved laborers were imported from the Caribbean rather than West Africa, and it is evident that they brought the

banjo with them.^[14] Enslaved Africans played the banjo primarily for their own entertainment, most often pairing it not with the fiddle but with a drum or other percussion instruments.^[15]



Figure 3. This watercolor, known as *The Old Plantation*, was painted by plantation owner John Rose, probably in the 1780s. It is the earliest extant

depiction of a banjo in North America.

The banjo was strictly a Black instrument into the early 19th century. In the 1830s, however, it was introduced to theatrical audiences and musicians by Joel Walker “Joe” Sweeney (1810-1860), the first White person known to play the banjo. Sweeney was one of the originators of **Blackface minstrelsy**, a form of entertainment for which White performers assumed fictitious Black identities, complete with dark makeup and stereotypical costumes. Minstrelsy, which originated in the working-class theaters of New York City, gained traction in the 1840s and became the most popular and influential form of American entertainment for the next fifty years. Minstrel troupes ostensibly presented scenes of Black life and music to White audiences, and the banjo became an important marker of Black identity. In reality, most minstrels had no contact with Black people and drew their material from commercial popular music and folk traditions of the **British Isles**. However, these shows served to introduce the banjo into mainstream culture, making several significant changes to the instrument in the process. These included the addition of a fifth string to extend the melodic range, the substitution of a wood-rimmed body for the older gourd, and eventually the placement of **frets** on the neck.^[16] By the second half of the 19th century, banjos of this type were being mass-produced in factories and were cheaply available to amateur musicians throughout the country.^[17]

There remains controversy over the means by which White Appalachians came to play the banjo. In the 1960s **Alan Lomax** and Robert Winans believed White musicians were introduced to the instrument by touring minstrels.^[18] More recently, however, scholars have argued that this exposure was the exception, not the rule, and that most White Appalachian banjo players learned directly from Black people—both free and enslaved—who lived and worked in the mountains.^[19] Similarly, scholars argue over the reasons for which Black musicians abandoned the banjo in the early 20th century. Explanations include the widespread availability of cheap guitars, a preference among Black musicians for modern musical styles, and the distasteful association of the banjo with Blackface minstrelsy.^[20] Whatever the case, by the mid-20th century, the banjo was strictly associated with rural White Southerners—despite the fact that the instrument was developed by enslaved Africans and remained their exclusive property for the first two centuries of its existence.

The Music

Tunes in Theory

The vast repertoire of melodies used by Appalachian instrumentalists to accompany dances, entertain family, and while away leisure hours is collectively known as “fiddle tunes.” These tunes are innumerable and can be traced to many sources. Some came over from the British Isles; others originated in the United States.^[21] Some derive from commercial popular songs, some from hymns, and some from traditional songs. Many have words that can be sung or omitted. All tunes, however, exist in countless versions. This variety exists because they were (and still are) learned by ear, each musician doing their best to imitate and remember the playing of another in a process known as **oral tradition**. Tunes can change for many reasons: A fiddler might make an honest mistake, but they also might change the tune on purpose, either to suit their playing style or to make it more pleasing to their ear. Although fiddle tunes have periodically been notated, both in musicians’ private notebooks and in printed collections, there is no authoritative or “correct” version of any given tune.^[22] Instead, there is a constellation of related versions—some almost unrecognizable—that reflect the practices of individual fiddlers.

Tunes vary greatly in form and style, but there is a common formula. Most tunes have two parts, or **strains**, each of which has its own melody. Often, one strain uses the high range of the instrument and the other uses the low range. For this reason, some fiddlers call them the “fine” strain (because the high-pitched strings on the instrument are thin) and the “coarse” strain (because the low-pitched strings are thick), although they are typically termed the A and B strains. In performance, each strain is repeated once individually, and the entire tune is repeated as many times as desired.^[23] In most tunes, each strain is the same length, containing an even number of rhythmic pulses, or **beats**. Such tunes are particularly well-suited to certain types of dancing. However, many tunes break with this formula. Some contain more than two parts or follow different repetition rules. In **crooked tunes**, one or more of the strains contains an odd number of beats. A few tunes don’t have a regular pulse at all.

Tunes in Practice

A tune can be played by a lone fiddler, a lone banjo player, the fiddle and banjo in combination, or either/both of those instruments supported by guitar, bass, mandolin, autoharp, or mountain dulcimer—in fact, any available assortment of instruments, each of which has a typical role within the **string band**. However, the combination of fiddle and banjo is the oldest known Appalachian string ensemble. The two instruments were first paired by enslaved Africans, who were using fiddle and banjo to accompany dancing by 1774.^[24] These instruments followed divergent routes into Appalachia, but they were both in widespread use by the early 19th century.

Fiddle and banjo music served two main purposes: to provide private entertainment for the musician and perhaps a few family members or friends and to accompany dancing. When playing for their own entertainment, friends might gather on a porch after work to exchange tunes, or family members might sing together to the accompaniment of fiddle or banjo. Dances usually took place in someone's home on a Saturday night. Furniture was moved out of the way, and cornmeal or oats were often sprinkled on the floor to improve the surface.^[25] Music was often supplied by a single fiddler or banjo player, who would stand in the doorway between rooms and play as loudly as possible. Indeed, the need to produce a sound that was audible over the noise of the dancers shaped the Appalachian style of playing.^[26] It was not important for a dance musician to be highly skilled or to possess a large repertoire; indeed, if a fiddler was loud and steady, they could simply play the same tune over and over for a whole night of dancing. Musicians might be paid by means of small donations from the dancers, or they might simply be provided with food and drink. Other dances were associated with communal work events, such as corn shuckings or bean stringings.^[27]

Although some fiddlers and banjo players made a good secondary income by playing for dances, few pursued music as a career. There was more money to be made in farming, mining, railroad work, and other modes of physical labor. For this reason, the class of professional musicians was essentially limited to those with a disability—most often blindness—that prevented them from taking on other work. Some were also discouraged from musical involvement by their religious convictions.^[28] Dancing was frequently condemned by church leaders, and fiddling in particular was considered sinful by its association with dancing. Many fiddlers gave up

their pastime upon committing to the religious life, burning or concealing their instruments as an act of piety.[\[29\]](#)

The Musicians

Samantha Bumgarner

Although not a professional musician, **Samantha Bumgarner** (c. 1880-1960) was one of the first White Southern banjo players to make a commercial recording. She was born in Jackson County, North Carolina, and the story of how she became involved with music is common to many Appalachian folk of her era. Her father, Has Biddix, was a fiddler, but he forbade his daughter to touch his instrument—perhaps because he did not consider fiddling to be a suitable pastime for a young lady, or perhaps simply because he didn't want her to damage a prized possession. While Has was out of the house, however, his daughter would sneak the fiddle down and practice. She figured out how to play tunes that she had heard and memorized, and soon was able to demonstrate competence on the instrument. Her father, apparently impressed by her talent and determination, permitted her to keep playing and even provided her with a homemade banjo constructed from a gourd, catskin, and waxed cotton-thread strings. When Bumgarner was fifteen years old, her father provided her with a store-bought banjo, and the two of them frequently performed together in public settings.[\[30\]](#)

Bumgarner often played with local banjo player and singer Eva Smathers Davis, and in 1924, the two of them were invited to New York City to record a handful of traditional numbers for Columbia Records—probably the result of Bumgarner's winning a banjo contest at the fiddler's convention in Canton, North Carolina. The first recording of a Southern "hillbilly" musician had been made the year before, and record companies were eager to take advantage of the new genre's commercial potential. Bumgarner and Davis were among hundreds of musicians who journeyed north and took their turn in front of the studio microphone. Although the sessions of April 22 and 23 did not launch lucrative music careers for the pair, Bumgarner and Davis are remembered as the first female country musicians to make commercial recordings.[\[31\]](#)

The duo's recording of "**Big-Eyed Rabbit**,"[\[32\]](#) made on April 22, 1924, captures Bumgarner's rhythmic, fast-paced fiddling and

straightforward singing. Bumgarner and Davis were the first to record this well-known tune, which—as is often the case—has circulated in many different versions. A related but distinct version of “Big-Eyed Rabbit” is played in the region that encompasses Surry County, North Carolina, and Galax, Virginia. Although the tunes are quite different, the essential characteristics of the melody and text are recognizable. Like so many Appalachian fiddle tunes, “[Big-Eyed Rabbit](#)” contains words that can be sung or omitted as the players prefer. Since Bumgarner and Davis were making a commercial recording, they naturally included the text, but it is easy to imagine the tune being played on instruments alone, perhaps for the purpose of accompanying dancing. Bumgarner and Davis’s version is in A B form, with A representing the lower-pitched strain and B representing the higher-pitched strain. Each strain is the same length, and they repeat the entire tune well over a dozen times. The fact that the singing starts on B and carries over to the subsequent A adds an element of circularity: B always wants to resolve to A, while A always wants to carry on to B.

At the April 23 session, Bumgarner made several solo recordings in which she played banjo and either sang or called out square-dance figures. Her “[Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss](#)”^[33] is an example of the latter and would have been used to facilitate dancing when live musicians were not available. “Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss” is another well-known North Carolina tune, and again Bumgarner holds the honor as the first to record it. Like “Big-Eyed Rabbit,” “[Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss](#)” contains many sung verses that can be included in a performance, as heard in a 1973 recording made by banjo player Olla Belle Reed of Ashe County, North Carolina.^[34] Because Bumgarner was recording dance music, however, she abandoned the text and concentrated on providing a driving, rock-steady banjo rhythm, calling out the figures over her own playing.

Bumgarner and Davis’s records sold respectably, but seemingly not well enough to merit a second invitation to the studios. However, Bumgarner went on to become a fixture at the first Appalachian music festival, organized by **Bascom Lamar Lunsford** in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1928. She participated in every **Mountain Dance and Folk Festival** until 1959, often appearing with Fiddlin’ Bill Hensley and taking prizes in the clogging competition. During the 1930s, she had her own program on John Brinkley’s famous “border” radio station, which broadcast at a high wattage from Del Rio, Texas, and in 1939, she joined a group of musicians and dancers who

performed at the White House for **Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt**, King George VI, and Queen Elizabeth.^[35] As a result of her diverse activities, Bumgarner did a great deal to popularize Appalachian music-making. Perhaps most significantly, she introduced **Pete Seeger** to the five-string banjo when he visited Lunsford's festival in 1936. Seeger was so entranced by the instrument that he set about learning to play it himself, later publishing a how-to manual and turning a whole generation of urban Americans on to the banjo.^[36]

Female banjo players might seem out of the ordinary, but a close look at the historical record reveals that they were far from scarce. A large number of male musicians who would go on to pursue performance careers reported learning how to play the banjo from mothers, aunts, older sisters, and female community members. However, folklorists—when they sought to document female instrumentalists at all—often found that **women** were unwilling to play for them, instead deferring to the male musicians in the household. As a result, female banjo players have largely disappeared from the record, and many of their stories still wait to be told.^[37]

Gribble, Lusk, and York

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Black string band of **Gribble, Lusk, and York** was widely regarded to be the best dance band in south central Tennessee. The trio maintained two separate repertoires: what they called “that old stuff,” which consisted of traditional fiddle tunes suitable for White square dances, and “**sukey jumps**,” which were blues-infused tunes for social occasions in the Black community.^[38] Whether playing at a public dance or on a street corner, fiddler John Lusk (1886-1969), banjo player Murphy Gribble (c. 1888-1950), and guitarist Albert York (c. 1887-1953) confined themselves strictly to “that old stuff,” which is also the repertoire that was recorded by folk revivalists in the last years of the band's career. However, they left a few clues as to what their sukey jumps would have sounded like.

Gribble, Lusk, and York were the grandsons of Jeff Lusk, an enslaved fiddler born around 1820. Jeff Lusk was the property of Scots-Irish landowner William Lusk and, as was often the custom, took his surname for himself and his children. In the 1840s, Jeff Lusk was sent to New Orleans to receive training on his instrument—a common practice and worthwhile

investment on the part of the enslaver, given the important role that enslaved fiddlers played as dance musicians.^[39] John Lusk and Albert York were the children of Jeff Lusk's son Joe (Albert took his name from the neighboring White slave owner Uriah York). Murphy Gribble was the son of John's daughter Mary Mollie but also the grandson of White slave owner John Gribble, from whom he took his name.^[40] All members of the Lusk family, including the girls, played instruments—usually more than one. The members of Gribble, Lusk, and York were all multi-instrumentalists: John Lusk played fiddle, banjo, and guitar; Murphy Gribble played fiddle and banjo; and Albert York played guitar and banjo.^[41]

Although they pursued music professionally, Gribble, Lusk, and York derived the bulk of their income from farming. According to census records, both John Lusk and Albert York were sharecroppers, living in small tenant cabins on White-owned land, while Murphy Gribble was a landowner.

^[42] However, oppressive economic structures made it difficult for small-scale farmers to survive, and it is not surprising that the trio would have taken every opportunity to earn extra money. Despite their local popularity, the band never recorded professionally. As Black participants in the Appalachian string band tradition, they would have been overlooked by commercial field agents in the 1920s and generally excluded from radio broadcast opportunities in the 1930s. However, they were finally recorded by Margot Mayo and Stuart Jamieson for the Library of Congress in 1946, just four years before Gribble's death, and in 1964, folklorist Ralph Rinzler recorded John Lusk playing with his son Duncan. For this reason, a valuable recording exists of the 20th century Black string band tradition—a tradition that, while centuries old, had gone into decline as Black musicians turned to other genres of music-making.

One of the tunes captured by Mayo and Jamieson in 1946 was “**Altamont**,” a typical square-dance number that seems to derive from the Black string band tradition. When Jamieson recorded the band for a second time in 1949, he captured the fiddle and banjo parts independently, offering an interesting glimpse into the various components of the string band texture. Although today this tune is played by musicians throughout Appalachia, Gribble, Lusk, and York were the first to record it. The tune is named after the town of Altamont, which rests on the Cumberland Plateau near the Kentucky-Tennessee border. Like so many tunes used for dancing,

“Altamont” has two sections of equal length, each of which is repeated in performance. The A strain is in a high range, played on the upper strings of the fiddle, while the B strain is in a low range. In the Mayo and Jamieson recording, the band carries on repeating these two strains for over four minutes—probably a habit, given that they would have played the tune even longer when accompanying dancers. The fact that “Altamont” is indistinguishable from square-dance tunes collected from White performers suggests that the distinction between musicians of different races is largely artificial. The heritage of square dancing has deep roots in the Black community, and “Altamont” might have first been played for Black dancers.[\[43\]](#)

By the 1940s, however, Black dancers were mostly interested in more modern-sounding music. During his 1949 session, Jamieson captured a performance of “**Easy Rider**,” a tune representative of the sukey jump type that Gribble, Lusk, and York would have played at Black celebrations. Rinzler’s 1964 recording of Lusk and his son is of much higher quality than Jamieson’s, showing how “Easy Rider” can be distinguished from “Altamont” on several fronts. The Rinzler recording uses a circle-of-fifths harmonic progression that is typical of ragtime but unheard of in traditional square-dance music. It also features uneven, swinging rhythms in the fiddle—another Black musical characteristic. Finally, it has only one strain, which Lusk repeats many times with minor variations. It is easy to imagine that this type of music accompanies quite a different type of dancing than does “Altamont.”

Manco Sneed

Every Appalachian fiddler has a unique style, but some are especially distinctive. Such is the case with **Manco Sneed** (1885-1974), a fiddler and banjo player from Jackson County, North Carolina. While most Appalachian musicians practiced their art within a community, Sneed found himself isolated at an early age, with few opportunities to collaborate with other musicians or even to play for dances. The result was that he developed an unusual, highly intricate style that has no immediate comparison.

Sneed’s father, John, was the son of an English trader and a **Cherokee** woman. John was also an expert fiddler, and he cultivated a love of music in all of his children. When Sneed was twelve, his family moved west to Graham County, North Carolina, where he encountered the fiddler J. D.

(Dedrick) Harris, who originally came from Flag Pond, Tennessee, and had a noteworthy career as a contest winner and recording artist. The two played together constantly, with Sneed backing Harris on the banjo. Sneed later reported that he had acquired nearly a quarter of his vast repertoire from Harris. As a teenager, Sneed also had the opportunity to play with several other fiddlers of considerable renown, and it seems likely that he would have found opportunities as a dance musician and “hillbilly” artist in his own right.

However, when Sneed was eighteen years old, his father moved the entire family to the Qualla Boundary of **Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians’ lands** of the **Great Smoky Mountains**. Sneed found no musicians with similar interests in his new community and was seldom called upon to play for dances. Instead, he took to fiddling for his own entertainment, elaborating on the tunes he had learned as a youth to create complex solo meditations. It was reported that, at the height of his talent, Sneed could play for hours without repeating a tune. Unfortunately, his playing was not recorded until he was in his seventies and was discovered by the revivalist community, at which point his skill and memory had both diminished. In 1959, folklorist Peter Hoover recorded twelve of Sneed’s tunes, and others captured a few more. These recordings, however, provide a mere echo of what must have been some of the most extraordinary fiddling ever to sound in Appalachia. [\[44\]](#)

Sneed’s playing captivated a generation of revivalist fiddlers, as Tennessee fiddler Joseph Decosimo aptly describes: “His playing is filled with nuance. Bowed triplets, an ornament heard on field recordings of an older generation of Appalachian fiddlers, adorn his playing. His fingers elaborate captivating melodies with intricately tangled cascades of notes. The location and pitch of his notes shift in confounding, powerful ways. There are bad notes and offness in his playing that make it supremely appealing to a handful of contemporary players.”[\[45\]](#) All of these characteristics are on display in “[Snowbird](#),”[\[46\]](#) a tune attributed to Cherokee fiddler Junaluska and named for a Cherokee community in western North Carolina.[\[47\]](#) This crooked tune is decidedly inappropriate for dancing: The A and B strains have different numbers of beats, and neither contains the typical phrasing of a square-dance tune.

Clyde Davenport (1921-2020) was born in Wayne County, south-central Kentucky. Like so many other Appalachian musicians, he attended to his own musical education. At the age of nine, he built a fiddle out of boards taken from a barn, stringing his bow with hair from the family mule. Within hours, he was able to imitate tunes that he had heard his father play. He later built his own banjo out of a wagon wheel and groundhog hide and learned to play that instrument as well. Davenport would build instruments throughout his life, making a career out of fiddle construction and repair, although his primary income came from manual labor in an automotive factory and farming.^[48]

Davenport was revered as a repository of very old tunes—some 200 of them—which he had learned from his father, grandfather, and members of the community. Much of his father’s repertoire in turn came from a fiddler named Will Phipps, who was born in 1829 (and, according to local legend, was buried with his fiddle).^[49] Although Davenport’s repertoire was passed down to him through generations, he derived his style from Kentucky fiddler Leonard Rutherford, whose smooth playing he revered: “It was just like [his bow] was greased. There wasn’t a scratch or a noise of no kind. Just clear as a bell.”^[50] As a White teenager, Davenport played for dances every Saturday night, usually with one of his brothers backing him on the banjo. Later he booked a daily appearance on a radio program in Muncie, Indiana, but he never pursued a career as a professional musician, and he also never competed in fiddling contests.^[51] In fact, he gave up music altogether at the age of thirty-five and did not play again for nearly twenty years.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, a string of folk revivalists visited Davenport in order to learn and record his tunes, and in 1992, he was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship. One of Davenport’s best-loved tunes is “[Five Miles From Town](#),”^[52] which he learned from his father. “Five Miles From Town” is a crooked tune with two strains of unusual and unequal length. Davenport plays with a fluidity that is seldom heard from Appalachian fiddlers, connecting one note to the next with little interruption.

Conclusion

Instrumental banjo and fiddle music in Appalachia takes a lifetime to explore. Indeed, one cannot fully understand fiddle and banjo music without becoming involved as a practitioner. Learning to play the fiddle enables an understanding of syncopated bowing patterns on a physical and gestural level to feel them instead of just to hear them. Acquiring some clawhammer technique reveals the strengths and limitations of the instrument, which determines its unique role in the banjo-fiddle partnership. After all, none of this music is intended for just listening. Dancing changes the way that the musician feels the rhythms of this music. It survived from generation to generation as a participatory practice that shaped and punctuated daily life.

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Unaccompanied Singing Traditions of Southern Appalachia

Esther Morgan-Ellis

Unaccompanied singing is characteristic of remote communities. Because it does not require instruments, which are often expensive, fragile, and difficult to construct, it can be practiced by those of extremely limited means. Three unaccompanied singing traditions of Southern Appalachia have attracted considerable interest over the past century: **ballad singing**, lined-out hymnody, and shape-note singing. On the surface, they have little in common. Ballad singing is practiced by an individual, while both lined-out hymnody and shape-note singing require a roomful of people. Ballads describe horrific crimes and tragic love affairs, while hymns and shape-note texts reflect Christian beliefs. Both ballads and lined-out hymnody consist of a single melody, while shape-note songs are harmonized in three or four parts. And finally, ballads and lined-out hymnody are passed primarily through oral tradition, while shape-note songs are learned from printed tunebooks.

Despite these basic differences, the three traditions have more in common than it may seem. To begin with, the binaries listed above are not so clear-cut: **Ballads** can serve as religious allegories, for example, while **oral tradition** is central to shape-note practice. The similarities extend further. Many shape-note melodies are taken from secular songs, while ballad singers sometimes retext hymn melodies. This genre-crossing is possible because the melodies, whatever their source, have similar musical characteristics. Singers in all three traditions employ related means of **vocal production**, often favoring loud volumes, straight tone, and minimal expression; indeed, the same individual is likely to sing ballads one day and shape-note songs the next. Singers might also make use of the same **ornaments**—added slides or pitches that decorate important melody notes. All three traditions feature **strophic** song forms, in which many verses are sung to the same melody. And all three traditions, while important to Appalachian life and community, originated outside of the region.

Ballad Singing

The word *ballad* has meant many things in different eras. In the 21st century, it connotes a slow, expressive song on a romantic topic. In the medieval era, a ballad was a dance song. In modern musical traditions, however, a ballad is a strophic song that tells a story. This definition describes **European** (and later American) ballads that have been in circulation since at least the 15th century and that are common in **Southern Appalachia** into the present day. The stories told by ballads can be historical, allegorical, or mythological in nature.

Ballads were brought to Appalachia by immigrants who fled economic depression in the Ulster province of **Ireland**, journeying to the colonies in great numbers between 1730 and 1775.^[1] Known as the **Scots-Irish**, these immigrants were largely impoverished, and many secured passage to the New World as indentured servants. After working off their debt on the plantations of Pennsylvania, they headed into **Southern Appalachia** in search of affordable land.^[2] Historians and folklorists have made much of the persistence of Scots-Irish culture in the **Appalachian Mountains**, turning their attention to stories, crafts, and speech patterns. It was the ballad, however, that attracted droves of collectors to the mountains in the first two decades of the 20th century. As such, it became the first Appalachian musical practice to attract the attention of people from outside the region.

As many early collectors have noted, ballads were primarily the property of **women**, who sang them as they went about daily household tasks and cared for their children. Ballads were almost always sung without instrumental accompaniment, although they were sometimes paired with **fiddle** or **mountain dulcimer**. Although many of the ballads sung in Southern Appalachia have **British** ancestry, others are indigenous to the mountains. Older singers recorded in the mid-20th century typically employed an unemotional, speechlike style, rendering the many verses with no particular sensitivity to the meaning of the text. The stories that ballads tell are most often cautionary or sorrowful and usually concern a love affair gone wrong. Common in the repertoire are **murder ballads**, which almost always describe the death of a young girl at the hands of her deceitful lover. Some such ballads were based on crimes that actually took place, and all served to warn the young women who sang them about the dangers of premarital liaisons.

“**Pretty Polly**” is one of the better-known examples.^[3] Ballads documenting the misdeeds and comeuppances of real-life criminals were common, and many were first produced as **broadside ballads** immediately following the arrest or execution of the subject. Broadside ballads, which were common in English-speaking lands between the 16th and 19th centuries, consisted of newly composed verses printed on cheap paper that were for sale in the street. While these printed lyrics might commemorate a historical event of any type, ballads about murder proved to attract the most attention.



Figure 1. This popular ballad—later collected in the Southern Appalachians—was published as a broadside in London in 1795.

Ballads have long circulated in both print and oral traditions. It is typical for a ballad to appear in print many times throughout the course of several decades, or even centuries. However, no two print examples are likely to be the same. This variation occurs because ballads are typically learned by ear and rendered from memory. Each singer will make minor changes, either due

to forgetfulness or personal preference. When a ballad is recorded after having passed through the hands of several singers, therefore, it will

inevitably have changed in both text and melody.^[4] This process results in families of related ballads that might differ significantly in the details and even be known by different titles but which tell essentially the same story.

Perhaps the most famous of all British ballads—and one that flourished in Southern Appalachia—is “**Barbara Allen.**”

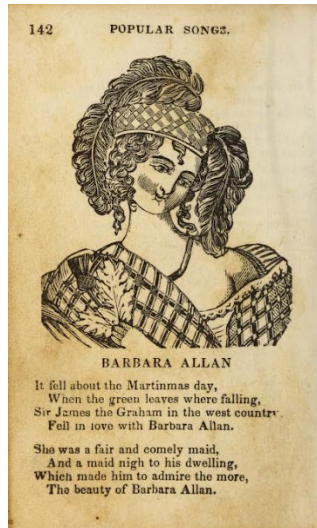


Figure 2. This version of “Barbara Allen” was included in *The Forget-Me-Not Songster*, published in New York around 1840. From *Reliques of English Poetry* by Bishop Thomas Percy, 1765.

This ballad traces its roots to mid-17th century **Scotland**, where it might have been written for a stage performance by a professional actress. “Barbara Allen” tells the story of a young woman who rejects the man who loves her but is overcome with remorse when he dies of heartbreak and quickly follows him to the tomb. In many versions, the rose and briar that grow from their respective graves combine into a lovers’ knot. Although the story told in “Barbara Allen” is sentimental on the surface, it is widely believed to be a mocking reference to the ongoing affair between English King Charles II of England and Barbara Villiers (the king and his mistress had five children out

of wedlock). The earliest account of “Barbara Allen” being sung dates to 1666, and the oldest extant broadside was printed in 1675.^[5] Over the following two centuries, “Barbara Allen” was frequently included in songbooks, printed in newspapers, and distributed in broadside form. While it also flourished in the oral tradition, many of the versions collected by folklorists can be traced back to printed sources.

When English folklorist **Cecil Sharp** visited Southern Appalachia in 1916, he collected ten versions of “Barbara Allen” from singers in Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia.^[6] Although each version has a unique melody, they are clearly related, often sharing musical phrases and an overall melodic contour. The text varies as well although the essential contents of the story remain consistent and individual lines and stanzas appear again and again. As an example, Sharp includes the stanza beginning “He turned his pale [face to the wall],” in five of the versions he collected:

Lula McCoy, Chicopee County, GA	Florence MacKinney, Habersham County, GA	Roxie Gay, Chicopee County, GA	Alfred H. Norton, Rocky Fork, TN	Ada B. Smith, Knott County, KY
He turned his pale face to the wall	He turned his pale face to the wall	He turned his pale cheeks toward the wall;	He turned his pale face to the wall,	He turned his pale face toward the wall,
And bursted out to crying.	And bursted out a-crying,	She turned her back upon him,	He burst out a- crying,	And death was in him dwelling.
She turned her back on Sweet Willie’s bed	Saying: Adieu to thee, adieu to all,	Saying: Kind sir, you’re none the better of me,	Saying: Adieu, adieu to the ladies all around,	Adieu, adieu, adieu to my dear friends.
And tipped downstairs a- smiling.	Adieu to Barbara Allen.	If your heart’s blood was a- spilling.	Farewell to Barbary Allen.	Be kind to Barbara Ellen.

Each version of the stanza is unique. Although all of the versions start with the same material, they end in two different ways: either Barbara scorns William, or William bids farewell to Barbara. It is easy to imagine how these varieties arose. The image evoked by the opening line is striking and would stick in the mind of a singer even if they forgot the exact wording.

Because Sharp did not have access to audio recording technology, he notated the melodies while his assistant, Maud Karpeles, took down the words. Later collectors would capture performances of “Barbara Allen” by

traditional ballad singers. In the mid-20th century, folklorist **Alan Lomax** recorded **Texas Gladden** (1895-1967) of Saltville, Virginia, singing her version of “[Barbara Allen](#).”^[7] Gladden—herself a ballad collector—first gained modest fame as a performer at the **White Top Festival** in the mid-1930s. She later recorded hundreds of ballads, lullabies, and stories for the Virginia Folklore Society and for Lomax.^[8] Another traditional singer, **Jean Ritchie** (1922-2015) of Perry County, Kentucky, recorded [her version](#) in 1961.^[9] Although Ritchie grew up in a rural, working-class White family, the folk revival made it possible for her to pursue a career as a performer of Appalachian music. She and her siblings sang ballads that they learned from members of their own family.^[10]

Lined-Out Hymnody

The singing practice known as **lined-out hymnody** has roots in England, where it was inaugurated in 1644 by the Westminster Assembly—a council tasked with restructuring the Church of England. The practice soon took root in colonial New England, where it persisted for over a century. Although it was largely driven out of New England by **shape-note singing** in the 18th century, it found a home in Baptist churches of Southern Appalachia, and it is still in use among Old Regular Baptists and certain Black congregations.^[11]

Lining out offered many practical advantages in the colonial era, when musical instruments were scarce (and not always welcome in church), printed hymnals were expensive, and churchgoers often lacked the ability to read music. In the practice of lining out, a **precenter** is tasked with calling out the words to each line of a hymn. He will do so rapidly, using an improvised melody that ends on the first note of the hymn tune. Then the congregation will respond by slowly singing the words to the hymn tune, which each member has previously learned by ear and memorized. Although each congregant sings the same melody, they do not sing in perfect unison. Instead, each individual singer is free to add ornaments, slides, or extra notes. The resulting texture is described as **heterophony**. This process is repeated for each line of the hymn. It is typical for only the precenter to have a hymn book, and even that will usually include text alone, without notated melodies.^[12]

In the early years of the practice, lining out was applied only to verses from the Book of Psalms, which were sung to melodies from the oral

tradition. Soon, however, singers developed a taste for more recent hymn texts, especially those by **Isaac Watts** (1674-1748). Perhaps the most influential of all hymn writers, Watts began his labor by versifying the Psalms for congregational singing but eventually authored many original hymns as well. His verses are common in both the lining-out and shape-note traditions.

[13] However, any text can, in theory, be sung using the lining-out method, and congregations adopted new poetic repertoires into the 20th century. Likewise, the melodies can come from ballads, folk songs, or other hymn traditions. In 1959, for example, folklorist Alan Lomax recorded Baptists in Blackey, Kentucky, lining out the hymn “**Ye Nations All**” to the tune of the ballad “Barbara Allen.” The singing style used in lining out is also not all that different from that of ballad singers. The most significant contrast is between the solo voice of the balladeer and the collective voice of the congregation.

In 2002, music scholar Jeff Todd Titon recorded lined-out hymnody at the Defeated Creek Old Regular Baptist Church of Linefork, Kentucky. His recordings, which exemplify the practice as it is still carried on today, offer a glimpse into the variety of texts and melodies. “**A Poor Wayfaring Stranger**,” [14] for example, might be familiar to fans of commercial country music, as it has crossed over into the secular performance repertoire. The words were first printed in an 1858 songster, although they were adapted from an even older German-language hymn that was written and published by Virginia minister Isaac Niswander in 1816 and later circulated as a broadside. The tune first appeared in the 1936 revision of *The Sacred Harp*, a tunebook that will be introduced in the next section. However, the tune originated in oral culture and had long been used at revivals—probably in combination with various texts. [15] In this one example, therefore, the singing method is fluid, enabling a song to pass back and forth between print and oral traditions and between sacred and secular performance contexts.

Titon also captured a rendition of “**Precious Memories**” [16]—a gospel song credited to Tennessean J.B.F. Wright in 1925. Although Old Regular Baptists have been stout in their rejection of recorded gospel music, that does not mean they cannot adapt songs from that tradition for their own purposes. Another interesting example is “**Amazing Grace**,” which has been recorded several times. Like “A Poor Wayfaring Stranger,” “Amazing Grace” has roots in the shape-note tradition. Although the text was written by the English curate John Newton in 1772, it was paired with the melody most people recognize

today by South Carolina shape-note composer William Walker in 1835.

[17] When folk revivalist John Cohen recorded Old Regular Baptists singing “[Amazing Grace](#)” in 1959, the tune had undergone significant transformation although it was still recognizable. [18] In 2018, however, field recorders documented quite a [different rendition](#) at Antioch Old Regular Baptist Church in Betsy Layne, Kentucky. [19] While adhering to the principles of lining out, these singers introduce harmonies—a practice that is less common but that has been documented throughout the 20th century. [20]

Shape-Note Singing

The tradition that would come to be known as shape-note singing has its roots in 18th century New England. It was developed in response to dissatisfaction with lined-out hymnody, which church music reformers considered to be drab. They yearned for a more complex and energetic style of congregational music, sung not in unison but in four-part harmony. For this performance to be possible however, churchgoers needed to be able to read music. [21]



Figure 3. The four solfège syllables and their corresponding shapes, as used to notate a scale. Image created by Esther Morgan-Ellis.

Shape-note singing gets its name from the fact that it is printed using shaped noteheads instead of the more typical round noteheads. Each shape corresponds with a **sofège syllable**, which in turn is associated with a **scale degree**, or a specific note in a musical scale. The idea of associating syllables with scale degrees is about 1,000 years old, and it has persisted because it is a powerful music-reading tool. Solfège was invented in the early 11th century by the Italian monk Guido of Arezzo, who also pioneered **staff notation**. The latter allowed melodies to be committed to paper, while the former helped with the reading and memorizing of those melodies. [22] In the shape-note tradition, only four syllables are used, even though there are seven scale degrees. This practice is because the solfège syllables outline patterns of intervals between notes, and those patterns repeat. Beginning with the 1802 publication of *The Easy Instructor* by William Smith and William Little,

differently-shaped noteheads were printed to correspond with the various syllables. This method made music reading even easier, as it eliminated the need to understand clefs or decipher key signatures. [\[23\]](#)

Even before the system of shapes was invented, church music reformers were using the four-syllable system to spread music literacy. Educated young **men** with musical talent established themselves as itinerant **singing masters**, traveling from town to town to offer **singing schools**. A school was usually two weeks in length and was offered during seasons when there was little farm work to be done. Participants in a singing school would learn how to read music and be offered the chance to purchase tunebooks (likely published by the singing master himself). Singing schools also served an important social function—particularly for young men and women who had few opportunities to mix socially without a chaperone present. When the singing master departed, he left behind a community of singers who could read music in four-part harmony. He was reimbursed for his trouble by means of tuition fees, book sales, and/or donations. [\[24\]](#)

The hymns written by singing masters had many unusual characteristics. These composers self-consciously rejected European traditions: They wanted to create music that was original, innovative, and decidedly American. And when they did adopt European practices, such as the use of the four-syllable system, they tended to be old-fashioned. For example, in shape-note songs, the melody is not in the high female voice (the soprano or, to use the shape-note term, **treble** voice) but rather in the **tenor** (the high male voice). Although this designation was characteristic of early European church music, the practice had largely been abandoned by the 18th century. American shape-note composers also ignored the conventions of harmony and voice leading, preferring instead to follow their intuition and draw inspiration from natural sounds and settings. As a result, shape-note songs are full of musical irregularities that lend them a unique sound. [\[25\]](#)

In the early 19th century, shape-note singing began to lose popularity in New England. As northeastern cities grew in size and sophistication, music reformers sought to adopt modern European practices—including a more refined style of hymn-singing, complete with organ accompaniment. However, shape-note singing flourished in the South, where a new generation of singing masters, composers, and publishers continued to develop and popularize the repertoire and its associated practices. Southern composers were soon publishing their own tunebooks. One of the most important volumes, *The*

Southern Harmony, was published in 1835 by William Walker, a singing master from South Carolina. However, it was Walker's brother-in-law Benjamin Franklin White, who in 1844 collaborated with fellow Georgia resident Elisha J. King to publish the most successful of all shape-note tunebooks, *The Sacred Harp*.

White and King's tunebook quickly gained an avid following. The first convention dedicated to singing from *The Sacred Harp* was organized in Upson County, Georgia, in 1845, and the tunebook remained in constant use even through the **Civil War**. White himself oversaw revisions in 1850, 1859, and 1869 (King died almost immediately after the initial publication). After White's death, other singers took on the task of editing and publishing new editions of *The Sacred Harp*. Each revision introduced new songs and eliminated old songs that were no longer commonly sung, meaning that the volume always reflected the tastes of the singing community. However, without White at the helm, revisions produced by different singers entered into competition with one another, and tunebooks with "The Sacred Harp" printed on the cover could no longer be trusted to contain standardized contents. Eventually, singers coalesced around two editions, known after their early editors as the Cooper revision and the Denson revision.^[26] Although the two revisions share more than half of their contents in common, the Cooper revision also includes a large number of songs in the newer gospel style, which emerged after the Civil War. These songs tend to be cheerful in affect, with swinging rhythms and passages of call-and-response.^[27]

The Sacred Harp has remained in use into the present day, and both the Cooper and Denson editions continue to be revised and printed. Although some practitioners feared that Sacred Harp singing, as it is called, faced extinction in the mid-20th century, a widespread revival in the 1980s attracted new singers from outside of the South, and today there are communities of singers throughout the United States and in **Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Japan, Norway, Poland, Scotland, South Korea, and Sweden.**^[28] Participation in Sacred Harp singing, however, means much more than just singing out of *The Sacred Harp*. It means adhering to practices and values that are unique to the shape-note tradition, most of which date to the early 19th century.

Sacred Harp singers come together at various local and regional **singings** that take place throughout the year. The smallest of these are weekly

“practice” singings, which are informal gatherings of singers who live in the same area. “Annual” singings are formal, all-day events that attract participants from considerable distances. They include elements such as opening and closing prayers, a **memorial lesson** (during which those who are sick or have died are remembered), and **dinner on the grounds** (a lavish midday meal provided by the hosts and served outside). Conventions—to which singers might travel great distances—are two- or three-day events organized along the same lines. [\[29\]](#)

Although singings vary in size, length, and formality, the basic practice of singing a song is always the same. Initially, participants form what is called the **hollow square**, with singers in each of the four sections facing a central point. There is no single “leader”; instead, individual singers take turns calling and leading songs from the center of the square. Once a song has been announced (always by its page number, not its title), a designated singer will **key** the song, or give starting pitches for each section. This part is important, since Sacred Harp singing does not incorporate instruments. The keyer does not try to sound the pitches notated on the page but rather selects suitable pitches based on the melodic ranges of each part. Next, the leader starts the song, establishing the tempo by moving one arm up and down. Although the leader will select which verses are to be sung, participants always begin by singing the syllables. If a song is particularly complicated, the leader might cue the entrance of individual parts, but usually the singers are confident and need little guidance. After a song is over, a new leader takes the center and calls the next song. [\[30\]](#)

For many listeners, the most striking characteristic of Sacred Harp practice is the singing style. In general, participants sing as loud as they can, producing a sound that could be described as raw or unadorned. Singers do not use vibrato, and they seldom vary the volume. Indeed, it might be argued that they sing in a way that reflects no sensitivity to the meaning of the text or shape of the musical phrase. However, such an evaluation applies an inappropriate metric, as Sacred Harp singers engage with the music emotionally—and often physically—at a particularly intense level. [\[31\]](#)

Traditional shape-note songs assume three basic forms. [\[32\]](#) The first is the strophic hymn, which is likely familiar to anyone who comes from a hymn-singing tradition. In this type of song, several verses are sung to the same melody, and all four voice parts (treble, alto, tenor, and bass) sing at all times.

“[Windham](#),”^[33] composed by Connecticut tunebook publisher Daniel Read (1757-1836) in 1785, is a fine example. Like so many American hymns of the era, it sets to music the words of Isaac Watts. The text concerns the immanence of death—a common theme throughout *The Sacred Harp*. Finally, the song is in the **minor mode**, meaning that it uses a scale with several pitches lowered in comparison to the more common major scale. Most Western listeners hear minor-mode music and interpret it as being sad or serious. Later gospel hymn writers would largely abandon the minor mode, and it is also uncommon in most mainstream hymn-singing traditions; however, it was favored by shape-note composers. One recording was made by Alan Lomax at the Alabama Sacred Harp Singing Convention in Birmingham in 1942. Characteristically, the singers slide between pitches while producing a bright, powerful sound.

Some strophic hymns contain a **refrain**, or a passage of repeating text that usually occupies the second half of the melody. “[Bound For Canaan](#),” for example, contains three verses, but each concludes with the refrain “I’m on my way to Canaan, To the new Jerusalem.”^[34] This major-mode song was composed by King for inclusion in the first edition of *The Sacred Harp*, although the fourth voice part (the alto) was not added until 1902. It sets a 1793 text by John Leland (1754-1841), a Baptist minister from Massachusetts, that is used in no fewer than six *Sacred Harp* songs.^[35] The appearance of a single text paired with multiple tunes is typical of the tradition. For example, the Newton text “Amazing Grace” appears twice in *The Sacred Harp*: once as “New Britain,” with the melody that is familiar to most people today, and another time as “[Jewett](#),” set to quite a different melody and with a refrain that begins “Shout, shout for glory.”^[36] The “Jewett” version is more frequently used as a “callback” song, such as at the conclusion of a break during the 2020 Ireland Sacred Harp Convention. Individual lines from “Amazing Grace” also appear in other songs. All this repetition reflects the influence of oral tradition and the significance of a particular song.

Although *The Sacred Harp* contains many of these strophic hymns, students in singing schools became proud of their ability to read and carry independent parts, and they wanted something more challenging to sing. To satisfy this need, singing masters wrote **fuguing tunes**. These unusual songs begin with all four voice parts singing together, but following a resting point or **cadence**, the voices re-enter one at a time, most often with the same text

and music as one another. The texture is similar to that of an 18th century keyboard fugue—thus, the name “fuguing tune.” Because each voice part enters at a different time, singers need to be confident in their own rhythms and pitches, with the result that fuguing tunes are considerably more challenging to sing than traditional hymns. “[Evening Shade](#),” written in 1805 by New England singing master Stephen Jenks (1772-1856), is a straightforward example of a fuguing tune.^[37] The 1792 text by Leland, typical of *The Sacred Harp*, warns the singer that “the night of death is near.”

Finally, shape-note composers wrote extended **odes** and **anthems**, which are long and highly variable in terms of form and texture. They often include passages in which one or more of the voice parts is omitted and also feature internal repeats and changes in meter, making them the most difficult to lead and sing. One of the most frequently sung anthems is “[Easter Anthem](#),” composed by Boston singing master William Billings (1746-1800) in 1787.^[38] Billings, along with Read, was one of the most influential early shape-note composers and did much to establish the style and conventions of shape-note hymnody. Edward Young’s text, first published about four decades earlier, draws from the biblical chapters of Corinthians and the Gospel of Luke.^[39]

Blurring the Lines

Reflecting the interconnectedness of these traditions and their influence on other singing practices, two final examples emerge. In each case, an Appalachian musician draws on their experiences with one or more of these traditions to create something unique.

During the 1930s, coal miners in Harlan County, Kentucky, were involved in a protracted and violent conflict with the mine owners. Poor management following a **World War I**-era coal boom meant that the onset of the **Great Depression** hit the mining industry especially hard, and it was working-class miners who were expected to absorb the financial losses. When miners unionized and demanded better pay, mine owners responded by firing strikers, withholding medical services, and sending hired militiamen to threaten workers and their families. Countless miners and children of mining families perished as a result of direct violence, starvation, and lack of access to medical care.^[40]

The wives of miners played an integral role in the **Harlan County War**, as it came to be called. In some cases, they took up arms themselves.

[41] However, their most lasting contributions were musical: a rich body of songs intended to capture their individual suffering and to inspire collective action. Perhaps the most powerful of these songs is “**Dreadful Memories.**” Two women—**Aunt Molly Jackson** and her half sister **Sarah Ogan Gunning**—both claimed authorship of “Dreadful

Memories.” [42] Jackson had a particularly colorful personality, and she developed a reputation for sometimes stretching the truth. All the same, her devastating account of the events leading her to write “Dreadful Memories” accurately reflects the conditions under which mining families persevered:

After the miners was blacklisted for joining the union March 5, 1931, the company doctor refused to come to anyone of the coal miners’ families unless he was paid in advance. So I had to nurse all the little children till the last breath left them. . . . Thirty-seven babies died in my arms in the last three months of 1931. Their little stomachs busted open; they were mortified inside. Oh, what an awful way for a baby to die. . . . My nerves was so stirred up for four years afterward by the memory of them babies suffering and dying in my arms, and me sitting by their little dead bodies three or four hours before daylight to keep some hungry dog or cat from eating up their little dead bodies. Then four years later, I still had such sad memories of these babies that I wrote this song. [43]

Gunning’s version is very similar to Jackson’s and reflects the same experiences. [44]

“Dreadful Memories,” like all of Gunning’s and Jackson’s songs, consists of a new text paired with an old melody. This practice is typical of the ballad and hymn singing traditions, both of which use familiar melodies as vehicles for new texts (and sometimes, especially in shape-note singing, familiar texts as vehicles for new melodies). In most cases, the source of the melody is not important. For example, the most famous of all the Harlan County songs, **Florence Reese’s “Which Side Are You On?”** uses a gospel hymn melody that Reese knew as “**Lay the Lily Low,**” but that song itself is derived from the ballad tradition and has gone by several titles over the course of centuries. [45] In this case, there is no particular connection between text and tune. Reese simply chose a melody that was familiar from her own churchgoing experience.

In the case of “Dreadful Memories,” however, the original song—the gospel hymn “Precious Memories”—served as the source of inspiration.

Jackson and Gunning would most likely have come to know the song in the context of lined-out hymnody. The hymn ponders “precious memories” of home and family, portraying peaceful scenes of domestic bliss. “Dreadful Memories,” on the other hand, reflects on the deaths of children brought about by the actions of the mine owners. It borrows phrases from the original text, turning them on their head to convey the reality of working-class hardship.

Exemplifying the fluidity of these singing traditions from another angle, **Doc Watson** recorded “**And Am I Born To Die?**” in 1964, accompanied by his father-in-law, fiddler Gaither Carleton.^[46] Doc Watson (1923-2012) is best remembered as a virtuosic guitar player, although he also played the banjo and was a fine singer of ballads and sacred songs. Watson was born in Deep Gap, North Carolina, a community where it was uncommon for even the most talented musicians to pursue performing careers; there was a much better living to be made as a laborer. Because a childhood eye infection took away his vision, however, Watson was able to work as a musician. He mostly played for dances, which meant that he had to adapt to changing tastes and master new styles of music. Although he began his career accompanying the banjo player Clarence Tom Ashley, he was soon playing electric **guitar** in bands that specialized in Western swing and rock ’n’ roll. In 1960, folklorist Ralph Rinzler sought out Ashley with the hope of making some recordings of his traditional repertoire. Ashley introduced Rinzler to Watson, who quickly revealed himself to possess both extraordinary musical ability and a vast store of traditional songs and tunes. Rinzler convinced Watson to return to his acoustic guitar and “old-time” repertoire, promising to introduce him to a new audience of folk revivalists. Watson ended up making countless influential recordings and is remembered as one of the finest Appalachian musicians.

^[47]

Although Watson recorded this hymn under the title “And Am I Born To Die?,” it is perhaps better known as “**Idumea**”—its title in *The Sacred Harp*.

^[48] “Idumea” is a simple strophic song composed in 1816 by Ananias Davisson (1780-1857), a singing master and tunebook publisher in the **Shenandoah Valley** of Virginia. It sets a three-verse text written in 1763 by the English Methodist reformer **Charles Wesley** (1707-1788). As a shape-note song, “Idumea” is sung in four-part harmony without accompaniment. Watson’s performance, however, is more reminiscent of ballad singing. He sets a relaxed tempo and adds vocal ornaments that are typically employed by ballad singers. Carleton doubles the melody on the fiddle, adding a few drone

notes for harmony. This approach to crafting an accompaniment was commonly applied to ballads. In short, Watson and Carleton performed a shape-note hymn as if it were a ballad—a reflection of their varied interests and experiences.

Conclusion

Although scholars are inclined to draw lines between genres, repertoires, and practices, these artificial divisions seldom reflect the experiences of people who create and consume music. In the course of a week, an early 20th century mountaineer might sing ballads with and without accompaniment, dance to fiddle tunes, attend a singing school, hum lullabies to a newborn, sing popular songs learned from recordings, and participate in lining-out at a revival meeting. They would have felt little concern for the unique practices and characteristics of each tradition. Although each has its correct place in daily life, the voice that sings hymns and ballads is the same.

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[1] Krim, "Appalachian Songcatcher," 101.

[2] Blethen, "The Transmission of Scottish Culture to the Southern BackCountry," 62.

- [3] For an in-depth exploration of “Pretty Polly,” see Morgan-Ellis, *Resonances*, 144–52.
- [4] Doyle and Kelley, “Moses Platt and the Regeneration of ‘Barbara Allen,’” 153.
- [5] Fumerton, *The Broadside Ballad in Early Modern England*, 225.
- [6] Campbell and Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, 90–99.
- [7] Gladden, “Barbara Allen.” <https://youtu.be/8F9nTKfwSDQ>
- [8] Cohen, “Texas Gladden.”
- [9] Ritchie, “Barbara Allen.” <https://youtu.be/Iht0mpmz7o>
- [10] Goldstein and Ritchie, “Child Ballads in America, Volume 1.”
- [11] Tallmadge, “Baptist Monophonic and Heterophonic Hymnody in Southern Appalachia,” 106.
- [12] Titon, “The Real Thing,” 117.
- [13] Crookshank, “We’re Marching to Zion,” 104.
- [14] Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists, “A Poor Wayfaring Stranger.” <https://youtu.be/wWKSFA2Tcs?list=PLuMpVmsDyHxgbhLO-BbLWjxctbQNuEIF>
- [15] Steel, *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*, 234.
- [16] Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists, “Precious Memories.” https://youtu.be/2Qlf4_Of0pQ?list=PLuMpVmsDyHxgbhLO-BbLWjxctbQNuEIF
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- [18] Old Regular Baptist Church, “Amazing Grace.” <https://youtu.be/ZUQCPCTKZW?list=PLuMpVmsDyHxgbhLO-BbLWjxctbQNuEIF>
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- [20] Tallmadge, “Baptist Monophonic and Heterophonic Hymnody in Southern Appalachia,” 112.
- [21] Cobb, *The Sacred Harp*, 58.
- [22] Marini, *Sacred Song in America*, 79.
- [23] Goff, *Close Harmony*, 21. Goff, like many scholars, dates *The Easy Instructor* to 1798, the year in which it was copyrighted; however, the first edition did not appear until 1802 (Bealle, *Public Worship, Private Faith*, 269).
- [24] Cobb, *The Sacred Harp*, 60.
- [25] These irregularities include parallel fifths and octaves, missing thirds, voice crossing, irregular phrase lengths, and “awkward” text settings in which unimportant syllables are emphasized.
- [26] Cobb, *The Sacred Harp*, 84–85.
- [27] Miller, *Traveling Home*, 9.
- [28] Caudle, *Sacred Harp Singings*, 40–42.
- [29] Miller, *Traveling Home*, 49.
- [30] Cobb, *The Sacred Harp*, 8–9.
- [31] Ibid, 40.
- [32] Ibid, 38–39.
- [33] Alabama Sacred Harp singers, “Windham.” <https://youtu.be/rAV7pPHXzrg>
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- [36] Jewett, “Amazing Grace.” <https://youtu.be/7idKgO4P6is>
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- [39] Steel, *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*, 209.
- [40] Romalis, *Pistol Packin’ Mama*, 30.
- [41] Yurchenco, “Trouble in the Mines,” 214.
- [42] Romalis, *Pistol Packin’ Mama*, 190–92.

[43] Yurchenco, "Trouble in the Mines," 217.

[44] Gunning, "Dreadful Memories." <https://youtu.be/9W1IDykF24c>

[45] For an in-depth exploration of "Which Side Are You On?," see Morgan-Ellis, *Resonances*, 369-72.

[46] Watson and Carlton, "And Am I Born To Die?"

[47] Lightfoot, "The Three Doc(k)s," 185-87.

[48] Fasola, "Idumea." <https://youtu.be/-Ug2Ui01sw>

Writing about Appalachia and of Appalachia: Contextualizing Appalachian Literature since the Civil War

Erin Presley

Appalachian literature resists easy categorization and demands that difficult questions be confronted for study and analysis. While the contested physical and historical boundaries of Appalachia complicate identifying who counts as an Appalachian writer and what works are of the region, Appalachian literature has often been considered part of Southern literature. As Danny Miller and others contend, this categorization misses much of the nuance of writings from the Mountain South and the fact that Southern literature is typically “more Gothic and more concerned with North-South conflicts” than Appalachian literature.^[1] Writers began considering these issues in earnest in the 1960s with the publication of *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey*, and interest in codifying Appalachian literature has continued apace.^[2] Before, during, and after these critical discussions of history and categorization took place, poets, novelists, dramatists, and essayists have continued writing about and from Appalachia, from post–Civil War local color writers to Affrilachian writers in the 21st century.

In 2015, W. D. Weatherford and Wilma Dykeman interrogated the status of “Literature since 1900” in the region by highlighting significant works by writers such as **James Still** and **Thomas Wolfe**. They present these writers’ works, especially Wolfe’s, as examples of what Appalachian literature could be—“writing that springs from regional sources but is also in the mainstream of a great literary tradition.”^[3] Similarly, **Jim Wayne Miller** took up this line of inquiry in 1977, identifying **Cratis D. Williams**’s work as “the most

comprehensive study of Appalachian literature to date.”^[4] Williams’s work focuses on stereotypical depictions of Appalachian people in **local color** writing, and he analyzes the mountaineer as a popular characterization. Miller goes on to argue that “the most vigorous literature of the Appalachian region, the writing which is an expression *of* the region and not a report *on* it, is concerned very much with the things of this world, situated squarely in the secular realm.”^[5] Indeed, Miller’s distinction between *of* and *on* must inform any consideration of Appalachian literature. In 1985, Anne Shelby built upon the foundation created by Weatherford, Dykeman, Williams, and Miller in her quest to further define the region’s literature, and she uses **Henry Shapiro**’s historical work on the “invention” of Appalachia to develop her framework for situating Appalachian literature in the broader context of American literature. According to Shelby, it is only in the years following the **Civil War** that “the idea that the mountainous sections of several southern states represent something unique in America” gained traction.^[6] She argues that “from the idea of Appalachia as behind the times, it was an easy step and one soon taken to the depiction of Appalachia, not as behind, but as inherently different from the rest of the country.”^[7] Shelby’s work reflects much of the literature written about the region, including popular novels such as **James Dickey**’s *Deliverance* and the subsequent film adaptation in the 1970s, which reinforced damaging stereotypes about violence and backwardness in the region. In 2015, Chris Green and Erica Abrams Locklear explored Appalachian literature through its relationship with Appalachian Studies and broadened the scope of their analysis to include the work of **Cherokee** and **Black** authors from the region.^[8] In 2020, Katherine Ledford and Theresa Lloyd provided an even more expansive and inclusive definition of the region’s literature beginning with the Cherokee oral tradition, moving toward historical texts by **Thomas Jefferson** and **Booker T. Washington**, and closing with the contemporary community arts organization *Higher Ground*.

These foundational studies of Appalachian literature show how the tension between insiders and outsiders has shaped and continues to influence Appalachian identity and the region’s literature. By exploring this tension, watershed works such as Horace Kephart’s *Our Southern Highlanders* (1913), James Still’s *River of Earth* (1940), Lee Smith’s *Oral*

History (1983), and Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* (1997) highlight the shift from fictional depictions *about* Appalachia as backward and dangerous to more thoughtful renderings *of* the region and its people. Key themes arise, such as the role of education, the influence of the past on the present, and the importance of place in significant novels, short fiction, and poetry. Finally, contemporary Appalachian literature of the 21st century tackles weighty issues *of* diversity, inclusion, and exploitation in the region written *by* a variety of contemporary writers, who represent a broad spectrum of experiences in the region; authors' gender and racial representation has also become more equally balanced between **women**, **men**, and **non-binary** writers as well as a much larger community of writers of color.

At the turn of the 20th century, most published writing about central and southern Appalachia focused on travel and exploration in the region. These writers, most of whom were not from the area, presented Appalachia as a place apart from the rest of the country. Regarding Appalachia as an unexplored wilderness led to two distinct presentations of the region and its people: one highlighted the natural beauty of the mountains; the other depicted it as the back of beyond and the people as being out of step with contemporary American values. Defining characteristics of these works include an emphasis on the region's striking landscape, especially in travel writing from this era, and stereotypical depictions of the people, including an emphasis on dialect and difference. In *Seekers of Scenery: Travel Writing from Southern Appalachia, 1840-1900*, Kevin O'Donnell and Helen Hollingsworth present curated publications from this time period and provide insightful context for these works. In the introduction, O'Donnell situates these works in time and place, arguing that the selections "show how the image of the mountaineer—the idea of a distinct, White, southern Appalachian population—emerged in the national consciousness."^[9] Further, the works included in this collection reflect the time in which they were written, as the nation was undergoing transformative changes during the Civil War and the **Industrial Revolution**.

Mary Noailles Murfree (1850-1922), who initially published under the pseudonym Charles Egbert Craddock, was one of the most prominent local color writers in the region, basing her late 19th century fictional works such as *The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains* (1885) in the mountains of northeast Tennessee, where her affluent middle-Tennessee family vacationed. During her lifetime, Murfree enjoyed commercial success

from her novels and short stories, many of which were published in magazines, but her critical legacy is more complicated. Most scholars find Murfree's work to reinforce the myth of Appalachia as "isolated, poor, uneducated, all white, and starkly divided in its gender roles with patriarchal, active men and passive, unambitious women."^[10] Elizabeth Engelhardt acknowledges the problematic nature of Murfree's works but argues convincingly that "the way Murfree writes about women is subtle and complex and that the outsiders in her stories are as fallible as the local mountain characters—and treated with equal suspicion by the narrator."^[11] In addition to Engelhardt's argument for reconsidering Murfree's works, O'Donnell also makes the case for taking Murfree's contributions to the genre of local color more seriously because of their connection to travel writing.^[12]

Another prominent writer during this time period was **Horace Kephart** (1862-1931), a former librarian and outdoor enthusiast who sought refuge from his troubled life in St. Louis in the mountains of western North Carolina in the early 1900s and became a vocal proponent of the creation of the **Great Smoky Mountains National Park**. While Kephart indisputably helped the region through his advocacy for protecting the Smokies as a national park, his characterizations of locals in his short fiction and quasi-sociological study *Our Southern Highlanders* (1913) occasionally perpetuate damaging stereotypes of the lawless mountaineers and "their amazing isolation."^[13] Initially published in serial form in the magazine *Outing* starting in 1912, *Our Southern Highlanders* was a success for Kephart, both critically and commercially upon its publication. Complicating Kephart's legacy is the critical divide between his reception among contemporary social scientists and literary authors. Most historians minimize Kephart's contributions to the region and its literature, labeling him "a local-color writer" and "an eccentric."^{[14][15]} Conversely, prominent fiction writers such as **Robert Morgan** and **Ron Rash** deeply value Kephart's work, as seen in their literary treatment of him. In Morgan's 1979 poem "Horace Kephart," the speaker describes Kephart:

Lean as a mountaineer himself, galluses
swung at his sides, he scribbles to the young
his intensity of woodcraft, weapons, survival,

and of the hillmen his archaic friends and landlords,
makers of spirits.[\[16\]](#)

Morgan treats Kephart seriously and respectfully in this poem as he acknowledges his subject's shortcomings—"a vast unpayable obligation" to the family he left behind—and his commitment to "his archaic friends" on Hazel Creek.[\[17\]](#),[\[18\]](#)

In a similar vein, Ron Rash includes a flattering depiction of Kephart as a minor character in *Serena* (2008), his most successful novel to date, in which Kephart helps one of the main characters escape harm from the villainous lumber magnates. In *Serena*, Rash emphasizes Kephart's commitment to the creation of a national park in the region, proclaiming him the "bard of Appalachia."[\[19\]](#) Additionally, Rash renders Kephart as a kind-hearted ally through his support of the local characters, McDowell and Rachel, especially when Rachel flees with her young son, Jacob. Not only does Kephart provide mother and child with shelter and food as they begin their escape, but he also thoughtfully attends to Jacob's needs—giving the child a bottle, showing him baby foxes, and giving him a sock for a new marble collection. Rash goes to great lengths to present the novel's most significant historical figure-as-character in a positive light, and Kephart's treatment of Rachel and Jacob proves to be one of his most redeeming moments. In the "Author's Picks: Appalachian Reading" section found in some editions of the novel, Rash recommends Kephart's *Our Southern Highlanders*, reflecting the importance of this work in the study of Appalachian literature.

A major shift occurred in Appalachian literature around 1929 when prominent modernist writers from and of the region began publishing their works and receiving critical acclaim. Foremost among these writers are Thomas Wolfe, James Still, and Jesse Stuart, who challenged stereotypes about Appalachia through their novels, short fiction, and poetry. Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, published in 1929, became the first novel by an Appalachian writer to receive serious critical attention and quickly made Wolfe a literary star. Despite the national attention Wolfe's novel received, many people in western North Carolina took issue with his depiction of the area. For example, in 1930, Horace Kephart wrote in a letter, "Have just read Wolfe's abomination *Look Homeward, Angel*. They say he will be shot if he ever returns to Asheville. Any creature who will

blackguard his own father, mother, brothers and sisters, through 600 pages of print, should be shot.”^[20] Similar sentiments arose in Asheville, where “the public library would not shelve Wolfe’s books for more than six years after the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel*.”^[21] Much of this criticism reflects a feeling that Wolfe betrayed his hometown through his autobiographical novel by writing *about* Asheville through his fictional Altamont and its residents. After seven years away, including graduate school at Harvard and residence in New York City, Wolfe returned to western North Carolina shortly before his untimely death in 1938. Outside of the harsh reaction in some quarters of Asheville, the novel and Wolfe’s work in general garnered praise, including Weatherford and Dykeman’s pronouncement that “a regional literature that can include in its achievement the universality of Thomas Wolfe has cause for pride in the past and hope for the future.”^[22] Wolfe continues to receive critical attention through scholarly journals such as *The Thomas Wolfe Review* and an edited reissue in 2000 of *Look Homeward, Angel* with Wolfe’s original title, *O, Lost: A Story of the Buried Life*.

Contrasting Wolfe’s experience of leaving the region to write about it, James Still was an outsider who made rural Appalachia his home and setting for his literary works. Moving from Alabama, settling in Knott County, Kentucky, and working as a librarian at the **Hindman Settlement School**, Still published his novel *River of Earth* in 1940, a work of Appalachian literature. While the novel employs dialect and stereotypes, Still’s nuanced treatment of the child narrator and struggling family in eastern Kentucky’s coal country presents the characters as multidimensional and moves beyond the harmful tropes highlighted in earlier works. Unlike Kephart and Wolfe, Still’s critical reception has consistently been positive, as his works are less about Appalachia and reflect more of the experience of the people living in the region. Published in 1940, Still’s *River of Earth* follows one family’s fraught relationship with coal mining in eastern Kentucky through the eyes of a child narrator. Against the backdrop of the **Great Depression**, the family’s father insists on moving the family from one mining camp to the next for work, much to the mother’s dismay. Significantly, the mother tells her husband, “I allus wanted my young’uns to larn to figure and read writing” in hopes of their having a better life, a desire that subverts a common stereotype about Appalachia’s hostility toward formal education.^[23]

Education plays an important role in other modernist works, including short fiction by **Elizabeth Madox Roberts** and Jesse Stuart. In Roberts's "**On the Mountainside**" (1932), young Newt must leave his mountain home in eastern Kentucky to continue his education in the settlements. As he makes the arduous journey from his home to the closest settlement school, he encounters an old man who is desperately trying to return to the mountain home he left many years ago. The old man says, "I was a plumb traitor to my God when I left the mountains and come to the settlements."^[24] The old man's words resonate with Newt's doubts about leaving his family and home to go to school, but ultimately, Newt chooses to stay the course and continue his education at the settlement school even if it means never returning home.

Jesse Stuart also addresses education in eastern Kentucky in "**The Split Cherry Tree**" (1939) but presents a more nuanced understanding than Roberts's Faustian view. In this story, Dave and his classmates break a farmer's cherry tree during a school excursion in pursuit of a lizard for science class. The farmer demands payment for the ruined tree, and the boys' teacher, Professor Herbert, agrees. The other boys are able to pay their share, but Dave, having no money, borrows the dollar from the teacher and must stay after school to clean to settle his debt. Dave's father is furious when he learns why his son is so late getting home and decides to accompany his son to school the next day, stating, "He ain't got no right to keep you in and let the other boys off jist because they've got th' money. I'm a poor man. A bullet will go in a professor same as it will any man. It will go in a rich man same as it will a poor man."^[25] Initially full of dread about what will happen at school, Dave watches as Professor Herbert shows Pa around the school and explains the students' studies as they enjoy conversation over lunch together. By the end of the day, Pa tells Dave, "He [Professor Herbert] likes me. I like 'im. We jist had to get together. He had the remedies. He showed me. You must go on to school."^[26] In Stuart's story, the young protagonist does not have to leave his home and family to get an education like Roberts's Newt, offering a complex treatment of Appalachian attitudes about education.

Significant mid-20th century works such as James Agee's *A Death in the Family* (1957) and Harriette Simpson Arnow's *The Dollmaker* (1954) shift the setting from rural Appalachia to urban areas, disrupting the common misconception of the region's physical isolation. Agee's posthumously

published novel won the Pulitzer Prize in 1958 and tells the story of a Knoxville family forever changed by the death of the father in a car accident. Like Wolfe before him, **James Agee** drew on his own experiences to craft this autobiographical novel, which still receives critical attention. For example, Michael Lofaro has edited two collections of essays on Agee's work: *James Agee: Reconsiderations* (1992) and *Agee Agonistes: Essays on the Life, Legend, and Works of James Agee* (2007). While Agee's work is wholly set in Appalachia, Knoxville's city blocks, sidewalks, streetlights, and automobiles are as commonplace as children's education, as a father says of his son, "That's my boy . . . Six years old, and he can already read like I couldn't read when I was twice his age."[\[27\]](#)

While Agee's book is an autobiography that focuses on the individual and collective grief of a family following the death of the father, **Harriette Simpson Arnow's** *The Dollmaker* is a work of **social realism** that shifts from rural eastern Kentucky to industrial Detroit as the Nevels family joins the **outmigration** of Appalachian families desperately looking for work during that time period. *The Dollmaker* focuses on the character of Gertie, an Appalachian woman and mother who struggles to transition from an agrarian life in which she "had been capable of almost anything" to the overwhelming metropolis of Detroit. Her husband, convinced that wartime factory work is the key to his family's economic freedom, makes the decisions for the family, and the novel secures its place within **American naturalism** as their Kentucky roots are severed and transplanted in industrial Detroit, too deep in debt to attempt a return. Like Agee and Wolfe, Arnow earned critical attention and accolades, including a nomination for the 1955 National Book Award.

While Agee's and Arnow's works present a nuanced view of Appalachia, **James Dickey's** *Deliverance* (1970) recklessly uses damaging stereotypes *about* the region that continue to inform outside opinions of the **Mountain South**. Set in northeast Georgia, the novel tells the story of four friends from Atlanta who take an ill-fated trip to the mountains. As Miller and others point out, what ensues "remains one of the worst pictures of the mountain people as inbred, suspicious, violent, and bestial."[\[28\]](#) The film adaptation of *Deliverance* (1972) strengthened the endurance of these stereotypes through caricatures of Appalachian people.

Indisputably, *Deliverance* was both a critical and commercial success for Dickey but at the expense of an entire region.

After the damage wrought by Dickey's depiction of the region, **Lee Smith's *Oral History*** (1983) ushered in a new era for Appalachian literature, as literary works began to reflect more *of* the area and less *about* it. Structured as a frame story in which Jennifer, a granddaughter raised away from the ancestral Hoot Owl Holler, seeks to investigate a supposedly haunted family cabin for an oral history project in college, the novel tells the story of the Cantrell family of southwest Virginia. Smith uses a series of first-person narrators beginning with Granny Younger, a friend of the Cantrell family, and ending with Sally, Jennifer's aunt and a voice of the family's previous generation. Smith also includes an outsider as a narrator, Richard Burlage, a teacher who travels to southwest Virginia from Richmond in 1923. Upon his arrival, Burlage notes that "this mountainous region [is] a stranger land than Richmond can conceive of."^[29] Through these complex and sometimes conflicting voices, Smith treats the region and its people with gravity and respect, producing one of the finest novels of Appalachia.

In a similar vein, **Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*** (1997) offers a thoughtful and sophisticated Appalachian story. Both a critical and commercial success, the novel won the National Book Award in 1997, stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 61 weeks, and was adapted into an acclaimed film. Unlike earlier successful works from the region, such as Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* and Agee's *A Death in the Family*, Frazier's novel is inherently Appalachian in its sensibility. Set during the Civil War, the novel focuses on three characters' experiences of love and loss but also tells the story of Appalachia's fraught position during this tumultuous time. Frazier captures the divide between Union and Confederate loyalties in Appalachia through his characterization of Inman, a young man who joins the Confederacy but decides to desert the cause and return to his mountain home. Frazier also treats the importance of place through Inman, Ada, and Ruby, each of whom is connected to the land. Through Ada and Ruby's friendship, Frazier complicates what it means to be educated and highlights the importance of being in tune with the natural world. Ruby's understanding and use of medicinal herbs and farming practices—her "grandmother knowledge"—plays an important role in the novel much in the same vein as Granny Younger's character in Lee Smith's *Oral History*.^[30]

As evidenced by novels such as *Oral History* and *Cold Mountain*, contemporary Appalachian literature is decidedly *of* Appalachia. In recent years, writers including **Barbara Kingsolver**, **Ann Pancake**, and Ron Rash have consistently shown the complexity of Appalachia and the abiding connection to place experienced by many from the region. Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) is set in eastern Kentucky and focuses on four characters as their narratives intertwine, including the evolution of the family farm in a post-tobacco economy and the restoration of the **American chestnut** tree. Kingsolver's characters challenge what it means to be Appalachian. For example, Lusa is an outsider who inherits her deceased husband's family farm in rural eastern Kentucky. Early in the novel, Nannie Rawley, another main character who practices sustainable farming at her orchard, tells Lusa, "You learn to love the place somebody leaves behind for you."^[31] Drawing on her formal education and her love for her husband, she devises a way to make the farm profitable while she also builds meaningful relationships with her in-laws and becomes a member of the community. Kingsolver's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Demon Copperhead* (2022) also explores identity in Appalachia.^[32] Set in southwest Virginia in the 1990s, Damon Fields tells his life story in a narrative that models itself after Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, which concerns an orphaned boy and is set in Victorian England in the 1840s. Damon's coming-of-age story highlights issues with systemic poverty and drug addiction in the region as well as the power of people who care, such as dedicated teachers and friends in helping one young person heal.

Relationships are also important in Ann Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007), a novel about one family's experience of the devastating effects of **mountaintop removal** in West Virginia. Told from the family members' perspectives, the novel illustrates the environmental and psychological damage wrought by coal mining and the importance of place to many of the characters, especially Lace and Bant. Rash's *Serena* (2008) also emphasizes a connection to the land as it tackles the ecological impact of the lumber industry in western North Carolina in the late 1920s. Rachel, a young local woman who must eventually leave her mountain home, comes to understand the words Widow Jenkins shared with her: "It would have been wrong to take you away from these mountains, because if you're born here they're a part of you. No other place will ever feel right."^[33] This deep and

abiding connection to the land also appears in Rash's description of Rachel and Jacob's poignant last time on Colt Ridge in western North Carolina:

Rachel knelt beside Jacob. She took the child's hand and pressed it to the dirt. Her father had told Rachel that Harmons had been on this land since before the Revolutionary War. "Don't ever forget what it feels like, Jacob," she whispered, and let her hand touch the ground as well.^[34]

With an emphasis on place, these novels also address significant environmental issues resulting from the use of natural resources in Appalachia.

Place also shapes the works of LGBTQIAAP2S+ writers from Appalachia. In her poetry collection *WWJD and Other Poems* (2019), **Savannah Sipple** examines her identity as a queer Appalachian woman. For example, in "South Fork, Kentucky River," the speaker illustrates how place plays a formative role by personifying South Fork, who "lives in the shadows of the mountains just big enough / to mine."^[35] Addressing South Fork directly as her audience and evoking coal mining in the region, the persona describes her relationship with South Fork as troubled, noting, "You can't wash him out."^[36] The speaker closes with South Fork's ongoing influence:

South Fork will tug that string in your belly,
the one way down deep, and even when you're far away and
glad of it,
even if you've never left, a part of you will ache cause you might
try to leave South Fork, but, honey, South Fork don't ever leave
you.^[37]

This powerful statement on the enduring hold of this river region on the speaker reflects a common theme in recent Appalachian works about the unbreakable connection to place.

Silas House also uses a river and subsequent flood to explore LGBTQIAAP2S+ issues in his 2018 novel, *Southernmost*. Initially set in rural Tennessee, the novel follows a Pentecostal preacher's journey from intolerance to tolerance and love as he seeks to reconcile with his gay

brother. In 2023, House was named Kentucky's poet laureate, the first openly gay writer to serve in the role. Family ties are also significant in **Carter Sickels's** *The Prettiest Star* (2020), as a young man with AIDS in the 1980s returns to his Appalachian hometown in southern Ohio to die.

A connection to place also informs much of the work of **Affrilachian** poets, who confront the myth of a White Appalachia through their writings. **Frank X Walker**, who coined the term *Affrilachia*, explores what it means to be a Kentuckian in his poem "Kentucke," dedicated to James Still:

i too am of the hills
my folks
have corn rowed
tobacco
laid track
strip mined
worshiped & whiskied
from Harlan to Maysville
old Dunbar to Central.[\[38\]](#)

These lines show the speaker's identity is inextricably linked to the past and present of Kentucky, from its tobacco farming to its coal mining, from one end of the state to the other. Appointed as Kentucky's youngest poet laureate from 2013 to 2015, Walker was also the first Black author to hold the position.

From 2021 to 2022, Crystal Wilkinson was Kentucky's second Black writer to serve as poet laureate in the state. Her poetry also evokes the history of Kentucky's economy and her own family history, as seen in her poem "O Tobacco." The speaker remembers her grandfather and his tireless work in the tobacco fields. Addressing tobacco, the speaker states,

Just like family you were
coddled
cuddled
coaxed
into making him proud.[\[39\]](#)

While Wilkinson received much acclaim for her volume of poetry called *Perfect Black* (2021), she is a multi-genre and genre-blending author, including works such as *Blackberries*, *Blackberries* (2000), *Water Street* (2002), *The Birds of Opulence* (2016), and *Praisesong for the Kitchen Ghosts* (2024), which is part memoir, part recipe book. The Affrilachian poets provide a more expansive view of the region and Appalachian identity through recognizing tradition while acknowledging the unhealthy aspects of living in Kentucky, such as generational labor in tobacco and coal.

Appalachian literature is expansive in genre as well as in representation of identity. **Robert Gipe** is a novelist and community organizer who has been part of the outdoor drama production of *Higher Ground* in Harlan since its origin in 2008 and continues to make sure the performances are timely. Gipe has also received high acclaim for his graphic novels *Trampoline* (2015), *Weedeater* (2020), and *Pop* (2021), which form his Canard County Trilogy. His works feature working-class Appalachian characters who confront issues like addiction, environmental justice, and violence.

Ultimately, Appalachian literature at its best shows the region and its people in their nuanced complexity, not as caricatures. While local color writers relied on stereotypes, the travel-writing aspect of that movement inspired people like Horace Kephart to work tirelessly to protect the Great Smoky Mountains and inspired contemporary writers like Robert Morgan and Ron Rash to pick up the mantle. **Modernist** writers of Appalachia set a high standard for those who followed and proved that one need not be from Appalachia to become of it. **Contemporary** Appalachian writers continue this tradition of writing *of* and *for* the region as they highlight environmental and social justice issues in their works as well as the diversity of experience among Appalachian people. In *Appalachian Elegy* (2012), **bell hooks** captures this sentiment:

While I do not claim an identity as Appalachian, I do claim a solidarity, a sense of belonging, that makes me one with the Appalachian past of my ancestors, black, Native American, white, all “people of one blood” who made homeplace in isolated landscapes where they could invent themselves, where they could savor a taste of freedom. [\[40\]](#)

This sense of unity and purpose characterizes literature of Appalachia, and with so many current Appalachian writers' attendance at the **Appalachian Writers Workshop** in Hindman, this generation of authors continues creating works that present the rich complexity of the region and its people, supporting each other's artistry, and carving a deep Appalachian niche in American literature.

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[4] Miller, "Appalachian Literature," 23.
[5] Ibid, 25.
[6] Shelby, "Appalachian Literature," 31.
[7] Ibid, 32.
[8] Green and Locklear, "Writing Appalachia," 62-87.
[9] O'Donnell and Hollingsworth, *Seekers of Scenery*, 2.
[10] Engelhardt, *The Tangled Roots of Feminism*, 103.
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[17] Ibid, 10.
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[19] Rash, *Serena*, 117.
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Appalshop and Appalachian Agency

Catherine Herdman

In American mainstream culture, much of the understanding of Appalachian identity is informed, and too often misinformed, by well over a century of stereotypes, both positive and negative, consistently reinforced by every print and visual medium in mainstream American culture. The tapestry of the space Appalachia occupies in American national culture is quite complex—too complex to thrash out fully in a brief essay. However, it is possible at this point, a couple decades into the 21st century and 50+ years into the Appalachian Studies movement, to begin to synthesize an emerging picture of where ideas about the region and its inhabitants originated and why they are still so stunningly pervasive. Just as the region is not a fixed geographic “place,” its culture is diverse, and ideas about both are amorphous. As a whole, Appalachia is best understood as an ever-evolving, fragmented process of negotiation and construction between individuals, communities, artists, activists, politicians, corporations, and other cultural actors deliberately and unintentionally reinvigorating particular narratives about the region and its inhabitants and/or overtly challenging and redefining them.

Ideas about Appalachia permeate many aspects of the American experience, including debates about fossil fuels, political conflict (and theater), benevolent dedication to issues associated with domestic poverty, and university **Appalachian Studies** programs, to name a few. Representations abound of the region in print and visual media output—magazine articles, comics, film, literature, television, and music. One particular group in the region has been dedicated to reframing Appalachia in media by providing opportunities for “Appalachians Speaking for Themselves” in the midst of it. Since its humble beginnings in 1969, **Appalshop**, [\[1\]](#) a media and arts collective in Whitesburg, Kentucky, has modeled an inspiring example of how adherents to a would-be victimized culture can reclaim some control over how others see them and, more

importantly, how people within the culture view themselves. In order to understand the impact of portrayals of the region in media and Appalachia's role in providing much-needed balance, it is necessary to explore the origin of the idea of "Appalachia," the propagation of prevalent stereotypes in a variety of media,^[2] the emergence of an Appalachian social and identity movement in the 1970s, and new directions of Appalachian identity in mainstream media in the 21st century.

The Origins of the Idea of Appalachian Identity

The predominant idea underlying Appalachian identity is that Appalachia's culture and inhabitants are distinct from mainstream or "regular" Americans. In his influential work on the construction of Appalachian identity, *Appalachia on Our Mind* (1978), Henry Shapiro argued convincingly that the idea of Appalachia as a region out of step with mainstream America—what he terms the "discovery" of Appalachia—emerged between 1870 and 1900.^[3] The first occurrence he found of published material rooted in this idea was a **local color** piece in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1873 titled "A Strange Land and a Peculiar People."^[4] The basis of the local color movement was to find and expose pockets of unique culture that were persisting in the face of a homogenizing national American culture in the decades following the end of the **Civil War**. Though largely written by people that were by any definition outsiders to these subcultures, readers often regarded the works as authentic. Local color writers did not invent Appalachia, but rather they described for their eager readers an idea that had already taken root—Appalachia was a distinct place with a backwards culture. Its people were "Others" in relation to new ideas about what it meant to be American in the decades following the Civil War and during the period of rapid industrialization at the national level.

This idea that the people of Appalachia were distinctly backward took hold in a powerful way in the context of an emerging "uplift" narrative espoused by benevolent organizations. **Berea College** president **William Goodell Frost** described the phenomena perhaps more favorably than local color writers when he characterized Appalachian mountain people as "Our Contemporary Ancestors" and argued for the need to help the region.

[5] However, the notion that something wasn't right in the region, with little nuance regarding different communities and experiences, clearly underlies even this surface-level compassionate interpretation of it. In concert with Berea College, Northern missionary groups engaged in decades of "benevolent" work and reiterated this narrative through advertising, appeals for funding, catalog sales of "authentic" Appalachian material **folklife**, and several monographs describing the region from their points of view. In addition to establishing Appalachia as a place dragging behind, this depiction further solidified a powerful corollary—the region was a problem that needed fixing. [6]

Scholars have debated at length about why this identity was so compelling—why did it seem so different, so exotic, so frozen in time, and so needing and deserving of outsider "help"? Certainly, one factor is the historical context of an emerging national culture in America that followed the Civil War and the rapid **industrialization** afterward. It is not a coincidence that the idea of a distinct Appalachia occurred during the same decades. In a general sense, a homogenizing national culture very different from what preceded the war unsurprisingly drew attention to those "pockets" that were lagging behind. [7] The urban areas on the fringes of the mountains were not treated as part of the region, so as the emphasis turned to large cities in America, Appalachia had none. In a more specific context, industrialists from outside the region were buying up land and developing the infrastructure to begin to exploit parts of the region for its natural resources—specifically timber and coal. Painting Appalachians as backward-looking people who stood in the way of "progress" [8] as defined by industrialists and outside capital investors directly served their interests. As speculators and investors gobbled up the land abundant in natural resources, often with ethically and even legally questionable methods, branding any holdouts as savage **hillbillies** helped to clear the way. Certainly, one major motivation for the "discovery" of Appalachia and its pervasiveness in today's American cultural landscape is simple: profit.

However, profit motive is an oversimplification, because clearly this idea was not confined to those that stood to gain directly. What motivation did others—both inside and outside the region—possess to internalize and spread the idea that Appalachia was different? Shapiro framed American interest in the region at this particular time as a flexible dichotomy. If a

person was critical or fearful of the emerging industrial, comparatively homogeneous post-Civil War American economy and culture, then they could find reassurance and comfort in the idea of a place frozen in (**pre-industrial**, pre-emancipation) time. If a person saw the changes as positive, then they might feel justified in the portrayal of the region and its inhabitants as backward, violent, and out of touch with the modern world—as savages that threatened to slow the march of inevitable and beneficial progress. Both were powerful and compelling narratives.

Appalachia in Media

Nowhere did the idea of a distinct Appalachia spread more quickly or reach a wider audience than in mass popular print, visual, and musical culture. It is well understood that stories are an important part of any culture—both the stories people tell themselves and each other as well as the stories that others tell from the outside. In the 20th century, America's cultural stories were primarily told through words and images in magazines and books, on the screen in film and television, and over airwaves with music. As technology related to publishing, radio, film, recorded music, and television expanded, American national culture became more cohesive; as Americans began to read, watch, and listen to much of the same cultural output, ideas about Appalachian identity spread with them.

Print Magazines, Comics, and Literature

The spread of ideas about Appalachian **Otherness** in media was largely determined by technology, and print media was the first to propagate it widely. Travel articles written in the style of local color, usually published in serial installments, were the first places Appalachian Otherness showed up in mainstream American culture. As the scope of printed material grew and became more homogenized, comics and other illustrations continued to perpetuate the popularity of stereotyped rural, White, and poor characters. By the first decade of the 20th century, when the word **hillbilly** became the most popular way to describe poor White mountain people, the prevalent traits were familiar already—poverty, violence, bad hygiene, resistance to progress, pathological kinship ties, and ignorance permeated portrayals of

the region.^[9] Though certainly more nuanced than comics, more serious literature like the works of **John Fox, Jr.**, lent credibility to the idea that Appalachians were out of step with mainstream America and feared any intrusion from the “furriners” beyond the mountains.^[10] And as a note on the popularity of stories of the region in the early 20th century, his *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, published in 1908, was the first American novel to sell one million copies.

Film and Television

Popular culture in the early 20th century continued to feature many iterations of what had become an American icon—the hillbilly. And the significance of hillbilly and Appalachian characters in American film, and later television, only grew stronger as technology expanded the reach of these popular culture media over the course of the 20th century. In *HillbillyLand* (1995), a thorough study of Appalachian themes in the silent film era, Jerry W. Williamson explores several archetypes ascribed to mountain people, or hillbillies, in the over 400 films that featured them. He discusses familiar Appalachian tropes such as backwardness, family and kinship ties, and poverty that are intended to “flatter, frighten, and humiliate” the viewers.^[11] But by far Williamson and others who study Appalachia in popular media put the most emphasis on two archetypes—hillbilly as comic fool and hillbilly as dangerous savage. These archetypes, rooted in the late 1800s, were a mainstay in the radio and silent film era, remaining consistent through the advent of TV and are still popular (if lazy) choices for content creators in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Music

Like film, over the course of the 20th century, technological advances took music from a mostly local social activity to mass media with an unimaginable scope of cultural influence. American country music has its roots in Appalachia in a direct way. In 1927, a recording studio held a call for musicians in Bristol, Virginia, effectively launching the careers of several

prominent early country stars and ensuring that later Nashville country would be strongly influenced by musicians from the region. However, the less organic, more stereotyped version of Appalachian identity was more popular. Many musicians dressed up like hillbillies and faked Southern accents both to draw listeners and to suggest “authentic” roots. The first waves of recorded, marketed, and widely distributed music in America drew from the dual sources of what was traditional lower-class culture—poor White and poor Black music—country and blues. However, like with film, the focus was on one-dimensional characters, and it is fair to assert that pop music featuring what can be understood as Appalachian themes had little to do with the actual **lived experience** of most residents in the region.

While it mirrored film in the ways technology influenced scope and nuance was ignored in favor of easy profits, music offered some key differences as a medium. Where print and film representations were more about characters, music focused on style and content. It also opened the door to more pushback earlier than film or television, mostly because it was simpler to create and didn’t require the high-tech equipment film and TV required; sophisticated production was largely unavailable to the masses until later in the 20th century. For example, during the **Bloody Harlan** strikes of the early 1930s, musicians from the region like **Sara Ogan Gunning** began to use older, traditional forms such as **ballads** to express devastating experiences and radical ideas about the economy, the government, and what it means to be both Appalachian and American.

[12] The **Bristol Sessions** ensured the region had a strong influence on popular “country” music, and the defection of musicians like Gunning and others to Greenwich Village during times of intense economic strife meant they would have a significant influence on the less commercially driven **folk revival** of the 1930s as well. [13] This era offered a major turning point: the roots of Appalachian musicians rawly expressing their pain as the industrial dream failed to materialize for most workers and defining what it meant to be Appalachian on their own terms. [14] Decades later, this era would grow into what can rightly be termed as both an Appalachian cultural renaissance and a social identity movement.

While it is clear that mass popular culture vehicles such as film, music, and comics expanded the audience for Appalachian stereotypes, what is less clear is exactly why hillbilly and Appalachian icons were such a big draw.

Why did audiences respond to portrayal after portrayal of poor White people acting foolish or threatening? Anthony Harkins, Jerry Williamson, and others who have closely studied cultural phenomena of Appalachian stereotyping reach similar conclusions to Shapiro: America needs hillbillies. Like other iconic character types, hillbilly characters help Americans to resolve **cognitive dissonance** about modernization.

David Hsiung proposed four reasons that Appalachian stereotypes have remained so persistently pervasive.^[15] Two relate to the reasons why people, companies, organizations, governments, and other institutions produce them so prolifically. First, stereotypes related to Appalachian identity are flexible—they can mean almost anything in a wide variety of contexts because “no people or place can be described uniformly.”^[16] And because of that, among other things, they are profitable. The other two relate more specifically to why people consume cultural and artistic output that relies so heavily on overgeneralized characterizations. Hsiung asserts that stereotypes of rural poverty remain popular because they can serve as a “release for mainstream middle America’s fears”^[17] and that “by putting down someone else, ...[people] feel better about themselves.”^[18] In the late 19th century, Appalachia as an “Other” in the context of American nation-building was appealing because it served a variety of seemingly contradictory psychological needs. If a person were dissatisfied with modern America, a way to critique the erosion of a bygone way of life—even an imagined one—was to make Appalachia a place frozen in time, a better time. Conversely, if a person were interested in, or especially stood to profit from, industrialization and the rapid social changes that accompanied it, “traditional” Appalachian culture became an impediment and, for some, even a pathology. Negative generalizations provided justification for disrupting Appalachian communities and wielding power against anyone that stood in the way of “progress” as they defined it.

While it is impossible to pin down exactly why people have been drawn to the idea of stereotypical hillbillies and Appalachians, it is also impossible to deny the strong link between economic self-interest and the production of images, sounds, and texts associated with Appalachian identity. The question of who defines culture, whether it is by outsiders or members within the culture, is ultimately a question of power and resources. In the 1960s and 1970s, the power dynamics that had allowed an almost

unanswered flood of negative images and characterizations of the region began to shift—at least a little bit.

Appalshop and the Appalachian Identity Movement

Prior to the 1960s, music is the best example of the complexity of mountain people countering negative portrayals of Appalachian identity. But due to the **civil rights movement**, and numerous identity movements that followed, resistance to oversimplified characterizations of the region took on a new life. From this point forward, Appalachian identity is best understood as a political, **social construction** and the negotiation over who controls perception of it is best understood as a social movement. At a national level, the new chapter starts with the **War on Poverty**. While the War on Poverty attempted to address the very real economic problems the region faced in the 1960s, it was in large part a reaction to and reinforcement of Appalachian Otherness, as well as the idea that government programs would be bestowed upon deserving, true (sometimes also implying “White”) Americans. The region was reeling from mechanization of the coal industry and the accompanying **outmigration**. National news media attention turned to the region, and journalists mined it for the most sensationalist images and stories they could capture. For example, a 1964 CBS news story called *Christmas in Appalachia* highlighted the abject poverty of one family.^[19] It features images of children eating dirt, a home using old magazines as wallpaper, and benevolent outsiders bestowing shoes upon the pitifully depicted Appalachian people. Similarly, a *Life* magazine spread in 1964 called “The Valley of Poverty,” featuring the stark photography of John Dominis and text by Michael Murphy, focused only on the poorest, “disease-ridden and unschooled” people in Appalachia and featured images that were the most shocking to mainstream, middle-class Americans.^[20]

In many ways, the War on Poverty coverage mirrored the negative portrayals of previous decades. However, in this era of liberal optimism, mainstream America viewed Appalachia in a similar way as the missionary groups had seen it earlier in the century—as a problem that could be fixed. In order to attempt a fix, the federal government created an alphabet soup of

agencies aimed at alleviating poverty and elevating what was clearly perceived as a denigrated region not sharing equally in the big American pie of economic success following **World War II**. The conflicts that ensued between federal and local control of both narratives and resources reflect the deeply complex negotiation about the region, its culture, and its inhabitants that had been brewing under the surface for decades.

When it comes to representations of Appalachia in media, one relatively small program, the **Community Film Workshop of Appalachia** (CFWA), unintentionally made the most difference in the ongoing conversation between the region and the nation from a cultural point of view.

In 1969, the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) funded eleven film workshops across the country. The goal of the workshops was to combat a lack of **marginalized** voices in mainstream media—particularly film. Ten of them came from communities identified as benign home to racially and ethnically marginalized populations, including an **Indigenous** reservation, Harlem, Puerto Rico, and other areas predominantly populated by marginalized communities. The eleventh was in what most would identify as part of the heart of Appalachia in the small town of Whitesburg, Kentucky. Its goal was to counterbalance stereotypical portrayals of minorities as a result of a lack of representation among the creators of American media. It is remarkable that a predominantly White community was identified, even then, an economic minority who also suffered from negative portrayals in mainstream media.

More remarkable, though, is how Appalshop, mostly a film workshop that was limited in scope and with sparse funding, grew into an artist-controlled multi-media and arts organization that is still dedicated to Appalachian agency—residents who speak for and about themselves—through film, radio, visual arts, roadside theater, and other media. These new technologies increased the utility and effectiveness of documentary film in social movements for justice, equality, and rights of populations emerging from countercultures and marginalized populations that challenged the status quo in American society. Appalshop's genesis was also an integral part of a renewed interest in Appalachian history, culture, and society—an Appalachian renaissance in the 1960s and 1970s. It provided a window to a wide slice of American history, culture, and media in the midst of profound transformation. Rapidly improving recording technology was part of the inspiration for the film programs. OEO program funding provided access to expensive

equipment that made the workshop student-artists' work possible. For the first time, amateurs could more easily transport and use cameras capable of synchronous sound recording. The students at CFWA were immediately more interested in filmmaking than in job training—in part because they had little hope of securing employment in the target fields without relocating away from home. The program required one three-minute practice film, but the first CFWA film was ten minutes in length and subsequent films were increasingly longer and more in-depth.

When the program funding ran out in 1971, the director and some of the original students were able to keep the equipment and continued to produce documentaries about communities in the Appalachian region under the name of Appalshop.^[21] They applied for and received grants from such organizations as the **National Endowment for the Humanities**, and Appalshop quickly became both an integral part of the Appalachian renaissance and a salient example of cutting-edge international trends in documentary filmmaking made possible by the newly available technological advancements. Appalshop artists began screening their films almost immediately. They were generally well received and, in some cases, celebrated with glowing reviews and awards. In creating these films, the students at the CFWA were participating in the international trend in documentary filmmaking.

In the 1970s Appalachia reached a level of cultural self-consciousness. *Appalachian Genesis* was Appalshop's first film in 1971, the same year hillbilly buffoons and monsters abounded in examples like *Hee Haw* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* on TV and the Oscar-nominated film *Deliverance*, portraying mountain people as unsophisticated and foolish. Within the region, this era is the start of an outpouring of people expressing their experiences and insights about the region through written word, music, and visual media that truly did not exist before. The kindling of strong traditions, especially in music, was there, but Appalshop, the Appalachian Studies movement, and a host of other organizations, artists, activists, and scholars lit a massive fire in the 1970s that continues to burn brightly. These people have successfully wrested at least some of the power to create, define, and exhibit the many things it means to be Appalachian. Appalshop entered the national dialogue about what it means to be Appalachian. While the specifics of individual film topics and style are fascinating, it helped to re-define Appalachian identity. Appalshop was part of a larger social identity movement in the

wake of the civil rights movement that went beyond art and music and included an Appalachian Studies movement and what can reasonably be termed an **Appalachian Renaissance** of culture and art from within the region.

Appalachian Identity in the Late 20th- 21st Century

The comparatively thoughtful and esoteric Appalachian Renaissance did not stop the pervasive use of stereotypical images any more than the civil rights movement, the women's movement, or other social justice identity movements stopped the stereotyped versions of Others dominating American culture. However, the mechanisms to at least try to push back on the worst offenses have come alive. In popular media, characterizations are often sometimes one-dimensional and riddled with stereotypes, such as less-than-artistic films like *Wrong Turn* that depicted quasi-human monsters that lurk just off the beaten path in the region. Yet, the simplistic mainstream view has been countered with powerful statements about real issues facing the region like environmental destruction, labor conflicts, prescription drug abuse, and the devastation of poverty with progressively more inspirational characters in films appear in titles like *Matewan* (1987), *October Sky* (1999), *Cold Mountain* (2003), and others. Perhaps the best example of self-consciousness of stereotypes is the playful horror film *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* (2010). The main characters still look a lot like the hillbillies of the early 20th century, but in a meta-stereotype switch, the vapid college students that would typically be the victims in a classic horror scenario are actually the monsters while Tucker and Dale are kind and insightful and manage to save the day.

America's hillbillies are noticeably a little more complex than they were in the early 20th century, and in the 21st century revival of documentary filmmaking, writers have offered more in-depth discussion of mass culture's use of Appalachian and hillbilly themes. Journalist and filmmaker **Elaine McMillion Sheldon** explored the boom-and-bust nature of coal towns via *Hollow* (2013), an interactive documentary with web-based storytelling that

focused on lived experiences in McDowell County in her home state of West Virginia. Similarly, Appalachian Kentucky-born filmmaker **Ashley York** tackled ongoing stereotypes in *Hillbilly* (2018), co-directed with Sally Rubin, complicating cultural perceptions with personal interviews of family members, workers, artists, and writers who illustrate the media-driven and political exploitation of Appalachia as a monolithic region.

Another example of cultural pushback occurred when the **Center for Rural Strategies**, also out of Whitesburg, took out full-page ads as part of an organized campaign to stop a reality show called *The True Adventures of the Real Beverly Hillbillies* (2007). It is not clear to what degree their efforts were the deciding factor, but the show never aired, which can be viewed as a small victory. However, what is perplexing is that numerous people were willing to participate and even celebrate such a show. And numerous other reality shows with Appalachian themes were made, including *Moonshiners* (2011), *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (2012), and the popular *Call of the Wildman* (2011), featuring the infamous **Turtle Man of Kentucky**. Perhaps the best known is the *Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia* (2009)—based on the descendants of famous outlaw dancer **Jessco White**. It is a microcosm of the contradictions of Appalachian identity in the late 20th and 21st centuries.

Perhaps **OxyContin** has replaced moonshining, but Appalachian themes in media still revolve around poverty, ignorance, and a resistance to progress in many forms. What makes it even more complex is that some people within the region have embraced hillbilly identity and attempted to co-opt negative portrayals by reframing them as positive—some in ways that are inspiring, and others in ways that are shameful. The stereotypes have taken on a life of their own. This seemingly contradictory trend is on full display in the **Hillbilly Days** festival in Pikeville, Kentucky, held since 1977. It draws the second-largest crowds in the state after the **Kentucky Derby**, and it is hard to make a case to students that this festival is somehow offensive. Many of them have attended and had a great time at the event. They believe it is for a good cause. However, the act of middle-class and higher-income earners dressing up like poor people and walking around with “hillbilly” teeth in, carrying jugs marked “XXX,” all funded in large part by big coal, encapsulates the contradiction.

A reiteration of the contradictory notions of the region hit the mainstream U.S. zeitgeist in 2020: the film interpretation of J.D. Vance's controversial memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, published in 2016. Produced by Netflix and directed by acclaimed and popular director Ron Howard, it embodies the complex nuances of what it means to be Appalachian in America. While scholars have raised serious and reasonable objections to its negative portrayal of the region, many viewers see something else in it—the opportunity to confront and understand aspects of their upbringing that were painful along with pathologies that influenced their worldviews. Ultimately, even the choice to focus on this kind of story rather than something more substantive that might portray a more balanced view of the region itself reflects the degradation of Appalachian identity for over a century in media, and the missing context of why these people might find themselves with a limited range of choices is an even graver sin of omission. However, industry people know well what consumers will respond to and the popularity of the book and its film adaptation belies the idea that it is really out of step with how outsiders and even many within the region view Appalachia.

Appalshop, on the other hand, is thriving in the 21st century—adapting to meet new challenges, such as the flood of 2022 that devastated their teaching facilities, destroyed their filming equipment, and damaged their archive. [\[22\]](#) The organization persists in its goal to realize the potential of new technologies in creative and effective ways and providing each new generation of Appalachians with a voice to define for themselves what their experiences in the mountains mean to them. Within Appalachian media, Appalshop has been a cultural leader, offering representation of non-White communities with over eighty film titles, interviews, and artifact collections that pertain directly to the Black community within Appalachia. The organization has also depicted the **LGBTQQIAAP2S+** community, with such queer content-specific films as *Belinda* (1992), *Through Their Eyes: Stories of Gays and Lesbians in the Mountains* (1999), *Zero Tolerance* (2006), *A Little Piece of Me* (2011), *Not a Daughter* (2016), and *Welcome to Dragalachia* (2013) among others that mention queer identity in Appalachia.

With cautious optimism, it is possible now to assert that even mainstream culture has adapted to a more nuanced view of the region and its

culture in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. As an increasing number of Appalachian residents comes out, artists from the region have been outspoken in their support. For example, award-winning country musicians like **Tyler Childers**, **Kacey Musgraves**, and **Chris Stapleton** among others have achieved commercial success without resorting to monolithic stereotypes of rural White people, and they have made music as well as public statements about their support of marginalized communities, willing to take the risk of losing some politically conservative fans who disagree.

[23] In 2023 when Childers released “In Your Love” and its accompanying video that showed positive treatment of the relationship between two gay men, some backlash occurred, but others point to his allyship as the non-conformist tradition of country music, categorizing Childers’ song “what real outlaw country is.” [24] Musgraves actively supports the LGBTQIAAP2S+ community, speaking out against discriminatory laws and collaborating with queer artists and drag performers. [25] In interviews and on tours, Chris Stapleton has denounced racism and voiced his support of Black Lives Matter. [26]

Conclusion

Like Appalshop, Appalachian Studies programs at universities and the journals, books, classes, and studies continue to view Appalachian-ness as an identity movement, acknowledging all the complexities and contradictions that academic study of any group brings to the table. However, scholars since the 1970s have embarked in countless research that exhibits a diverse and complex region of people that defy the generalizations and stereotypes that permeated media representations of the region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Appalachian identity is a construct with a long history and seemingly unfailing resilience. People relate to it. Its media depiction makes money. And while there is a long tradition of Appalachian culture, Americans are not immune to the draw of a simpler, sensationalistic version of Appalachia. But constructed identities are a double-edged sword. They can divide as much as they can unite. While there is something inspiring about people embracing

Appalachian identity and defining it for themselves in a more positive way, it is impossible to ignore the underlying idea that the region is somehow, as a whole, distinct from mainstream American culture. This popular notion will continue to have devastating consequences—politically, environmentally, and personally to people who identify as Appalachian and must confront a dark history of portrayals that fail to illustrate who they are.

It is much too limited to view Appalshop and other organizations and individuals that act with integrity in constructing Appalachian identity as a “solution” to negative portrayals of the region. More accurately, these makers are models of agency and serve as beacons in the conversation of Appalachian identity. On one level, Appalachian identity is largely controlled by people in power and corporations with clear agendas; on another, it is a conversation between cultural actors that plays out in a wide variety of media; and on still another level—likely the most salient—it is a personal choice, hopefully the result of a mix of critical analysis and gut feeling, that everyone related to the region makes and revises over the course of their lives.

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[1] For a searchable list of all productions, see Appalshop Archives, <https://www.appalshoparchive.org/>

[2] Waller, *Feud*, 221.

[3] Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind*, 4.

[4] Harney, “A Strange Land and a Peculiar People,” 430-38.

[5] Frost, “Our Contemporary Ancestors,” 318-19.

[6] Curiously, despite strong religious traditions in the region, in addition to other assumptions about Appalachian “Otherness,” some mainstream denominations propagated the idea that it was “unchurched” because their own version of Christianity had not penetrated local customs.

[7] Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine*, 116-18.

[8] McCoy and Watkins, “Stereotypes of Appalachian Migrants,” 29.

[9] Within national popular culture, different names have been used to describe Appalachian or Southern mountain characters, but by far the most popular is hillbilly. While it must be made clear that all hillbillies are not from Appalachia and not all Appalachians consider themselves hillbillies, the overlap is significant enough that it’s impossible to discuss Appalachia in media without simultaneously addressing the hillbilly icon.

[10] Fox, *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, 50.

[11] Williamson, *Hillbillyland*, 2.

- [12] Billings and Black, "*A Strike against Starvation and Terror*": *An Archival Exercise Exploring a Coal Miners' Strike*.
- [13] Malone, "Music," 117-18.
- [14] Salstrom, "The Great Depression," 77.
- [15] Hsiung, "Stereotypes," 101-13.
- [16] Ibid, 102-03.
- [17] Ibid, 108.
- [18] Ibid, 108.
- [19] Kuralt, *Christmas in Appalachia*, 28:43.
- [20] Murphy, "The Valley of Poverty," 54-65.
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Appalachian Agriculture and Food Systems

Amanda Green

From the agricultural practices of the Shawnee and Cherokee to the contemporary field-to-fork operations of Appalachian farmers and chefs reclaiming their traditional foodways, Appalachian food and agriculture creates its own niche in American culture. Many forces have shaped

Appalachian agriculture and **food systems**,^[1] including the people, mountains, valleys, waterways, and more-than-human worlds of Appalachia. Moreover, processes of colonization, immigration, globalization, and climate change have significantly impacted current agricultural practices and food systems. Appalachian agriculture and food systems include concepts from food studies, including horticulture, agriculture, agrobiodiversity, cultural memory, food sovereignty, food security, and food deserts.

Introduction to Anthropology

Cultural anthropology studies agriculture and food systems using anthropological field methods, including observation and interviewing. The ideal way to understand food cultures comes from **ethnography**, which is living and interacting with a community of people over an extended period of time, intentionally participating in their lives, and using observations and interviews to learn more about food systems, from the study of ramps and apples to food security in Appalachia.

What Is Appalachian Food?

Appalachian cookbook writer Ronni Lundy rhetorically asks readers to consider this question: “How can you assert a purely Anglo-Saxon and profoundly isolated culture when you discover that those same shuck beans are a German creation and that the traditions of the region also include Italian, Swiss, African American, and Native American foodways?”^[2] In asking this question, Lundy emphasizes that Appalachia is not an isolated region and its foodways don’t reflect isolation. Instead, they reflect the ongoing processes of colonization and globalization. **Globalization** refers to the increased circulation of goods, capital, ideas, and people at greater and greater speeds through worldwide intensification of interactions, while **colonization**, including **European** colonization of North America, is the process by which states extend their power beyond their borders in order to secure access to raw materials, cheap labor, and markets.^[3] Both processes generate change and inequalities, particularly in food systems.

Agricultural Transformations in Appalachia

In the contemporary social construction of Appalachia, agriculture is envisioned as the predominant way of life, characterizing Appalachians as “ancient” folks of the holler who live in harmony with nature.

^[4] Historically, Appalachia was certainly an agrarian landscape, but by the year 2000, only 2% of Appalachian residents earned their primary income from agriculture, and less than 3% of households are classified as rural-farm. Simultaneously, Appalachian consumers spent more per capita in direct farm sales (purchasing directly from the farmer at a farm stand or farmers market) than the rest of the country, indicating that Appalachians continue to prize local agriculture.^[5]

Native Foodways, Food Foraging, Horticulture, and Agriculture

The earliest documented people arrived in Appalachia around 8,000 years ago. They were likely food foragers, subsisting through fishing, hunting,

and gathering plants and following animal and plant resources by season. Agricultural transformations began in **southern Appalachia** approximately 5,000 years ago. **Horticulture**, the cultivation of plants for subsistence largely through small garden plots, dates to about 2,300 years back, and by AD 800, distributed settlements were found in the region indicating the rise of agriculture. **Agriculture**, an intensive farming strategy where land is permanently cultivated and a surplus of food is created, took hold prior to European contact.^[6] Chenopod, little barley, maygrass, knotweed, gourds, **squash**, sunflower, sumpweed, and eventually tobacco as well as **maize (corn)** grew as crops in these regions. The **Mississippian period** (AD 1200-1450) is the first clear agriculture transition, spreading from the Central Mississippi Valley. This time period was characterized by forest clearings to convert land to use for agriculture and maize-growing and mound-building practices.

With the collapse of the mound-building and corn-growing cultures of the Mississippian period, the **Cherokee** emerged as the Appalachian region's primary inhabitants. While the Cherokee likely have a 4,000-year cultural history in the region,^[7] it was not until 1690 that the Cherokee became the principal group in Appalachia with a population of approximately 12,000 and a territory of 322,600 square miles that included what is now Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, South and North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia.^[8]

The iconic garden meal of corn, **beans**, and squash is rooted in the **Indigenous** (specifically **Haudenosaunee** or **Iroquois**) tradition of planting these companion plants together. The cultivation of maize-beans-squash (commonly called "**the Three Sisters**") would have been supplemented by hunting, fishing, and collecting of wild plants. Women played a significant role in these foodways. Women tended to farm large communal tracts and small garden plots, and they were also responsible for storage of communal foods and management of communal lands.^[9] They gathered raw materials, carried water, guarded crops, and prepared the food. Women would also transport hunted foods and butcher them. With the onset of European colonization of Appalachia in the 1600s, Cherokee culture blended with the emerging settler mountain culture of the **English, Scottish, Irish, and Germans**. The Cherokee shifted from a subsistence and hunting lifestyle to

full-time agriculture, coming to rely on cattle introduced by Europeans. This culturally blended style of farming in the American Southeast lasted until 1838-1839, when the U.S. Government forced the Cherokee from their historic homelands with the Indian Removal Act.^[10] This forced removal, now referred to as the **Trail of Tears**, led to the establishment of the Eastern and Western Bands of Cherokee, with the eventual establishment of sovereign Cherokee territories in western North Carolina and Oklahoma.

Maize: Indigenous Knowledge and Origin Myths

The contributions of Native foods to Appalachian foodways have historically been erased from popular conceptions of Southern and Appalachian culture. Yet the Native South included a vast array of agricultural practices and technologies, such as the Three Sisters, that contributed to a varied and nutritious diet for both Indigenous peoples and settlers. According to Rayna Green, Indigenous communities of the Southeast shared many foodways skills with settlers, the most important perhaps being the combination of maize with beans for a protein and amino-rich diet based on hominy, cornbread, soups, and mushes such as grits and tamales.

^[11] These dishes were prepared with limed corn or ash that contain Vitamin B3. This vitamin is essential to preventing niacin deficiency, a condition which can lead to pellagra, a disease causing skin inflammation, diarrhea, and dementia. Early **Spanish** settlers quickly adapted these culinary tricks, while early **British** colonists refused to recognize the value of these Native food technologies until pellagra was widespread in their populations.^[12]

Maize is sacred to many Indigenous peoples of the Americas, including the Cherokee. Selu, also called Grandmother Corn or the **Corn Mother** in Cherokee tradition, is credited as the originator of corn.^[13] Selu gave the first Cherokee instructions to gather the kernels that sprouted from the site where her body was buried.^[14] In the book *Selu*, Marilou Awiakta describes the Selu **origin myth**^[15] along with the **Original Instructions**^[16] that describe how to grow corn with the best agricultural practices for optimal nutritional and spiritual effects.^[17] Awiakta uses essays, stories, and poetry to convey the blend of science and Indigenous

wisdom within the staple crop of corn.^[18] Corn, while sacred for Indigenous peoples, is also ubiquitous in American diets. In fact, renowned author Michael Pollan discovered that corn was in one quarter of U.S. grocery store food items, concluding that contemporary Americans are made of corn.^[19] From bags of popcorn to corn on the cob, bowls of cereal, shrimp and grits, or products sweetened with corn syrup (e.g., soda, energy drinks, candy, ketchup), many ordinary food products contain corn, but they have yet to contain the stories of Selu and the stories which reflect the Original Instructions.

Settler Foodways, Heirloom Varieties, and Agrobiodiversity

In addition to Indigenous foodways, the foodways of Appalachia are shaped by the original immigrants from **Africa, England, Germany, Ireland, and Scotland**, as well as later immigrants from **Spain, Italy, and Mexico**. The foodways associated with those first settlers are ones of scarcity and subsistence production, the food that fed the working classes of coal miners, factory workers, and millworkers. Seasonality shaped the first settler foodways as well. A hard winter would be followed by the first signs of spring: ramps and early greens like watercress (creasy greens), later by the first berries of spring and other forest products, such as the wild strawberry and nuts, as well as the morel **mushroom**. With summer's bounty came corn, beans, squash, potatoes, and **tomatoes**. In the fall, **apples, honey, and sorghum** syrup were processed while beans and corn were dried. Along with these crops, livestock such as sheep, cattle, and hogs were raised on the hillsides.

Cherokee and early settlers produced their food in small-scale diversified farming operations, which Chris Baker argues allowed Appalachians in the 1800s and 1900s to adapt to the changing conditions of life over two centuries.^[20] These changes included large-scale deforestation, mining, and the development of hydroelectric projects. Along with Indigenous foodways, these small-scale ventures fostered Appalachia's agrobiodiversity.

Agrobiodiversity (agricultural biodiversity) refers to the subset of biodiversity found in agriculture, the pool of genetic resources, and human agricultural, pastoral, and fishing systems that rely on and build that diversity in crops and animal species.^[21] Worldwide, higher agrobiodiversity levels are found in marginal areas and in marginalized groups.^[22] Similarly, in the **Mountain South**, scholars have found immense agrobiodiversity, perhaps making it the most diverse foodshed in North America.^[23] Agrobiodiversity erosion or loss is occurring at a rate of 1-2% per year, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization, and in Appalachia, this loss is also documented as genetic diversity is replaced by seed and livestock from industrial agriculture.^[24] Preserving agrobiodiversity is critical as it holds sources for new germplasm used to adapt to emerging pests, diseases, and extreme weather events associated with climate change.

James Veteto has spent his career working with communities who preserve the agrobiodiversity of Appalachia, from the orchardists of western Carolina to Cherokee and settler **seed keepers**^[25] across Appalachia and the Ozarks. Veteto's and others' mission to save and disseminate heirloom seeds fits under the framework of **food sovereignty**^[26] because it focuses on local and regional control over seeds within the food system. By the end of his research on heirloom seeds in the Appalachian South, Veteto identified 1,756 distinct varieties, which makes Appalachia the region with the highest known levels of agrobiodiversity in the U.S., **Canada**, and northern Mexico.^[27] A later inventory by RAFT (Renewing America's Food Traditions) found 1,412 varieties for southern Appalachia, including 667 varieties of apple and 485 varieties of bean grown in the region.^[28] Veteto found that heirloom varieties remain important in regional culinary traditions, family histories, and cultural memory. Moreover, the Eastern Band of Cherokee peoples are the originators of much knowledge, particularly with butter bean and squash varieties, and have worked to protect that knowledge.

Bill Best is also an honored seed keeper.^[29] With roots in Haywood County, North Carolina, Best's family passed knowledge of seeds and gardening from generation to generation, from his grandmother to his mother to himself. Best's research brings attention to the importance of everyday bean seed keepers as they migrate away from Appalachia, including

contemporary Appalachians who leave for urban centers as well as the Trail of Tears Bean taken by the Cherokee when they were forcibly removed from Appalachia to Indian Territory.^[30] Southern Appalachia may be the world's secondary center of bean diversity, only after Rwanda, a country located in sub-Saharan Africa.



Figure 1: Bill Best, pictured here, speaks at the University of Kentucky Food Connection on April 6, 2018. Best is the founder and co-director of the Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center in Berea, Kentucky. Photo by UK College of Agriculture (CC-NC-ND).

Best maintains an heirloom seed bank of over 200 green bean varieties of the Mountain South. He began selling his heirloom beans at the Lexington Farmers Market in the 1970s, and continues to sell them at the Berea Farmers Market in the 2020s.^[31] For decades, Best supplied eastern Kentucky transplants with the beans they grew up eating with their families. After a feature article about his beans appeared in the *Rural Kentuckian* (now *Kentucky Living*) in 1988, Best and collaborators became well-known for growing heirloom beans and folks started sending and trading seeds with him. Best's personal narrative emphasizes that **foodactivism**, efforts to change the food system to be more sustainable and more equitable, has been ongoing since the moment the industrial food system came into being. In considering

why his beans became so popular, Best reflected that he had tapped into “widespread unhappiness with the state of the modern food supply” in the 1980s.[32] Together with his son Michael Best, the two created the Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center to create a seed bank for heirloom beans and other vegetables from Appalachia. From across the country, people send him seeds and stories or seek out seed varieties that were once grown in their families. Organizations like the Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center and the Southern Seed Legacy Project (founded by Robert Rhoades and Virginia Nazarea, and now run by Veteto) support Appalachian agrobiodiversity.

Apples, Cultural Memory, Agrobiodiversity, and Climate Change

Apples (*Malus domestica*) and apple trees flourished in American settler histories as they met the needs of early subsistence life. Although crab apples (*Malus sylvestris*) have long proliferated in North America, *Malus domestica* was imported to the colonies through English and French colonists. Early homesteaders and tenant farmers were often required to plant orchards to sustain the new population. Seedlings from excellent apple trees were shared between families and communities allowing the names, stories, and memories of particular trees to be passed along with seedlings from the trees. Thousands of apple varieties existed in early American history, and by the mid-1800s, apple nurseries were established throughout the eastern United States. Commercial nursery catalogs from the end of the 20th century include at least 1,469 apple tree varieties.[33]

Apple diversity occupied the cultural memories of most early American settlers. **Cultural memories** are different from individuals’ memories as they “provide people with a sense of belonging and a feeling of

broader membership in a real or imagined community.”[34] Cultivating, sharing, remembering, and exchanging fruits and stories became the medium for transmission of cultural memories. Like ramps, apples connected people to place—through the very rootedness of an apple tree in the earth as well as the memories people associate with specific trees, places, and people. According to Susannah Chapman and Tom Brown, continuing to cultivate and remember old apple varieties in contemporary times is a memorial practice,

a practice that is personal, social, and cultural.[35]



Figure 2: Over 450 apple varieties have been documented in western North Carolina. For example, Lindsey Deal apples (pictured here) were developed relatively recently (1954) in the region. Photo by Amanda Green (CC-BY-NC-ND).

By the early 20th century, the food system shifted as people were more likely to purchase their food at grocery stores, which significantly impacted apple diversity in the U.S. by the mid-century. Apples, such as the Red Delicious, kept well, didn't bruise easily, and had a nice appearance. Thus, they were cultivated for wholesale to these grocers. Other apple varieties could no longer compete with the varieties that shipped well and were shelf stable. In addition, contemporary Americans prefer crisp apples for eating rather than other varieties that might store better or function better for canning or for making pies and other desserts. [36] These consumer shifts accompanied the growth of large orchards and the reduction in small-scale and subsistence orchards. Today, approximately ninety apple cultivars are grown for commercial wholesale fruit production. [37] Further reducing diversity, the American ethos of landscaping shifted by the 1950s to focus on

a sterile backyard landscape, leading people to plant fewer apple trees outside their own front doors.

Veteto and Stephen Carlson documented contemporary apple biodiversity in western North Carolina.^[38] They identified 450 apple varieties in the 22 orchards they visited. Significantly, most of the apple biodiversity was located in the smallest orchards. The largest orchards they visited had the least variety, which indicates that a small number of people is responsible for maintaining the vast majority of apple biodiversity. Apple biodiversity is critical to adapting to climate change; milder winters will cause apples (and other fruiting trees) to bloom earlier, putting the trees at risk for a later spring frost that will freeze the buds and effectively destroy the apple crop for that season. In 2020, a late spring frost killed nearly the entire apple harvest for central and eastern Kentucky, destroying a source of food and annual income for many farmers. Later-blooming apple varieties are especially useful because these may avoid the crop-killing frosts.

Losing these crops represents not only the loss of agrobiodiversity that allows humans to adapt to changing environments, but it also leads to the “loss of cultural knowledge, memories, and histories associated with crop diversity.”^[39] Still, restoring these varieties is possible. Contemporary apple diversity remains “in the margins”, maintained by a nebulous network of home gardeners, farmers for local markets, small commercial seed and nursery companies, and those working at historic preservation sites.

^[40] Together, they seek out and maintain well-known rare cultivars as well as “yard” cultivars that are kept in people’s backyards and homesteads.

Food Foraging and Non-Timber Forest Products in Appalachia

The forests, trees, and plants of Appalachia have been used for food as well as for medicine. These are collectively referred to as **non-timber forest products** (NTFPs)—products made from plant materials that include food, medicines, floral decoratives, specialty wood products, and landscaping materials. The Cherokee and other Native peoples harvested nuts from **chestnut, hickory, oak, and walnut** trees as well as fruits from **wild cherries, plums, pawpaw, mulberry, serviceberry, and persimmon**.

Ramps as well as native botanicals such as **bloodroot**, **goldenseal**, **ginseng**, and **blue cohosh** contributed to medicine practices. With colonization beginning in the 1700s, settlers began to commercially sell ginseng but also used ramps, **wild ginger**, chestnut, hazelnut, and black walnut—all of which had corollaries in Europe—as well as **sassafras**, **slippery elm**, and **may apple**, for medicinal purposes.^[41]

In Appalachia today, NTFPs provide livelihood opportunities, allowing people to provision for themselves or to earn supplemental income, while also allowing people to connect with the land in sustainable ways.

^[42] Given the reduction in employment in major industries like **coal** and **timber**, such economic opportunities are critical to Appalachian economies. People in Appalachia harvest NTFPs for multiple reasons, primarily to diversify their income for themselves and their community, but also to connect with nature including to increase sustainability or take advantage of forest resources, to find personal fulfillment whether through new learning or enjoying the outdoors, and finally to connect with community members. Among current NTFP harvesters, there is worry that younger generations will rely less directly on NTFPs as they in general rely less on the land, thus leading to loss of this harvesting knowledge as older generations age.

Ginseng

One particularly well-known forest medicine is **ginseng** (*Panax* sp.). Ginseng is one of the world's most popular health supplements. In Chinese medicine, ginseng is thought to stimulate the flow of *chi*, or life energy. Ginseng demonstrates how Appalachian foodways are part of globalization. Ko Shing Street in Hong Kong is the world's main market for American ginseng. Kristin Johansson reported that over 300 tons of American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*), primarily from Midwestern farms and Appalachian **hollers**, were sold there in 2000.^[43] While ginseng was historically valued by Indigenous and European settlers, it is its global value to **Japanese**, **Korean**, and **Chinese** markets that make it “Green Gold,” fetching between \$200-\$500 per pound or even \$1000 for an especially perfect root.



Figure 3. Immature ginseng flowers in a forest in north-central West Virginia. Ginseng, a popular health supplement, is valued as a non-timber forest product in parts of Appalachia. Due to loss of mature forests as well as opportunistic harvesting, ginseng populations are in decline. Photo by Amanda Green (CC-BY-NC-ND).

Ginseng is the most valuable non-timber forest product in the world, and it brings in \$24 million in American exports each year.^[44] Ginseng harvesting became regulated in 1983 with fines and imprisonment threatened to those who harvest out of season. Ginseng is incredibly difficult to cultivate; it sprouts from seed a year and a half after falling to the ground, and it grows slowly over several years before it can be harvested. It also requires a particular ecology to succeed: forty days of below-freezing temperatures and soil that is moist and well-drained. **Stripmining** operations in Appalachia over the past decades have destroyed thousands of acres of wild ginseng habitat, contributing significantly to the lack of ginseng available for harvest. According to Mary Hufford, this loss of habitat through large industrial strip mining operations erases from public awareness the environmental pressures that also destroy ginseng habitat and instead blames ginseng harvesters for the decline.^[45]

Food Insecurity in Appalachia

In Appalachian states, **food insecurity** occurs at a higher rate than the 2022 U.S. national average of 17.3%.^[46] Food insecurity occurs at two levels. **Low food security** occurs when an individual reports reduced quality, variety, or desirability in their diet. **Very low food security**, or hunger, occurs when an individual reports reduced food intake as well as reduced weight.^[47] Food insecurity in the U.S. often requires households to make trade-offs between important basic needs, such as housing or medical bills, and purchasing nutritionally adequate foods. Many food advocates argue that the food security concept should be replaced with the food sovereignty or food justice concepts to focus on equity and restoration of

local control and access over the food system rather than just provisioning emergency food.

Appalachian Kentucky has the highest rate of poverty of all states in Appalachia at 25.6%. Accompanying that poverty, in eastern Kentucky counties, food insecurity rates range between 15-25% with Harlan, Pike, Bell, Martin, and other counties hovering around 24%.^[48] In 2018, West Virginia ranked eleventh in food insecurity and ninth in poverty in the nation. Those West Virginia counties bordering eastern Kentucky also experience higher rates of food insecurity, between 14% to 22.5% in Mingo and McDowell Counties. In western Virginia, those counties bordering eastern Kentucky and West Virginia also experience higher food insecurity rates at 17-18%. Similarly, in Tennessee, food insecurity rates are higher in the Appalachian region at 15-17%.^[49] Health indicators across the U.S., including rates of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and diabetes, are higher in Appalachian counties than elsewhere. Food access is one contributor to these poor health outcomes, as only 19% of Appalachian residents eat the daily recommended intake of fruits and vegetables (compared with 23.4% of Americans nationwide).^[50]

At the structural level, the **food environment** creates barriers to healthy food access for many Appalachian residents. These forces include the decline in family farms, the closure of many local grocery stores, the distance to grocery stores and other providers of fresh produce, the prevalence of fast-food outlets and convenience stores as opposed to full-service groceries, as well as low population density, geographic isolation, and persistent poverty. Combined, all of these variables create what is known as a **food desert**. Interpersonal influences also impact diet, as the norms and attitudes of a community and community organizations (such as churches) can influence eating habits. Moreover, media and advertising have a documented impact on food choices, particularly with children. To rebuild a healthier food environment, many food justice advocates argue that the region should return to its Appalachian traditions of farming and gardening. The long history of small farms and home gardens is a cultural value in much of Appalachia and may represent one way to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables.^[51]

The school nutrition environment strongly influences children's nutritional status. Children may consume up to one third of their daily food

intake at school, and schools serve as a strong source of learning about nutrition and diet through classroom instruction and peers. Deborah Crooks researched the nutrition environment at an eastern Kentucky elementary school in the 1990s where 76% of the children qualified for free or reduced price meals. [\[52\]](#) At one elementary school, the largest income-generating activity (approximately \$7000-\$8000 dollars annually) was the sale of snack foods from the “snack room” with shelves filled with mostly candy and chips as well as crackers and granola bars and a soft drink machine. School administrators know that candy, pop, and chips sold best, and they consider the extra money vital to the functioning of the school’s programming, from purchasing supplies for teachers to paying for school enrichment programming for poorer children. Crooks characterizes this enterprise as “trading nutrition for education” as schools prioritize funding these programs over constructing a more nutritious food environment. [\[53\]](#) As a result, school children experience higher rates of obesity, they consume more low-quality diets, and snacks are likely displacing more nutritious foods in their diets. Since the 1990s, major shifts have occurred in the school food environment as there is greater recognition of the ways that childhood food environments influence food behaviors into adulthood.

Wild Game Harvesting and Food Insecurity in Appalachia

Jonathan Hall and co-authors explore the role of wild food provisioning as a possible way to address food insecurity in West Virginia. [\[54\]](#) Wild game in West Virginia and the surrounding states includes white-tailed deer, sika deer, elk, black bear, and wild or feral hogs. In comparison with its six surrounding states (Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland), West Virginia had the second lowest game harvest during the 2012-2017 data collection period, approximately 10 million pounds of game meat per year, of which 96% was white-tailed **deer**. However, West Virginia had the highest amount of game meat available for each resident, and the harvest of game meat is significantly higher than local domestic meat production (such as cattle). The data indicate that the wild game harvests in West Virginia “are enough to meet the red meat consumption needs of 10% of any state’s food insecure population.” [\[55\]](#) In fact, in McDowell County an

average annual harvest of wild game is enough red meat to feed the entire county for five years. Hall and co-authors suggest that wild game provisioning in West Virginia should be explored as an option to build food security. Currently, the West Virginia **Hunters Helping the Hungry** program takes meat donations from hunters and distributes them through two food banks (Mountaineer Food Bank and Facing Hunger Foodbank).^[56] From 2012 to 2017, they distributed 151,513 pounds of venison (approximately .25 percent of the 60 million pounds harvested over that time). This program could be a large area of research in Appalachia to understand how individuals and households rely on wild game to provision their families through informal food economies.

Conclusion

Appalachian agriculture and food systems have changed significantly, from the early development of horticulture during the Mississippian period to the expansion of agriculture with the Cherokee and early settler farmers. These early communities were responsible for developing Appalachia's immense agrobiodiversity and building food systems based on small-scale agriculture, foraging, and the harvesting of non-timber forest products, in response to and resistance to processes of globalization, colonization, and the expansion of coal mining and timbering. Today, a small cadre of seedkeepers, farmers, and food activists are responsible for maintaining Appalachia's diverse food system. Many food systems professionals look to Appalachia's agricultural and foraging heritage to solve some of its most pressing issues, including preventing food insecurity and developing new economic opportunities.

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- [1] Neff and Lawrence, "Food Systems," 2. The food system is "a system encompassing all the activities and resources that go into producing, distributing, and consuming food; the drivers and outcomes of those processes; and, the extensive and complex relationships between system participants and components" It includes land, water, soil, energy, distribution, processing, retail, health, nutrition, education, and culture.
- [2] Lundy, "Introduction," 1.
- [3] Guest, *Essentials of Cultural Anthropology*.
- [4] Gragson, et al., "Agricultural Transformation of Southern Appalachia," 93.
- [5] Jackson, et al., "Agriculture and Food System Trends."
- [6] Gragson, et al., "Agricultural Transformation of Southern Appalachia."
- [7] Neely, *Snowbird Cherokees*.
- [8] Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees*.
- [9] VanDerwarker and Detwiler, "Gendered Practice in Cherokee Foodways."
- [10] Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees*; Neely, *Snowbird Cherokees*.
- [11] Green, "Mother Corn and the Dixie Pig."
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] Awiakta, *Selu*.
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] An origin myth is a story told about the founding of a group or natural phenomenon, usually accompanied by original instructions, or the rules for living to maintain and restore harmony with Mother Earth.
- [16] Nelson, *Original Instructions*, 2-3. Original instructions "refer to the many diverse teachings, lessons, and ethics expressed in the origin stories and oral traditions of Indigenous Peoples. They are the literal and metaphorical instructions, passed on orally from generation to generation, for how to be a good human being living in reciprocal relation with all of our seen and unseen relatives."
- [17] Awiakta, *Selu*.
- [18] Awiakta, "I Offer You a Gift."
- [19] Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*.
- [20] Baker, "Reinventing Mountain Food Traditions."
- [21] FAO, "Agricultural Biodiversity."
- [22] Rhoades and Nazarea, "Local Management of Biodiversity."
- [23] Veteto, "Seeds of Persistence."
- [24] FAO, "Agricultural Biodiversity."

[25] Seed keepers or seed savers are individuals and organizations who maintain agrobiodiversity by saving seeds (or other reproductive material such as tubers and bulbs) each year to plant the following year.

[26] “Declaration of Nyéléni.” Food sovereignty is defined as “The right of peoples, communities and countries to define their own agricultural, labor, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and societies.” This definition, called the Nyéléni Declaration, was crafted at the 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty, the first global food sovereignty summit connecting peasant and Indigenous peoples from across the globe.

[27] Veteto and Carson, “Climate Change and Apple Diversity.”

[28] Veteto, et al., “Place-Based Foods of Appalachia.”

[29] Best, *Kentucky Heirloom Seeds*.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Chapman and Brown, “Apples of Their Eyes.”

[34] Ibid, 54.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Chapman and Brown, “Apples of Their Eyes”; Veteto and Carson, “Climate Change and Apple Diversity.”

[37] Hensley, “A Curious Tale.”

[38] Veteto and Carson, “Climate Change and Apple Diversity.”

[39] Nazarea, *Heirloom Seeds and Their Keepers*, 48.

[40] Nazarea, “Local Knowledge and Memory.”

[41] Moerman, *Native American Medicine Plants*; Moerman, *Native American Food Plants*.

[42] Trozzo, et al., “Forest Food and Medicine in Contemporary Appalachia.”

[43] Johansson, “Ginseng Dreams.”

[44] Ibid.

[45] Hufford, “Knowing Ginseng.”

[46] Coleman-Jensen et al., “Household Food Security in the United States.”

[47] USDA, “Food Security in the United States”; USDA, “Food Security Status of U.S. Households in 2022.”

[48] Feeding America, “Map the Meal Gap.”

[49] Ibid.

[50] Schoenberg, et al., “Perspectives on Healthy Eating Among Appalachian Residents.”

[51] Cardarelli, et al., “We’re Like the Most Unhealthy People.”

[52] Crooks, “Trading Nutrition for Education.”

[53] Ibid.

[54] Hall, et al., “Wild Alternatives.”

[55] Ibid, 5.

[56] Ibid.

Appalachian Foodways

Amanda Green

Appalachian foodways are complex, constantly changing, reflective of global political and economic forces, and grounded in the histories of the different peoples that have graced this region. From the earliest foodways of the Shawnee and Cherokee to the contemporary field-to-fork operations of Appalachian farmers and chefs reclaiming their traditional foodways, Appalachian foodways create their own niche in American culture. Many forces have shaped Appalachian foodways, including the varied experiences of people as well as the mountains, valleys, waterways, and more-than-human worlds. Moreover, colonization, immigration, globalization, and climate change continue to reshape Appalachian foodways today. To understand those processes and Appalachian foodways, the field of food studies uses the concepts of foodways, food systems, food sovereignty, food security, and food justice.

Author's Positionality

As the author of this chapter, I think it's important for me to reveal my **positionality**, my relationship to Appalachia, because it informs my personal and academic perspective. I hail from Appalachia, but like many Appalachians, my roots are diverse. My mother immigrated to West Virginia from Sweden in the 1980s, while my father was raised in a small town in northern West Virginia. Generations before, my English ancestors settled in what was then called western Virginia, colonizing the region and usurping the land and resources from Indigenous peoples. I spent the first eighteen years of my life growing up in my father's idyllic West Virginia town. Immigrants from Sicily and Spain settled this part of the **Allegheny Plateau** in the early 1900s, and they shaped the culinary heritage and appetite of my community.

My teenage self would have described Appalachian foodways as canned **peppers**, Abruzzino's and Tomaro's fresh loaves of **Italian bread**, **pasta** dishes, **meatballs**, and **pepperoni rolls**. Across Appalachia, the

arrival of new immigrants to the region transformed the culture and foodways. I left Appalachia for college, but I always returned. I worked on a small organic farm in the foothills of western North Carolina, served wine and biscuits at the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina, and after receiving my Ph.D. in Anthropology, began teaching cultural anthropology at Eastern Kentucky University. Experiencing other parts of Appalachia made me realize that my childhood foodways were only one small corner of Appalachia, and I could spend a lifetime studying the food cultures of Appalachia.

Appalachian Foodways

The concept of **foodways** describes historic and contemporary food habits of a region or a group. It is “the study of what we eat, how we eat, and what it means.”^[1] The foodways of a given culture entail learning about the activities that surround food, including “the ways in which people think and talk about food” from how they procure, preserve, prepare, distribute, consume, and even clean up food.^[2] Determining a singular definition of Appalachian foodways is a fraught endeavor, existing on a continuum between people’s real, **lived experiences** and the stereotypes, images, and expectations that have built up around these experiences. Elizabeth Engelhardt argues that Appalachian foodways are built around the **Appalachian Mountains**, both the physical presence and ecology of the mountains as well as the cultural and symbolic meanings of the mountains. She elaborates that what can be grown, what can be raised, and what can be preserved is all determined in some relation to the mountains and hills of Appalachia. Furthermore, Engelhardt asserts, “What tastes good, what is emblematic, what is avoided and who gets a voice in deciding, all too develop with mountains in the discussion.”^[3]

On the other hand, Lucy Long argues that Appalachian foodways, those foodways based in **British** and **German** traditions of meat and starch, were not that different from most early settler American foodways.^[4] The milk-based sauces, pork and dairy products, fermentation and canning, and the **Indigenous** traditions of **corn**, **beans**, **squash**, and wild foods are present across early settler foodways. What makes Appalachian foodways unique in

the 21st century, according to Long, is that these food traditions continue into the present thus making them seem exceptional, quaint, and perhaps a bit backwards to folks who don't live in the region.

Appalachian cookbook writer Ronni Lundy rhetorically asks readers to consider this question: "How can you assert a purely Anglo-Saxon and profoundly isolated culture when you discover that those same shuck beans are a German creation and that the traditions of the region also include Italian, **Swiss**, **African American**, and Native American foodways?"^[5] In asking this question, Lundy emphasizes that Appalachia is not an isolated region and its foodways don't reflect isolation. Instead, they reflect the ongoing processes of colonization and globalization. **Globalization** refers to the increased circulation of goods, capital, ideas, and people at greater and greater speeds through worldwide intensification of interactions, while **colonization**, including **European** colonization of North America, is the process by which states extend their power beyond their borders in order to secure access to raw materials, cheap labor, and markets. As a result of these forces, Appalachian foodways are both old and new, local and global, cheap and expensive.^[6]

Foodways, Stereotypes, and Tradition

If change is at the heart of Appalachian foodways, then what is traditional to Appalachia? Lundy pointedly asks, "Just when does tradition begin?"^[7] **Tradition** is defined as the transmission of customs and beliefs from one generation to the next, but often the beginnings of most traditions are more recent than generally expected. Any study of Appalachian foodways invites the readers to consider the foods they take as "traditional" to begin to contemplate what makes a tradition and when they begin.

The concept of foodways is inextricable from **culture**, which is a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, as well as material artifacts. It is a system that is created, learned, shared, and contested by a group of people.

^[8] Thus, while culture is shared by a group of people, it doesn't mean that everyone agrees on everything. For example, there are competing definitions of Appalachian food culture. Culture is always changing as well, which means that knowledge, beliefs, and practices around food are always

changing such as the introduction of Italian and **Spanish** foodways to central Appalachia.

Culture is also taught and learned. As members of cultural groups, individuals are enculturated from birth by the people and the institutions that surround them. **Enculturation** is the process by which individuals are socialized into culture, including the systems of knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors appropriate for their society. This enculturation includes taste preferences—people are socialized into enjoying particular tastes, smells, and textures by their families, teachers, friends, community members, and the organizations around them, including religious and school institutions. Cultural anthropologists study these processes using anthropological field methods, including observation and interviewing with the goal to understand culture, including foodways, by using **ethnography**. Unlike a biography that uses sources to construct a book about an individual person's life, ethnography involves living and interacting with a community of people over an extended period of time, intentionally participating in their lives, and using observations and interviews to learn more.

In addition to the newness of traditions, an “exotic Appalachia” stereotype persists, which imagines Appalachian foodways as full of **poverty** (the classic Mountain Dew trope) and full of wilderness (hunting **possum** and **bear** for our meat).^[9] These stereotypes are problematic because they ignore other narratives of the region. Food anthropologist Richard Wilk commented, “It is an anthropological truism that food is both substance and symbol, providing physical nourishment and a key mode of communication that carries many kinds of meaning.”^[10]

Cornbread, Biscuits, and Beans

Cornbread and **biscuits** in Appalachia illustrate Wilk's point, as both operate as nutritional sustenance and **symbols**, standing for or representing personal and group identities in Appalachia. Cornbread was the traditional form of sustenance in the **Mountain South**, as corn was easily grown and processed in the region. Wheat flour, on the other hand, was introduced by people from outside of Appalachia. Engelhardt, a native of Appalachia, recounts a story of learning to make biscuits from her grandmother as part of

her own enculturation. In the process she shares that at the turn of the 20th century, biscuits became a symbol of being a “good” woman in the South. On the other hand, baking cornbread symbolized “ignorance, disease, and poverty.” Through the distinctions between biscuits and cornbread, food operates as nutritional sustenance, as a vehicle for the transmission of culture, as well as a symbol of class and gendered identities. Engelhardt writes that “A social history of class, race, and gender hides in the different recipes and uses of cornbread and biscuits.”^[11] A family’s choice between cornbread or biscuits or between sweet cornbread or cornbread with no sugar added represents not only personal taste, but also is symbolic of a person’s culture and their communities.

Another distinction between cornbread and biscuits is the time of day. Usually, cornbread accompanies supper (the evening meal), and biscuits are certain at breakfast—both allowing for exceptions, especially when there are leftovers from a previous meal. Both can also serve as a snack when paired with other staples, such as older Appalachians’ evening treat of cornbread and **buttermilk** in a drinking glass, eaten with a spoon. Biscuits split in half and spread with homemade **jam**, local **honey**, or **sorghum** can give the quick boost of energy needed in the afternoon or after a school day.

Known as “the poor people’s sweetener,”^[12] sorghum, or sorghum molasses, is a natural delicacy on Appalachian tables, especially when slathered onto biscuits, baked into cakes and cookies, or plopped into a cup of coffee to offset the bitter taste.^[13] Appalachian sorghum originates from **African** peoples who came to the Americas as chattel slaves, and many generations later, families throughout rural Appalachia—multiple generations of descendents of enslaved people as well as “white poor mountain and Southern people”—consider sorghum a family tradition.^[14] Historically, a family saved seeds from the annual crop of sorghum cane, planted them near a creek, and waited for their growth into thick stalks and leaves like corn. In late fall, farmers engaged in a labor-intensive process that required close attention due to the high likelihood of accidents, burns, or smoke exposure. The harvesting process required trimming the seed pods from the top of the plant; stripping the leaves from the stalks, bundling the leaves, and feeding them to the livestock; and using the stalks to create the sorghum. They bundled and cut the stalks, then fed sections into the grinder of a sorghum mill. A long pole extending from the grinder functioned as a dual rotary press

and led to a harness for one or two mules, who walked around the grinder, pressing the cane into a juice-like substance and funneling it into a barrel. From that point, up to four people worked in a coordinated manner to convert the juice into thick, syrupy sorghum. One worker siphoned the juice into a pot placed above a wood fire, while another worker stirred the juice until it was foamy. Yet another worker skimmed the green foam and sent it through the whole process again; from start to finish, the process produced little to no waste. One of the workers captured the thick, sweet syrup into quart- or gallon-sized glass jars, and the family kept some jars for use throughout the year and also took some jars into town to sell or to trade for groceries.

[15] Until 2008, Kentucky led the nation in sorghum making, but as farming decreased as an economically viable occupation and became a largely mechanized industry, the popularity of sorghum making moved from family farms in central Appalachia to the Midwest. [16] Still, some **Mennonite** families in Kentucky maintain sorghum operations in the traditional manner.

[17]

Another staple in Appalachian foodways that is paired with cornbread is **soup beans**. Bill Best explains that Appalachian families often pass down a seed stock of beans for generations, and as in his family's case, over 150 years. Best indicates that beans and their widespread use throughout Appalachia originate from **Cherokee** peoples who married into settlers' families and shared their foodways. [18] Soup beans—also called brown beans, beans and cornbread, or simply “beans”—are quite versatile, serving as either a main or side dish at suppertime. A single stock pot of beans could feed a family for several days, offering nutritional benefits in protein and fiber as well as providing an inexpensive, tasty alternative to meat, with or without a ham hock added to the pot as seasoning during cooking. Similar to the pronunciation of “Appalachia” as a marker of a person's location in the U.S., soup beans offer an important cultural distinction: namely, a bowl of *soup beans* (an Appalachian moniker) is not the same as a bowl of *bean soup* (non-Appalachian areas).

Ramps: Place, Culture, and Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Food creates and maintains social relationships; it produces and reproduces who belongs to a group and the boundaries around that group.

[19] To members of Appalachian communities, collecting **ramps**, eating ramps, and talking about ramps creates these group boundaries and reinforces unique community and Appalachian identities. [20] A staple in Appalachian foodways, the ramp (*Allium tricoccum*) is a wild onion or leek species found throughout the eastern United States. Ramps are a perennial plant with a large bulb, like a spring onion. Ramps have become a symbol of Appalachian identity, usually associated with poverty because they are gathered for free in the forests and they smell pungently of onions. This wild-grown plant lends itself well as a symbol and **ethnic boundary marker**.

[21] First, the physical act of collecting ramps is time-consuming and arduous. Ramps grow in mountainous and forested areas, which often require effort to reach. Ramps are also seasonal, emerging at the end of winter. Each spring, the ramps emerge with sword-like leaves that grow to approximately twelve inches. By June, the leaves die off and an off-white flower emerges that releases its seeds. Usually in mid-March, Appalachian residents check known ramp spots, tucked deep into the forest hillsides and coves, their eyes straining to spot the small patches of green where the leaves have emerged. By April, a small ramp harvest could supply the first taste. Harvesting requires gently loosening the soil around a patch and tugging them from the ground. Because ramp patches can be over-harvested, residents usually take only a small amount, leaving most in the ground to reproduce the next year's crops. When a new generation learns about ramps, they experience a process of enculturation, the learning of culture, through harvesting wild foods on the land. Gathering ramps connects people to the land, both physically and metaphorically, as ramps "are physically rooted in the mountains and rooted in the thoughts and memories of those living there," reflecting so perfectly the earlier argument that Appalachian foodways are built around the Appalachian Mountains. [22]



Figure 1: Ramps carpet a forest floor in northern West Virginia. Photo by Amanda Green.

Historically, ramps have contributed to survival as one of the first nutritious plants to emerge after winter, thus supplementing dwindling winter rations. Ramps were gathered by the Cherokee in the spring. Cherokee **folklore** held that the ramp held therapeutic properties, including the ability to thin and cleanse the blood.^[23] Indeed, ramps are high in Vitamin C and fatty acids. Despite the known nutritional benefits, eating ramps for Cherokee and early settlers was stigmatized by other communities. Stories have circulated about children sent home from school because they smelled too much of ramps.^[24] In modern times, remembering this important survival role and stigma is also part of the creation of Appalachian identity by noting the boundary created between those who eat and those who do not eat ramps.

The removal of Indigenous peoples like the Cherokee from their original homelands in Appalachia destroyed their food sovereignty, as their foodways were uprooted and land stolen. In the past decade, the right to harvest Native foods on Native lands has become a means for Indigenous peoples of North America to promote their food sovereignty. **Food sovereignty** is “The right of peoples, communities and countries to define their own agricultural, labor, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain

themselves and societies.” This definition, called the **Nyéleni Declaration**, was crafted at the 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty, the first global food sovereignty summit connecting peasant and Indigenous peoples from across the globe. ^[25] The example of Cherokee ramp harvesting and the growing recognition, celebration, and protection of Cherokee foodways illustrate the increasing strength of food sovereignty across the globe.

In 1934, the **National Park Service (NPS)** established the **Great Smoky Mountains National Park**, a large portion of which is adjacent to lands belonging to the **Eastern Band of Cherokee (EBCI)**. The agency quietly agreed through handshakes and meetings to allow Cherokee and other residents of the region to continue harvesting ramps, but no formal agreement or contract was signed. By the 2000s, the NPS closed the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to ramp harvesting, though many communities had harvested there for generations. In 2009, four members of the EBCI, including George Burgess, were charged with illegally harvesting ramps in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Burgess stood trial in November 2009, and Courtney Lewis, also a member of the EBCI, described the case as “a touchstone for the continuation of Native Peoples' rights and the willingness of the federal government to acknowledge those rights.” ^[26] At the trial, Burgess’s defense argued that the ramp is not only nutrition for the Cherokee but also an entire cultural process from gathering, harvesting, processing, and celebrating to uses as food and medicine for the Cherokee people. Burgess received a guilty verdict during his trial, but NPS personnel and the courtroom judge all appeared reluctant given the circumstances: Cherokee had practiced ramp harvesting in this region for thousands of years, their harvesting practices were sustainable (taking 10% and leaving the roots of the plant), and they harvested in a remote location that was historically part of Cherokee territory. Following the trial, the NPS and the EBCI came together to discuss how to ensure Cherokee rights to harvest from their lands.

In the past two decades, the popularity of ramps has grown immensely. An increasing number of ramp festivals have emerged in Appalachia as local communities seek to both celebrate and profit from the popularity of the ramp and its tourism potential (for example, see Richwood, West Virginia, the self-declared “Ramp Capital of the World,” and their annual ramp festival). Festivals provide an occasion for the community to gather, clean, prepare, and celebrate ramps, a cultural activity that also reinforces community and

Appalachian identities.^[27] Ramps are also highly sought after by “foodies” outside the region. Ecologists and some local communities worry that it threatens ramp yields as ramps are dug up at greater rates for the commodity market.^[28] Similarly, some scholars and community members worry that it dilutes the cultural meaning of ramps as they are co-opted outside of Appalachian culture and as the emphasis is placed on the cooking and consumption of ramps rather than the gathering and processing of ramps in the community, in the mountains and hollers of Appalachia.^[29]

Foodways and Environmental Justice

In the 1900s, coal companies sought a docile mining workforce and so they recruited immigrants. Italian immigrants, primarily from the Calabria region, arrived. One of the vestiges of this migration was the mixing of foodways and the emergence of Italian-American foodways specific to West Virginia. The most popular food to emerge from this melting pot was the **pepperoni roll**, a yeast-raised roll stuffed with thinly sliced pepperoni or sticks of pepperoni. Mountaineers grow up on these pepperoni rolls, whether served hot and fresh at the Johnson Elementary School cafeteria, eaten during a snack break from skiing, or grabbed at the gas station or the pool snack bar. The origins of the pepperoni roll likely involved some combination of freshly baked bread and slices of *salumi*. Today, Tomaro’s Bakery in Clarksburg, West Virginia, is a multi-generational business started in 1914 by Anthony Tomaro. It and other bakeries like Abruzzino’s continue to thrive through sales of pepperoni rolls and loaves of Italian bread.



Figure 2: Abruzzino's Italian Bakery in Gypsy, West Virginia, has been producing pepperoni rolls (pictured here) since 1985 when Chris Abruzzino, at 21 years old, started the bakery to insure an income for his family. Photo by Amanda Green.

Similar to Italian-American foodways, another set of foodways appears in Appalachia via the Spanish immigrants of Asturias. While Italian immigrants arrived to work in West Virginia's **coal** mines, more than 1500 Spanish immigrants, particularly from the region of Asturias in northern Spain, were recruited to work in the state's zinc factory in Spelter, West Virginia. The mix of Anglo, Italian, and Spanish immigrant families led to racial tensions that still exist today, and food has been one of the tools used to create ethnic boundary markers, or the symbols used to demarcate the created boundaries between different groups. Suronda Gonzalez, also a native of Harrison County, West Virginia, recounts that Asturian families would comment that their poor White neighbors ate cornflakes for dinner, put ketchup on their chorizo, and had no hospitality. [\[30\]](#) According to Gonzalez, one of the only things that united these groups was their reliance on growing their own food to supplement their diets. These foodways brought her West Virginia-born mother and Asturian mother-in-law together as they learned the special dishes of Spain, including *tortilla Espanola* (a traditional omelet with **potatoes**, **eggs**, and **onions**) and *empanadas*. Working together in the kitchen, Gonzalez's mother acquired the knowledge of Spanish foods and became the bearer of the Asturian food tradition as well as her own Appalachian traditions.

The zinc factory in Spelter closed in 2001, and in 2010 the Dupont Company agreed to a settlement of \$150 million: it included a thirty-year medical testing program for the area's residents (\$80 million) and \$70 million toward clean-up and payouts to residents. It turned out Spelter had become a toxic waste site, and in 2011, Spelter was awarded millions to clean up the heavy metals contamination. The immigrant and Appalachian gardens surrounding Spelter were likely filled with toxins, like the bodies of those who worked there. The toxicity of the water, land, plants, and human bodies represents a case of environmental justice and food justice.

Environmental justice began as a social movement in the 1980s that demanded equitable or fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. Residents of Appalachia have often borne a greater share of environmental burdens through exposure to heavy metals and toxins in factories, mines, as well as polluted waterways and soils. Similarly, **food justice** is a movement to build a more equitable and racially just food system ensuring universal access to nutritious, healthy, and culturally appropriate food, safety for food producers, and local control in the food system. The historic gardens of Spelter's Asturian immigrant community were a source of healthy, nutritious food while simultaneously the soils and plants were also enriched with toxins. Many Appalachians today face similar circumstances as their waterways and soils are impacted by mining and factory runoff that potentially pollute their food system.^[31]

Raising the Status of Appalachian Foodways and Cuisine

According to Lucy Long, a new Appalachian cuisine is being generated in Asheville and other Appalachian tourist destinations as part of the process of culinary tourism. **Cuisine**, Long explains, is "a publicly articulated set of dishes, ingredients, styles, aesthetics, and mind-sets that are felt to represent a group's identity through food."^[32] Cuisine is what is presented to the public by chefs, cookbook writers, tourism operators, and many more as part of the growth of culinary tourism. **Culinary tourism** is an industry initiative focused on exploratory eating as a basis for the tourism experience. Profit is the primary goal of culinary tourism, and the focus tends to be on gourmet

and high-priced products. It's a new medium of economic development through restaurants and the hospitality sector, as well as through small farmers and those interested in environmental and social justice issues. Long argues that the new Appalachian cuisine moves away from stereotypes (e.g., canned possum and **squirrel**) to focus on producing and eating from the land.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, a small group of chefs, writers, scholars, and farmers has expressly sought to raise the profile of Appalachian cuisine through multiple organizations and mediums. In the literary world, authors have extended the success of the original ***Foxfire Book of Appalachian Cookery***.^[33] Other notable books and authors include world-renowned author Barbara Kingsolver's ***Animal Vegetable Miracle***, a memoir profiling her family's year of eating local foods from the hills of western Virginia.^[34] Cookbook author Ronni Lundy won two James Beard awards for her book ***Victuals***, described as "a love-letter to Appalachia."^[35] ***Smoke, Mountain, Roots, Harvest*** is Lauren Angelucci McDuffie's cookbook and reflection on growing up in western Virginia, built from her well-regarded blog ***Harvest and Honey***.^[36] ***Crystal Wilkinson's Praisesong for the Kitchen Ghosts*** serves as a collection of foodways across five generations of Black **women** in her family, the stories told in their kitchens, hand-written recipes passed down, and photographs shared from her own cherished albums and collected from her relatives.^[37]

Many chefs have also returned to their Appalachian homes, recognizing that the foodways of Appalachia also represent a valuable cuisine. Chef Graham House grew up outside of Asheville and expressed his youthful desire to leave the region in order to work in more celebrated culinary destinations like Italy and California. Then, when he recognized that Asheville had become a food destination, he told a *New York Times* reporter: "I didn't respect it as much as I should have. I'd talk about the morels and chanterelles of California; when I got home, I pulled into the driveway and found 10 pounds of black trumpet mushrooms."^[38] Chef Sean Brock from southwestern Virginia has also opened two restaurants, Red Bird and Audrey, in East Nashville dedicated to exploring Appalachian cuisine.^[39]

Black chefs are now leaving a mark on Appalachian foodways, bringing to public consciousness the contributions of the Black community into Appalachian cuisine. Also, major foodie organizations are beginning to

recognize the ongoing work of chefs. For example, Chef Hanaan Shabazz, who opened her own establishment, Shabazz Restaurant, in the 1970s in Asheville, North Carolina, was the recipient of the 2020 Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame Award, an honor presented by the Southern Foodways Alliance.^[40] The award recognizes the unsung work of culinary tradition bearers like Shabazz who also worked at Asheville's Southside Kitchen, a project to train, support, and connect marginalized communities to sustainable employment pathways.

At Benne on Eagle in Asheville, North Carolina, Chef de cuisines Ashleigh Shanti (from 2018 to 2020) and Malcolm McMillian (from 2020 to the present) manage a kitchen that pays homage to the Black influence on Appalachian foodways in the historically Black neighborhood called the Block. Shanti made the shortlist on the James Beard Rising Star Chef of the Year award in 2020. Shanti, featured in a *New York Times* profile in 2019, explained that she wanted to cook in ways that celebrated her heritage as a Black woman from the South.^[41] For example, to make hummus, she replaced garbanzo beans with **black-eyed peas** and used fermented **benne seeds** (an African staple) for tahini.

In the northern part of West Virginia, Chef Michael Costello and farm manager Amy Dawson have integrated Appalachian traditions at their co-owned restaurant, Lost Creek Farm.^[42] Dawson and Costello use recipes and heritage foods to tell the story of West Virginia, of exploitation by industries like coal and **logging** that destroyed fishing traditions, of the concentration of the seed industry into the hands of four large corporations and the coinciding loss of agrobiodiversity, and of newer exploitation of ramp over-harvesting by new food crazes.^[43] The duo pulls from the heritage of Spanish immigrants by creating *empanadas* and integrates varieties of corn cultivated by the **Osage** and Shawnee before settlers forced them from their homelands. Costello and Dawson further seek to instill pride in West Virginia foods by reclaiming **vinegar pie** (also known as **desperation pie**), which uses apple cider vinegar and nutmeg to mimic lemon. Costello explained to a group of schoolchildren the significance and pride they should have in heritage foodways: "Say you want a lemon pie, but you don't have any lemons?" he said. "You do a very creative thing, a very Appalachian thing. You figure it out."

Organizations dedicated to Appalachian cuisine, **agriculture**, and foraging are diverse. In 2014, the Appalachian Food Summit started at Hindman Settlement School in southeastern Kentucky. The goal is to celebrate and support a sustainable future for Appalachian food and people. The **Southern Seed Legacy Project**, in Burnsville, North Carolina, strives to protect genetic diversity and cultural knowledge in the American South through seed-saving networks and a seed and cultural memory bank. The Center for Cherokee Plants and Cherokee Nation Seed Bank, located on Cherokee lands in North Carolina and Oklahoma, provide seeds to tribal citizens to celebrate and pass on Cherokee agricultural knowledge. Grow Appalachia, established at **Berea College** in 2009, has set a mission to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables by building the capacity of home and community gardens. This is only a snapshot of the myriad number of organizations investing in Appalachian foodways.

Conclusion

As Appalachian foods are revalued in the marketplace, so too are they revalued by Appalachian families. For many, gathering morels and ramps in the early spring, sowing seeds and harvesting corn, beans, and squash in the summer, and hunting deer in the late fall, form the rhythms of life. But for others, like my own family, our growing awareness of the bounty of Appalachia leads us deeper into the woods to seek out the tasty morsels and bring a growing sense of gratitude and belonging to the mountains.

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[1] Engelhardt, "Redrawing the Grocery," 1.

[2] Long, *Regional American Food Culture*, xi.

[3] Engelhardt, "Two Walnuts, a Piece of Quartz, A Pencil," 30.

[4] Long, "Culinary Tourism and the Emergence of an Appalachian Cuisine."

[5] Lundy, "Introduction," 1.

- [6] Engelhardt, "Two Walnuts, a Piece of Quartz, A Pencil," 6.
- [7] Lundy, "Afterword," 200.
- [8] Guest, *Essentials of Cultural Anthropology*.
- [9] Engelhardt, "Appalachian Chicken and Waffles," 77.
- [10] Wilk, "Real Belizean Food," 1.
- [11] Engelhardt, "Two Walnuts, a Piece of Quartz, A Pencil," 33.
- [12] Wilkinson, *Praisesong for the Kitchen Ghosts*, 161-62.
- [13] Ibid, 167.
- [14] Ibid, 162.
- [15] Willis Day, interview with Lisa Day.
- [16] Boyett, "Henderson History."
- [17] Wilkinson, *Praisesong for the Kitchen Ghosts*, 167.
- [18] Best, *Saving Seeds, Preserving Taste*, 17.
- [19] Mintz and DuBois, "The Anthropology of Food and Eating."
- [20] Rivers, Oliver, and Resler, "The Ramp and Appalachian Identity."
- [21] A symbol can be an object, figure, image, idea, character, or food that stands for something else. Symbols, as well as metaphors, rituals, stories, and norms, help to create and maintain ethnic boundary markers; these signposts guide people in understanding who they are in relation to who they are not.
- [22] Rivers, Oliver, and Resler, "The Ramp and Appalachian Identity," 14.
- [23] Edge, "Ramps," 239.
- [24] Locklear, "The Stench of a Mountain Tradition."
- [25] "Declaration of Nyéléni."
- [26] Lewis, "The Case of the Wild Onions," 105.
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- [30] Gonzalez, "Cornbread and Fabada," 160-61.
- [31] Wies, et al., "As Long as We Have the Mine."
- [32] Long, "Culinary Tourism and the Emergence of an Appalachian Cuisine," 6.
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- [37] Wilkinson, *Praisesong for the Kitchen Ghosts*.
- [38] Black, "Long Misunderstood, Appalachian Food Finds the Spotlight."
- [39] Ibid.
- [40] See Southern Foodways Alliance's 2020 documentary of Shabazz on their website.

[\[41\]](#) Eligon and Moskin, “16 Black Chefs Changing Food in America.”

[\[42\]](#) Nierenberg, “Serving up West Virginia History.”

[\[43\]](#) Ibid.

Chestnut Country:

An Environmental History of the American Chestnut in the Appalachian Commons

Jacob Johnson

The American chestnut played a critical role in the Appalachian ecosystem for millennia. The tree's commonality to the region created an association that predated the name Appalachia itself, as the first European explorers noted, "Wherever there are mountains, there are chestnuts."^[1] Although chestnuts made up approximately twenty percent of the total Appalachian forest at the turn of the 20th century, these trees most influenced the sandy ridgelines of the **Blue Ridge** (NC, VA, and WV) and the coal-bearing **Cumberland Plateau** (KY, WV, VA, and TN) sections of **central** and **southern Appalachia**.^[2] In these sections of Appalachia, the forests supported a "commons" form of land use, serving as the ecological base for both household subsistence and production well into the 20th century.^[3] Even to this day, many Appalachians supplement, if not entirely make, a livelihood out of their ability to hunt and trap game, fish, gather herbs and botanical remedies, graze livestock, grow crops, or just generally access land viewed as publicly owned, even if legally private. These practices and the people that maintain them continue to be some of the most definitive examples of commons systems and users throughout the entire United States.^[4]

Despite its proliferation in the United States' first full century, the **American chestnut** did not survive through the 20th century. When imports of the Japanese chestnut tree arrived in 1904 by way of the port of Brooklyn, New York, they accidentally brought with them a fungal blight that

annihilated the American chestnut tree population through the first half of the 20th century. Often touted as one of the worst ecological disasters in history, the blight killed more than 3 billion mature chestnuts, creating ecologically apocalyptic shockwaves that rippled throughout the Appalachian forest. The continuous growth of new saplings provided optimism for the tree's revival, but the blight caused a functional extinction of American chestnuts that typically die before maturity to this day.^[5] While this extinction resulted in a disaster for the Appalachian forest ecosystem, it paired with an economic crisis brought on by the enclosure of the commons by extractive industries. The American chestnut's role in the **Appalachian commons**, its enclosure, and its decline call for a reimagining of how the commons functioned.

As a commons, Appalachian forests fostered an economic livelihood around the American chestnut as mountaineers traded chestnuts for cash. The Appalachian forest also functioned as an ecosystem, in which the American chestnut was a keystone species. The ecological base, though critical to understanding the plight of agrarians not only in Appalachia but globally, carries a strong anthropocentric bias.^[6] This human-centered view undermines the role that non-human actors, such as the chestnut, played in maintaining the commons. Drew Swanson better described this overlap between human and non-human actors as a “meeting ground,” which he saw especially manifested in Appalachia’s “most famous invasive,” the **chestnut blight**.^[7] However, he did not place these Appalachian meeting grounds within the context of the commons. Connecting the tree's importance to Appalachian wildlife, Donald Davis alluded to the severe repercussions of chestnut blight on animals, who struggled without the tree's high caloric output of **mast**—fallen chestnuts.^[8]

Making Chestnut Country

The inter-species dependence on the tree, including people, wildlife, and later livestock, represented a rather unique relationship into what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls a “maple nation.” In this nation, the **maple** trees of her **Indigenous** community provided services to residents year-round, ranging from firewood in the winter to shade in the fall, with the primary meaning of

citizenship being the enjoyment of the tree's provisions and the cyclical maintenance it required.^[9] The American chestnut provided similar, if not quantitatively greater than the maple, services to both Appalachia's Indigenous peoples and the settlers that dispossessed the land from them. The currency of this country, rather than carbon as in the maple nation, was chestnuts.^[10]

The nut itself was the primary impact of the chestnut throughout both the Appalachian forest and its commons. Compared to other mast-producing trees, chestnuts were consistently more common and significantly produced a greater number of nuts than other species.^[11] While this output fed much of the region's game, it also fed people. In the **Middle Archaic** period, beginning 8,000 years ago, Indigenous people pioneered the Appalachian commons by settling in proximity to game-filled stands of chestnut.

^[12] These stands provided a prime hunting ground for subsistence from not only chestnuts but also the abundance of wildlife, ranging from squirrels to bears and most everything in between. By the end of the **Late Archaic** period, 3,200 years ago, chestnuts accounted for 70% of all "nutmeat" in the Cold Oak rock shelter of eastern Kentucky.^[13]

Though this extraction of chestnuts for subsistence was minimal, **Indigenous** peoples knew how to maintain a balance, and even create an abundance, of chestnuts for themselves and for the surrounding wildlife. Also during the Late Archaic period, Indigenous peoples at Cliff Palace Pond, just below the Cold Oak rock shelter, began using fire to clear the predominantly cedar forest. By the time of European settlement in Kentucky, the chestnut had boomed from one percent of the forest to 19% of the state's Appalachian forest because of these prescribed burns.^[14] Although these practices continued among the Cherokee long enough to be outlawed by the state of North Carolina, the Euro-American settlers that entered eastern Kentucky never met these Indigenous peoples.^[15] Disease along with Indigenous enslavers, such as—but far from limited to—the **Iroquois**, pushed the **Fort Ancient** peoples of southern Ohio and eastern Kentucky out of the region by the 1680s, nearly a century before White settlement.^[16] Even though no mention of Fort Ancient exists in the European historical record, the colonization of the continent sent shockwaves that destabilized Indigenous

worlds across the United States although the area remained far from uninhabited in later years.

Shifting Ground

The introduction of capitalism, one of the most radical and dynamic cultural exchanges in human civilization, altered perceptions of the land and its wildlife. Southern capitalists, often looking to afford plantations for themselves, invested heavily in the deerskin trade in Appalachia. Cherokee hunters alone killed more than 150,000 deer a year by the mid-18th century.

[17] Without any clear perception of ownership, from either Indigenous or settler populations, Kentucky came to be regarded as a prolific hunting commons. This reputation attracted a unique class of yeoman hunters, embodied in **Daniel Boone**, to settle the region. [18] As deer populations slimmed throughout the colonial period, their concentration in the predominantly chestnut and oak forests of Appalachia fueled the frontier's expansion. [19]

Indigenous peoples were far from willing to give away their hunting grounds, so Euro-Americans slowly pushed those hunters out. Because of competing claims from the **Cherokee, Shawnee, Delaware**, and Iroquois, none of whom permanently resided or hunted in the region, most soon-to-be Kentuckians never recognized any Indigenous ownership. [20] While Euro-American settlers contributed to overhunting and the eventual extinction of **elk** and **bison** from Appalachia, their most devastating impact was the introduction of **hogs** and other livestock. These newly introduced, and arguably invasive, animals competed for space and resources alongside humans and wildlife, virtually eliminating the chance of surplus mast and straining the Appalachian forests' food supply. [21]

Rather than a total enclosure of the commons, the White settlement of Appalachia represented a racial enclosure that sought to exclude only Indigenous people on the grounds of White **privilege**. Throughout the first half of the 19th century, White Appalachians continued commons practices in their land use. Although wildlife populations were rapidly depleting, many Appalachians still depended on **deer, turkeys, bears, squirrels**, and other remaining game for subsistence. This depletion necessitated and maintained

the existence of Kentucky's hunting commons years after Indigenous removal, complicating the establishment of private property.^[22]

The livestock that White settlers let freely graze the Appalachian forest represented another form of racial enclosure that threatened the commons. Scientists and environmental historians need further research into the exact ecological impact of livestock's introduction to Appalachia, but the population of nearly 400,000 hogs and 139,000 **cattle** by 1860 must have put a strain on eastern Kentucky's carrying capacity.^[23] They further limited the number of chestnuts, along with many other edible and medicinal plants, that Indigenous people and native wildlife had historically depended on. The felling of chestnut trees throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, whose wood settlers prized for its rot-resistant qualities, literally displayed this enclosure by taking an exponential number of annual chestnuts out of the ecosystem. In an article that ran in the *Big Sandy News* in 1888, a local resident remembered, "On a farm near where I live are chestnut rails still doing duty in a fence that were split in 1815."^[24] While the fence impressively still stood, it had at least come at the cost of decades of those chestnuts' annual mast production—even if minimal compared with future losses.

Apart from this racial enclosure, little had changed about the dietary importance of chestnuts to settlers from the Indigenous gathering commons. In October 1893, a resident of Blaine, Kentucky, wrote to the *Big Sandy News* that "Business is dull, chestnut hunting and potato digging being the order of the day."^[25] That chestnut hunting was a "dull" business in the fall months of the year speaks to the routine nature of gathering them; they had become inseparable from other harvest-time activities, such as **potato** digging. Most other residents, however, found chestnut hunting to be rather exciting. People writing to the *Big Sandy News* repeated this phrase every October in tandem with other agrarian or commons-linked practices, further demonstrating the entrenchment of the chestnut in Appalachian society. In her visualization of the "seasonal round" of the commons, Mary Hufford identified chestnut gathering as a regular October activity alongside potato digging and squirrel hunting.^[26] These were far from the only late fall activities that overlapped, though. For instance, a letter from Leander, Kentucky, to the *Big Sandy News* in October 1916 stated, "The neighbors are

busy making sorghum and gathering chestnuts,” but they disappointingly concluded, “Our chestnut crop is very light this year.”^[27]

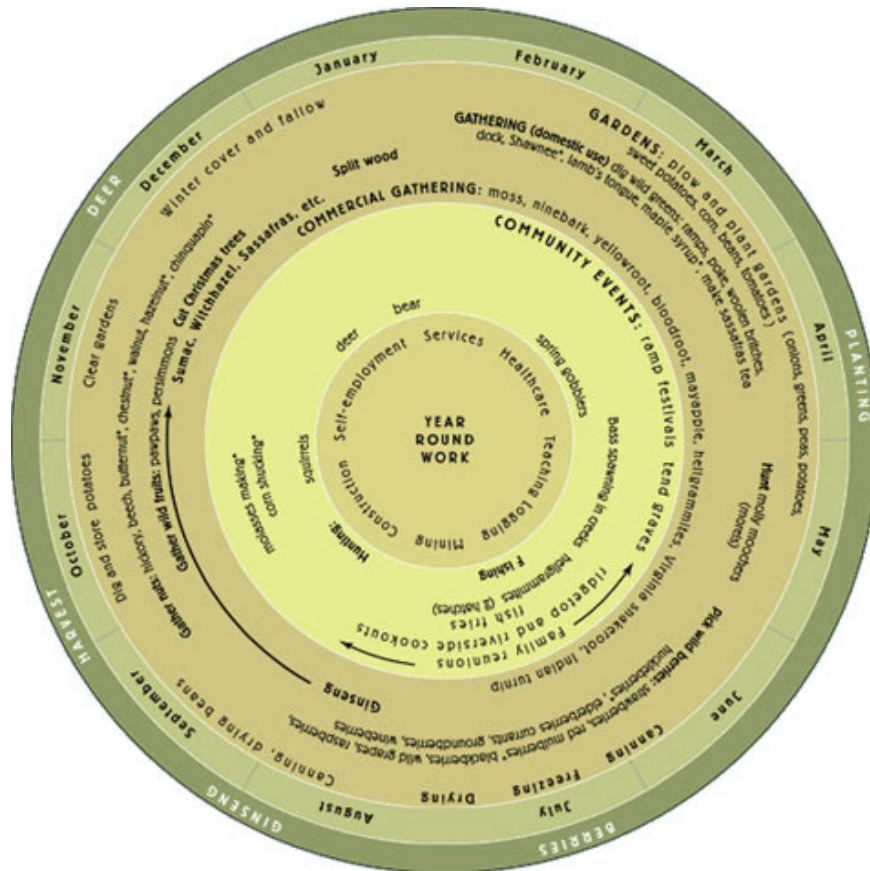


Figure 1. Annual cycle of events on Coal River. Design by Mary Hufford.

The region’s relatively new settlers had, however, added one new critical function to the chestnut-gathering commons. Throughout Appalachia as well as much of the eastern half of the country, chestnuts operated as a substitute for cash in country stores, and store owners distributed chestnuts to urban markets.^[28] Once harvested from the ecological base, the Appalachian forest, chestnuts transformed into a commodity that allowed them to be bought, sold, or bartered. Unlike other resource exchanges, chestnuts represented a “**commons commodity**,” meaning that the ownership of fallen chestnuts did not require ownership of the land if it was from an “unimproved” forest. Instead, the act of harvesting defined the ownership of a commons commodity whether it be a chestnut, deerskin, or **persimmon**.^[29]

By contrast, some farmers kept personal chestnut orchards. In 1911, Louisville's *Courier-Journal* carried a story from the *Beattyville Enterprise* that reported of an "enterprising" farmer named Rufus Hill, who had "the largest chestnut orchard in the country, perhaps...with 1,160 trees." Unlike the unimproved forest, a chestnut grove functioned as an extension of the farm, just as much the private property of the farmer as any other yield-producing plot. At harvest time that October, therefore, Hill expected the personal profit of all that "he gathered," which was "a little more than thirty and a half bushels of chestnuts from it this year."^[30] But because the tree's production was so prolific, owners of chestnut orchards often allowed people to gather chestnuts under the same rules of those in the unimproved forest.^[31] In short, the overall production of chestnuts was so bountiful that it was not economical for a single owner to harvest them.

None for All and All for None

A light crop of chestnuts, or of most anything gathered from the commons, always had underlying ecological implications. In the case of the 1916 crop, a blurb in the *Big Sandy News* in November detailed how "worms [developed] rapidly in stored [chestnuts], and the safest plan is to fumigate them."^[32] Although the *Big Sandy News* never identified the species of worms devastating the chestnut crop, they were only one of many inter-species "meeting grounds" in the chestnut-dominant Appalachian commons. For instance, a resident of Skaggs, Kentucky, reported in 1919 that "Chestnut and possum hunting is all the go here."^[33] Though it was likely that **opossums** were part of some **mountaineers'** diet, there was also an economic incentive to pairing the hunts. In 1909, a decade earlier, someone had written to the *Big Sandy News*, "Chestnuts are abundant in the grocery stores, but the [persimmons] must have been cornered by the possums. None are on the market."^[34] Humans competed side by side with a wide variety of animals for the chestnut and other commons commodities, so the link between chestnut and possum hunting could have just as likely been to stamp out competition. Although the tree's mast was rather consistently abundant, the consumption from people, wildlife, and livestock rapidly drained that abundance.^[35] The overlap Hufford noticed in the commons between

squirrel and chestnut hunting in October reflects such layered inter-species functions. [36] Chestnuts acted as a lure for squirrels, and mountaineers killed them for their meat, protecting the economic value of chestnuts from one of its biggest consumers.

As the chestnut blight spread from the northeast, killing billions of trees in roughly three decades, the price of chestnuts wildly fluctuated. While historian Ralph Lutts found the state of Virginia's 1914 amount of \$200,000 in the chestnut trade to be an underestimation, he also argued the trade had exploded as the blight continued to kill trees nearer to urban markets.

[37] References to the fluctuation in the price of chestnut in the *Big Sandy News* suggested the latter was more likely. In October 1915, a correspondent reported, "There is a bumper chestnut crop—the best in years ripening in the mountains." "Already many people are going into the mountains from the settlements to gather them," the report continued. "They are selling for from \$1.25 to \$1.50 a bushel." [38] By 1922, a store in Blaine, Kentucky, placed an ad in the *Big Sandy News*: "Want chestnuts at \$3.20 [a bushel]." [39] The near tripling of prices over the course of only seven years implies the heavy toll of the blight on trees outside of the region. Eastern Kentucky had the least access to urban markets of all Appalachian states in this era, so the price fluctuations were considerably lower than in other areas. However, the price's tripling within eastern Kentucky's comparably locally contained market reflected the severity of chestnut blight on both the markets and the environment. Still, the prosperous chestnut commons, and their most vital currency and resource, were well in decline by 1922.

Industrialization added a final layer of value to the chestnut's wood and bark, but this layer drastically undermined the ecological and economic value of the nut itself. The American chestnut's wood had always held great value to Euro-American settlers not only for its abundance but also its rot-resistant qualities. [40] Appalachian farmers and logging companies alike first commodified chestnut wood in eastern Kentucky through splash dam methods of **logging**, which used the region's internal rivers to transport felled logs to market for a modest profit. [41] Although these operations were most commonly run by local men, they could have a rather exploitative nature that overlapped with industrial interests. For instance, **Verna Mae Slone**, who lived on the Knott and Floyd County border, recalled in her memoir **What**

My Heart Wants to Tell: “a large lumber company named Cole and Crain [*sic*] came to Caney Creek to buy up all the trees.” The company sent local resident Hayes Johnson as a foreman to construct and oversee a splash dam operation there as well. But Slone continued, “After Hayes Johnson got all the trees he wanted, and, maybe became a rich man from the profits, he left Caney Creek.”^[42]

Likewise, the **tanning** industry encouraged mountaineers’ exploitation of the tree’s bark. In 1916, the *Big Sandy News* happily reported the opening of a new tannery, “where they will manufacture [leather] tanning acids, drawing their timber supply from both Southwest Virginia and Eastern Kentucky,” that was expected to hire 1,500 to 2,000 people. The report continued, “Chestnut will be largely needed.”^[43] However, chestnut oak remained the preferred tree of the tanning industry in eastern Kentucky, but many local tanneries accepted American chestnuts as a secondary preference. For instance, the Tanners & Dryers Company placed an ad in the *Big Sandy News* in 1907 that called for “10,000 cords [of] Chestnut Oak tan bark.... Also 10,000 cords of Chestnut wood.”^[44] Yet, as Kathryn Newfont observed of tanbark gathering commons in North Carolina, eastern Kentuckians probably continued to use chestnuts for tanbark long after the trees had died to blight.^[45]

While farmers and settlers had long cut down the tree, the impact was never as drastic as it became after industrialization. Railroads provided the transportation for large, mechanized logging operations in eastern Kentucky, which left the region deforested.^[46] However, companies eased the minds of sellers by offering sizable sums of money. Eastern Kentucky came out of the **Civil War** in mounting debt, and by 1910 the average amount of debt among Floyd County residents was \$278.56.^[47] Appalachians faced an increasingly tough choice between the fast cash offered in felling chestnuts and the long-term benefits of the tree. Many residents proved increasingly willing to take the short-term benefits of felling the tree as the blight spread southward, which only further hastened the decline of the tree and the commons. For example, Jay H. Northup advertised in the *Big Sandy News* the sale of several farms he had acquired, citing his old age and blindness. One of these farms, however, already had “Seven hundred poplar and chestnut trees cut down.... worth \$15,000. Will take \$20,000.”^[48] By

felling an unknown, but presumably large number of chestnuts, ironically, Northup had significantly damaged the **agricultural** value of the farm as the chestnut's mast was so critical to mountain animal husbandry.^[49]

This behavior was far from unique in terms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Appalachian commons. As Luke Manget demonstrated in *Ginseng Diggers*, the strenuous economic effects of the **Civil War** in West Virginia prompted mountaineers to harvest **ginseng** unsustainably for short-term economic gains. Many contemporaries, especially store owners, thought this turn toward ginseng harvesting was bringing about the extinction of the plant.^[50] The use of such commons commodities, at least in eastern Kentucky, worsened the debt economy by creating soured and indebted relations between wholesalers, country store owners, and customers.^[51] Opportunities to sell chestnut wood for fast cash to repay debt were abundant. In 1898, the Louisa Telephone Company placed an ad wanting “sealed bids on from forty to fifty chestnut poles, 35 feet long and six inches at the tip.”^[52] However, as historians Steven Stoll and Ronald L. Lewis have argued, the lumber industries’ large-scale deforestation of the Appalachian forest rapidly depleted the ecological base of the region.^[53] The influence of these industrial interests promoted the enclosure of Appalachia’s commons too, but as Davis indicates, scholars have overestimated the actual impact of this attempt at enclosure.^[54]

Although logging had a detrimental impact on affected areas, sawmills did not impact all of Appalachia. At least some Appalachians must have intrinsically understood that the chestnut was exceptionally critical to that ecological base. For instance, the *Big Sandy News* reported that Judge George Carson of Wolfe County, Kentucky, had “sold to the Weinart Stave Company, of Louisville, a boundary of timber embracing three or four hundred acres for \$6,000,” but had also “[reserved] the chestnut and black locust that is standing upon the ground.”^[55] Although this deal may have just been speculating on the wood's future value, Carson may also have wanted to preserve those trees for their commons functions.

The fact that a similar deal happened in Breathitt County in 1903 further implies some reasoning behind the selected trees. According to *Breathitt County News*, James and Zerilda Cope sold “all the timber on their land, except chestnut and locust, situated on Frozen Creek... for the sum of

nineteen thousand dollars.”^[56] Despite not being native to the Appalachian forest ecosystem, **black locust** trees added nutrients ranging from nitrogen, iron, potassium, and magnesium into the soil.^[57] While locust trees enriched the soil, chestnuts enriched the grazing and gathering of livestock, people, and wildlife. Mountaineers hunted wildlife, often around American chestnuts, for their meat and skins. Moreover, if there was a need for a few quick dollars or something else from the country store, chestnuts operated as a cash substitute. As both the black locust and the American chestnut held significant benefits to agrarian life in Appalachia, this monetization most likely drove the decision to protect those trees.

This tendency among some mountaineers to preserve some, if not all, of their forest created a patchwork layout of enclosed, deforested, and commons spaces. As Davis later corrected himself in *The American Chestnut: An Environmental History*, absentee owners could not perfectly monitor their land and Appalachians continued their commons practices.

^[58] The operations that attempted to monitor their land typically relied on local residents, whose loyalty to kith and kin almost certainly allowed them to ignore some commons practices—if only for cousins and family friends.

^[59] The *Breathitt County News* best captured this dual continuation and enclosure of the commons. “A Jolly Crowd,” published in October 1903, detailed a family outing that “reported a pleasant day gathering **pawpaws**, chestnuts, persimmons, and frost-ripened, autumn-flavored fruits.” That starkly juxtaposed this story further down the page with a warning:

Notice!

Any person or persons cutting down chestnut trees for the fruit, or otherwise cutting timber or trespassing on the lands of the Kentucky Union Company, the Goff Land Company, the George’s Branch Cannel Coal Company, or the Lost Creek Coal Company, in Breathitt, Perry, Powell, Lee, Wolfe, or other counties in the State that they have property in, will be indicated for such offenses and prosecuted to the extent of the law.^[60]

Despite the increasing corporate power pushing to enclose the commons, many Appalachians continued their commons practices well into the 20th century.

As coal mining became the predominant industry in eastern Kentucky, the emphasis on enclosure waned. Likewise, the environmental impacts of the logging industry, whose **deforestation** acted as an enclosing force itself, were far more pronounced than coal's impact on the commons.^[61] On November 23, 1916, Consolidated Coal announced plans to reforest its "100,000-acre holdings in Letcher county during the next few months." The company had planned "reforesting [with] locusts, mulberry, oak, poplar, and chestnut...including 60,000 black locusts."^[62] The construction of a coal town like Jenkins, ironically, had caused most of the deforestation of Consolidated Coal's holdings, as the company ran three sawmills to feed the burgeoning town a steady stream of lumber.^[63] Although the growing class of miners remained dependent on many of their commons and agrarian means of subsistence and production, chestnuts were only briefly important as a survival strategy within the coal camps.^[64]

The chestnuts left by lumbermen, unfortunately, did not survive for long. By 1921, *The Mt. Sterling Advocate* was already lamenting that "Millions of feet of the finest kind of lumber for ordinary purposes could have been saved if stricken chestnut trees had been cut when attacked by the blight."^[65] By the time the blight finally reached eastern Kentucky in 1904, the financial loss of the American chestnut, in terms of the tree's many functions, represented the loss of only more recent developments. Much more significantly, one of the most common keystone species within the ecosystems of Appalachia only haunted the forest now. The chestnut, rather than a meeting ground between the tree and humans who extracted its value, acted as a multilayered and multifunctional meeting ground between humans, markets and capital, and the ecosystems of the Appalachian forest.

Conclusion

As had been the case in the creation of the commons, during the Middle Archaic period 8,000 years ago, the nut remained the most crucial element of the tree. For thousands of years, the Cherokee of central and southern Appalachia had depended on the tree. The chestnut blight erased new dependencies, like grazing hogs in the forest, just as well as centuries of traditional practices in less than four decades. Scientists estimated that the

American chestnut's disappearance from the Appalachian forest represented the loss of 34% of the total mast production in the forest.^[66] In oral history interviews, Davis observed the devastating effects that such a loss had on wildlife, as residents recalled the sudden disappearance of not only all animals that depended on chestnuts but also the predators that depended on chestnuts' consumers. Although chestnut supplies dwindled during the **Great Depression**, competition for those remaining raised to the point of murder in some communities.^[67]

For the wildlife and livestock dependent on the tree as well as the people dependent on all three via the commons, the effect was the same: a total decline. Chestnut blight and the functional extinction of the tree had severe repercussions on the ecosystems and economies of not only eastern Kentucky but all of Appalachia. In 1953, nearly at the half-centennial anniversary of the chestnut blight's arrival, Bernard Whitt wrote "Goodbye, Mr. Chestnut" to the *Licking Valley Courier*. Whitt reminisced as he "visited the old chestnut orchard at the Green Salyers farm on White Oak," recalling it was there, he wrote, that "Fifty years ago as a boy I gathered sack fulls of chestnuts on the hill." Although it was technically private property as a chestnut orchard, "Green Salyer let the neighbors get what they wanted" in the same way as a commons.^[68] Whitt followed up in the *Licking Valley Courier* after he spent "four days last week in the woods hunting squirrel." He reminisced further, "It had been fifty years since I hunted and killed squirrels there... [but] I saw only one chestnut in all my hunting, and this tree stands back of Herbert Hammond's." He then continued with a public plea to Hammond, whom Whitt thought "may not even know it's there," to "protect it, and have Harold Barber, the State biologist," research the tree.^[69] As this recollection demonstrated, the Appalachian commons had survived well into the 20th century, even if most chestnuts had not survived with them.

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Shine On:

Distilling, Cultural Rebellion, and the Fluid Construction of Criminality

Carl Root and Edward Green

“They were outlaws but only because a distant central government ‘criminalized’ part of their way of life by imposing a tax on home-distilled whiskey they had produced for generations.”

—Wilbur Miller^[1]

In 2008, two graduate students in criminal justice at Eastern Kentucky University wondered aloud why their hometown of London, Kentucky, harbored a headquarters of the Appalachia **HIDTA**. HIDTA is an acronym for “high-intensity drug trafficking area,” and the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia are under the purview of the Appalachia HIDTA. Funded by the Office of National Drug Control Policy, the organization’s stated mission is to disrupt and dismantle drug trafficking organizations in the Appalachian region. Having seen multiple markets rise and fall with regard to illegal drugs—whether marijuana, methamphetamine, or more recently, heroin and other opioids—we were interested in examining what made our part of the world such a hotbed for drug trafficking, use, and abuse. Our first thought was creating a cultural history of the manufacturing of illicit substances, flowing all the way back to white lightning, hooch, and mountain dew: all nicknames for that untaxed **white whiskey** more commonly called **moonshine**.

Considering this historical context crucial in understanding the present conditions of Appalachia, we began to conduct research and eventually set out to interview individuals about our region’s storied past of moonshiners and revenueurs. It wasn’t long at all before we became convinced of

something the late Southern author William Faulkner once noted: “The past is never dead, it’s not even past.” [2] Just as quickly as we began speaking with family and friends with prior knowledge and experience in the craft of distillation (more specifically, the illegal manufacture of the aforementioned untaxed alcohol, moonshine), we were encouraged to speak to others with more contemporary information, experience, and insight. With what researchers refer to as a “snowball sample,” where one interview leads to another, which leads to another, we went into some surprising locations to discuss and observe the very current practice of an age-old art and craft. It turns out that rumors of the demise of moonshine and moonshining had been greatly exaggerated. Instead, we found ourselves right in the middle of what has now been recognized as a sort of renaissance, or a renewal, of white whiskey in Appalachia and the United States. [3]

We met moonshiners in bars, suburbs, and even inside a gated community—hardly the **hollers** and hills that initially concerned our study’s funders and the university’s institutional review board. As part of our research, we were given a VHS tape that had been created for the sole purpose of passing on the tradition of making moonshine the old-fashioned way within a family. The sometimes-shaky footage focused on two fellows tending to a still somewhere in the woods of West Virginia. They explained how they didn’t want this set of skills, or their knowledge, to die with them and were producing this video so that it could be shared with future generations. They described the process in an easy-to-follow manner and shared plenty of personal observations and opinions on moonshining and its historical troubles with the law.

The video had been recorded years before a similar film titled ***This Is the Last Dam Run of Likker I’ll Ever Make*** made a man named **Marvin “Popcorn” Sutton** a cult classic example of the mountain moonshiner.

[4] Before we had the chance to reach out to him, Sutton died by suicide before he was to report to federal prison after being convicted of charges involving moonshining and illegal firearm possession. We attended his funeral service in Cocke County, Tennessee, and our curiosity was piqued as country music star Hank Williams Jr., also in attendance, told the press that “we’ve got something big in the works.” It would be some time later before we learned that Williams was one of the investors in “Popcorn Sutton Original Small Batch Recipe”—one of many marketing strategies recently responsible for making moonshine a legal, and taxable, commodity. Williams

and his associates have since trademarked the tagline “America’s Original Rebel Spirit,” and it also serves as the subtitle for a 2018 book by John Schlimm.^[5]

By 2017, there were at least 137 distilleries marketing some kind of unaged white whiskey as moonshine.^[6] Visitors to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, can sample a cornucopia of flavors, try moonshine-soaked cherries, and take pictures in front of a huge copper **still**. In 2021, over 5.7 million people visited the four Tennessee locations of Ole Smoky Distillery, more visitors than any other **distillery** in the world. By comparison, 2.2 million people visited all of Scotland’s 134 whiskey distilleries the same year.

^[7] Appalachian counties and cities previously flooded with “revenuers” from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in search of mountain moonshiners are now teeming with tourists looking for a taste of “that good ol’ mountain dew.”

How is it that the same recipe that resulted in a prison sentence for Popcorn Sutton is now mass produced and marketed widely without fear of such consequences? As it turns out, the history of moonshine and moonshiners is one that has undergone multiple transformations, from respected to reviled and from romanticized to demonized and back again. These ebbs and flows in reputation have a curious connection to the history of laws and taxes related to liquor in the United States. This history has turned into a more contemporary conversation, and echoes of this past persist in the 21st century’s renewed interest in mountain spirits.

17th and 18th Centuries: Whisky as Necessity and Right

“The water was not fit to drink. To make it palatable, we had to add whisky. By diligent effort, I learned to like it.”

—Winston Churchill^[8]

The word *whiskey* comes from the Gaelic term *usquebaugh*, which is most often translated as “water of life.”^[9] Making **whiskey** was a crucial part of **Celtic** life for the **Scottish**, the **Irish**, and the **Welsh**, as documented by some of the earliest Anglo-Saxon invaders.^[10] Of course, these traditions traveled with the people. There is evidence of English settlers distilling the **maize**, or **corn**, of **Indigenous** peoples into whiskey as far back as the 1620s, when George Thorpe and other settlers established the Berkeley Plantation on the frontier just beyond the original Jamestown settlement in

Virginia. Thorpe embraced corn and distilled it, writing home to friends about how he preferred his “drink of Indian corn” to English beer.^[11] In fact, alcoholic beverages were the drink of choice in early colonial life since other options were either too expensive (coffee and tea), too scarce (milk), or unpleasant to taste (much of the water). Unfortunately, very little research into the earliest years of alcohol production in colonial America exists. Sarah Meacham reveals how the activity was a necessity, as she states, “critical to survival.”^[12]

While the 20th century image of a bootlegging or moonshine-making **man** escaping the law persisted through media, the history of alcohol production tells a different story. Primarily under the purview of **women, cider and ale** production and the associated tavern keeping was important work in a society dependent upon alcohol as a safe drink, medicine, cleaning product, and sometimes currency for encouraging voters. In 1656, Englishman John Hammond published a denouncement of the “slothful and careless” Chesapeake women for not making enough alcohol in hopes of publicly shaming them into increasing production. He stated that “they will be adjudged by their drinke, what kind of housewives they are [*sic*].”^[13] Farmers found corn whiskey to be preferable economically to raw corn or grain. Much more could be transported to market for much more profit. By the 18th century, the practice was widespread, and farmers produced somewhere between 100 and 1,000 gallons annually.^[14]

After the **Revolutionary War**, the social and cultural view of alcohol production as a necessity and critical for survival ensured conflict in 1791 when **George Washington’s** Secretary of the Treasury, **Alexander Hamilton**, promoted the passage of the first tax on a domestic product by the U.S. government: the whiskey tax. The tax was seen by the administration as a crucial tool in paying off the debt accrued from the American Revolution. Farmers and others vigorously protested the whiskey tax initially and advocated for its repeal. When nonviolent actions were ignored, violence ensued. A tax collector was tarred, feathered, and whipped in Washington County, Pennsylvania. Large-scale resistance and avoidance of the tax were reported throughout Appalachia. Tax collectors as well as those who complied with them were threatened and subject to reprisal, such as having their barns and stills burned. By the summer of 1794, the uprising known as the “**Whiskey Rebellion**” was in full swing.

Eventually, President Washington sent more than 12,000 well-armed federal troops to round up suspected rebels and to quell the rebellion. This

action is widely considered one of the first real challenges to the authority of the U.S. government. Washington's administration "passed the test," so to speak, as the whiskey tax remained in effect until 1802. The tax remained terribly unpopular, as proven by subsequent difficulties in collection followed by **Thomas Jefferson's** successful campaign strategy of promising to repeal it, which he did upon defeating incumbent President **John Adams** in 1800. Jefferson's promise led to what historian Joseph Dabney referred to as a "golden era of American whiskey as a tax-free agricultural enterprise and frontier cottage industry."[\[15\]](#) With the exception of three years, during the **War of 1812**, this untaxed period of whiskey-making lasted sixty years. Ironically, by 1797, even George Washington was making whiskey: "His farm manager, a Scot named James Anderson, knew how to build a distillery and how to operate it, so Washington had one of his unprofitable farms converted to the growing of rye and had Anderson build a five-pot distillery."[\[16\]](#) Even in the beginning, views on the legality and morality of making whiskey in the United States were quite fluid and subject to change.

19th Century: War and Taxes

"In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."

—Benjamin Franklin[\[17\]](#)

As a result of Jefferson's repeal of the whiskey tax (and firing of federal tax collectors), the regular and routine practice of whiskey-making resumed, or perhaps "continued" is more accurate. Historian Bruce E. Stewart says of this period, "Before the **Civil War**, no stigma had yet been attached to mountain residents who made alcohol."[\[18\]](#) During this "golden era," whiskey's reputation as a medical wonder was maintained; likewise, it was present at most social events, including elections. Daniel Pierce explains how in the **Great Smoky Mountains** "voters generally expected those running for office to 'treat' them with whiskey and provide some entertainment."[\[19\]](#) Demand was high, as the annual individual consumption of liquor reached 7.1 gallons by 1830.[\[20\]](#) Of course, this demand proved an economic incentive for mountain farmers, who needed an **agricultural** product to turn into cash to use to pay taxes. For example, the farmer could get about \$10 for a wagonload of corn or around \$150 or more for a wagonload of whiskey in 1890.[\[21\]](#) Therefore, the mountain folks making whiskey during this time were respected. As Stewart acknowledged, they

were “not marginalized criminals but entrepreneurs responding to the marketplace. As such, they gained the appreciation of mountain people, who regarded drinking—and distilling—as a vital element of their economy and culture.”[\[22\]](#)

Then in 1861, the country went to war with itself. Again, a whiskey tax to help pay for war was implemented in 1862. Much like in previous times, opposition to the tax was high, as was the evasion of paying it. Table 1 shows the drastic increase in whiskey prices from a New York sample as a result of the tax.

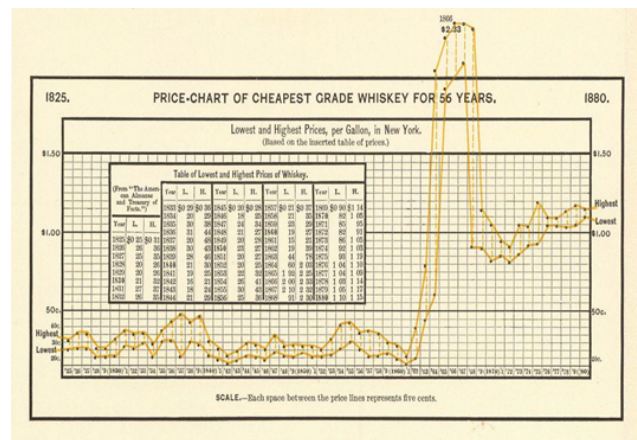


Figure 1. Price-Chart of Cheapest Grade Whiskey for 56 years.

Image Credit: David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries

Alongside the whiskey tax, the nation established its first income tax. In response, the Office of the Commissioner of Internal Revenue was reinstituted and, according to IRS figures, “in its first year, 1863 . . . collected \$39.1 million.”[\[23\]](#) The development and professionalization of the **Internal Revenue Service** were necessarily intertwined with the enforcement of unpopular liquor laws during this time period.[\[24\]](#) Historian Wilbur Miller addressed this enforcement and corresponding resistance: “By 1876 most of the work of district attorneys and the marshals in Appalachia was revenue cases, in Georgia amounting to four-fifths of federal prosecutions.”[\[25\]](#) During these years, distillers were often referred to as “blockaders,” as they “ran the blockade” of revenueurs to sell the product. During the time after the 1862 tax, the label “moonshiner” arose to describe those who distilled alcohol illicitly, perhaps due to their work under cover of darkness.

In 1876, under orders from President **Ulysses S. Grant**, the IRS increased the enforcement of liquor laws, seizing over 3,000 stills and arresting twice as many moonshiners in the next four years.[\[26\]](#) This growth in the manufacturing of illicit alcohol has often been attributed to cultural forces, but the external forces of industrialization and urbanization play a more important role. As coal and timber companies moved into the Appalachian region, populations exploded. Miller describes how Middlesborough, Kentucky, went from sixty farmers to 5,000 residents between 1883 and 1889, for instance.[\[27\]](#) This population growth necessarily translated to expanded markets for moonshiners, as the now-criminalized practitioners of the ancient art of distilling were known.

In the late 19th century, readers of American magazines and newspapers began seeing articles about the industrious residents of Appalachia, including mountain moonshiners. Unfortunately, many **local color** writers expanded the periodicals' audiences but relied heavily on stereotypes of mountain people as isolated, backward, and fundamentally uncivilized compared to the rest of the nation. These stereotypes and negative connotations would surround representations of mountain people, and particularly moonshiners, well into the 20th century. The power of outside forces in shaping the Appalachian economy and identity likewise persisted. The century began, in fact, with the widespread passage of laws prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcohol altogether.

20th Century: Prohibition and Profit

“Why don’t they pass a constitutional amendment prohibiting anybody from learning anything? If it works as well as prohibition did, in five years Americans would be the smartest race of people on Earth.”

—Will Rogers[\[28\]](#)

Not only did **prohibition** laws dry up a revenue stream for the federal government, they were also great for those in the moonshine business. These laws came early to the Appalachian region, and by 1920, national prohibition had arrived. By this point, even many moonshiners had accepted the existence of whiskey taxes (even if they chose to evade them), but the notion that the government could deprive people of the right to turn their corn into whiskey was completely unacceptable and outrageous to entire Appalachian communities.

Between 1900 and 1930, it would be safe to say that **Southern Appalachia** had been fully transformed into an industrial region of resource extraction, specifically logging and mining. Many in Appalachia resisted employment in these industries, preferring instead to maintain their more traditional agrarian existence, sometimes supplemented by the newly criminalized activity of distilling corn into whiskey. These individuals formerly known as entrepreneurs therefore became outlaws and the primary focus of the IRS.

Miller described the turn toward national prohibition as “a far greater expansion of the state than tax collection” and explained how this effort “led federal officials from a difficult task to an impossible one.”^[29] This task was seen as impossible in large part due to the fact that this intrusion was viewed as “moral instead of merely fiscal.”^[30] Resistance was inevitable and profitable for many. After all, laws meant to prohibit production and consumption did nothing to curb the nation’s appetite for alcohol.

Instead, Prohibition created an economic incentive. The exponential increase in the value of alcohol during this time led many moonshiners to increase production. Dabney described how during this time “corn whiskey went big-time—attracting fabulous prices from thirsty consumers everywhere, but particularly in the major cities, where the big gangs contracted for every drop of homemade whiskey they could lay their hands on.”^[31] Many moonshiners upgraded from forty- or fifty-gallon stills to those capable of producing over 500 gallons at a time. Pierce explained, “What had once been a craft, now became an industrial process.”^[32]

As the name of the game became increased production and increased profit, multiple innovations beyond the use of bigger stills emerged in the production of moonshine. Moonshiners began using sugar and baker’s yeast to decrease fermentation time, some added adulterants to give the impression that the whiskey was stronger than it actually was, and some used car and truck radiators instead of copper condenser worms to speed production. Henry Ford’s assembly line automobiles and the state and federal highways likewise revolutionized the business of moonshining, and the innovations of bootleggers and rum-runners transporting illegal alcohol laid the foundation for what is now known as the **National Association of Stock Car Racing (NASCAR)**.

Prohibition might have failed at eliminating the mass production of alcohol in the United States, but it succeeded wildly in revolutionizing the

business. While it was still portrayed in media accounts through stereotypes of backward, even primitive, mountain people, Pierce comments that “in reality almost overnight it had become a modern, integrated, industrial process” and, referring to the Great Smoky Mountains area, that moonshining “probably employed more people and made more profit than any other business in the region.”[\[33\]](#) Of course, this industrialization was big business for revenuers as well, and the cat-and-mouse game continued throughout the century although the repeal of national prohibition by the passage of the 18th Amendment in 1933 decreased demand for moonshine considerably.

In many Appalachian regions, however, prohibition was maintained through state and local laws, and economic hardship in the area continued to provide motivation to moonshiners. Once again in the 1950s, increased taxes on liquor made moonshine an attractive option, and production increased to meet the demand. This decade is referred to as the “Thunder Road” era due to the prevalence of heavily modified vehicles used to transport moonshine. Hollywood, always eager to depict a good car chase, capitalized on the excitement of this era with films like *Thunder Road*,[\[34\]](#) connecting the illicit behavior of moonshine running in Kentucky and Tennessee with the excitement of pushing the limits of the law while driving race cars.[\[35\]](#)

Ironically, around the same time that some popular culture romanticized the moonshiners and their business, other celebrities, such as **Andy Griffith**, worked in coordination with the Treasury Department’s Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Division (ATTD; later the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, or ATF) to raise awareness about the dangers of illicit alcohol. In order to increase profits and production during this era, like under prohibition, some moonshiners again took particularly dangerous shortcuts, such as adding adulterants for “kick” and using radiators from cars and trucks, resulting in cases of lead poisoning, blindness, and death. In addition to their effort to raise public awareness of the dangers of moonshine, the ATTD mounted an aggressive campaign called Operation Dry Up in 1962 and by the 1970s had greatly increased the number of enforcement agents and decreased moonshine production in several states.

Another strategy implemented by moonshiners throughout this period to increase profit was the use of sugar instead of corn. Doing so decreased the time of production and increased the amount of whiskey produced. This incentive disappeared in the 1970s after the U.S. government’s embargo on Cuba caused a doubling in the price of sugar. Other necessary materials such

as copper and corn likewise increased in price, which all but erased the profit in making moonshine. Much of the market remained since the moonshiner could sell their product cheaper than legal whiskey due to avoiding the taxes. With an increase in production costs, however, moonshiners had to raise prices almost to the level of legal liquor to make money.

At the same time, other economic opportunities appeared in Appalachia, and many moonshiners “went legit.” Between 1967 and 1977, the number of moonshine stills destroyed by federal agents dropped from 6,000 to 500. By 1997, that number was about twenty per year.^[36] Lippard and Stewart point out that “by the end of the twentieth century, journalists, scholars, and mountain residents alike had concluded that moonshining as well as the knowledge of making unaged corn whiskey were on the verge of extinction.”^[37] These conclusions were a bit premature, however, as the 21st century has seen another monumental change regarding moonshine production and distribution: **legalization**.

21st Century: Legalization and Commodification

“We need continually to remind ourselves of one single simple statement that a criminal act has to be defined through social and cultural processes that are in themselves played out separate from the essence of the act itself.”

—Mike Presdee^[38]

During the last decade of the 20th century, there were fewer than 100 legal distilleries in the United States. Kenneth Sanchagrin describes the exponential growth of whiskey-making facilities: “by 2011, when 26 states had reformed their laws, the number of distilleries had jumped to 356, and in 2016, when nearly every state had reformed its distillery laws in one way or another, the number of distilleries jumped to 1,118.”^[39] By 2023 this number reached 2,150, an increase of over 2,000% according to census data from the North American Industry Classification System.^[40] This expansion is a direct result of changing laws at state, county, and municipal levels.^[41] The majority of alcohol manufacturing laws involve and apply to small craft distilleries. Plenty of distilleries—both within Appalachia and beyond—have found moonshine and the history and outlaw nature of the spirit to be a profitable investment.

Popcorn Sutton's name, image, and legacy help to market "Popcorn Sutton Original Small Batch Recipe." For example, his image and the slogan "Jesus turned the water into wine, I turned it into likker" greet visitors to the company website. Unfortunately, Popcorn is portrayed as a salesman of this taxed and legal version of his "likker" in name and image only, since he died by suicide rather than go to prison for the charges he caught for distilling spirits just a few years earlier. Similar moonshine "celebrities," NASCAR drivers **Junior Johnson** and Bill Elliott have also gotten in on the legal moonshine business, with Johnson's "Midnight Moon" marketed as being "inspired by Johnson's family recipe." Their website describes how when "young Junior ran 'shine for his family, driving like a bat out of hell evolved into more than just a necessity. In order to outrun the cops, he built the fastest cars and invented gutsy driving moves, like the famed bootlegger U-turn. His racing savvy soon turned into passion and Junior crossed over to NASCAR, where he became an instant star."[\[42\]](#) The website goes on to describe how Johnson was eventually caught by revenueurs (not driving, but at home) and served eleven months of a two-year sentence before returning to his racing career. Junior Johnson passed on in 2019, his criminal past seemingly forgotten, evidenced by being proclaimed the "Last American Hero" by journalist Tom Wolfe in 1965[\[43\]](#) and having been granted a pardon in 1985 by President **Ronald Reagan**.[\[44\]](#)

A growing body of research by cultural criminologists has investigated this phenomenon of the selling, or **commodification**, of cultural resistance. From the production of television shows like *Sons of Anarchy* and the sales of associated items, from T-shirts and leather vests to motorcycles, it is possible for fans to purchase some semblance of the outlaw biker lifestyle without encountering any of the associated risks, harms, or stigma.[\[45\]](#) This same process has taken place with regard to Appalachian **outlaw culture** and cultural icons related to moonshine and moonshining. Given the number of distilleries currently producing some version of white whiskey (a.k.a. moonshine) and the number of visitors to these distilleries, this appeal to the human urge to misbehave makes for big business.

Distilleries maintain that their technology, recipes, and techniques are all exact replicas of the way moonshine was historically produced. Some argue, however, that it still isn't the same. In fact, some go as far as to say that if a product is taxable, it ceases to be the same "rebel spirit," or even be moonshine at all. In fact, one definition of moonshine is "a distilled beverage

that is illegally produced.”[\[46\]](#) As a result, even a proliferation of “legal moonshine” distilleries from coast to coast has not completely killed the art and craft of making moonshine in what is seen as the most “old-fashioned way”: illegally. Many individuals make moonshine in the smallest of small batches and outside the confines of legally established distilleries. Unlike so many who came before them, these moonshiners are not motivated by economic hardship, lack of other employment alternatives, or even the pursuit of profit. Instead, they do it for more personal reasons, sometimes informed by an understanding of the aforementioned history.

Sentiments at least as old as the Whiskey Rebellion were echoed by an older gentleman known around London, Kentucky, as the “General.” **The General** had spent time in prison for moonshining in the 1960s and explained living outside the law:

Nobody wants to pay taxes—and they’re right in that, I never did like taxes . . . and it’s a form of rebellion as far as I’m concerned. It says, you know, it may be a law, but I don’t have to live with it, I don’t have to abide by it; it’s on the books, if I get caught I pay the penalty . . . but I won’t abide by it. It’s a way of protesting I think.[\[47\]](#)

While the General was interviewed in a modest home and recalled tales of working “out in the woods,” not all moonshiners work in hiding; at least one practices his rebellion from a three-car garage nestled within a gated community. Much like the moonshiners of yesteryear, this self-proclaimed “hobby distiller” likewise loved to build fast cars, earning him the code name “Speed Racer.” His cars were meant to win trophies, however, and not to transport the moonshine he made in the same garage. **Speed Racer** explained his moonshining motivations as being primarily personal, with a hint of the old economic urge thrown in, just for good measure. First, he exclaimed, “I do it because I love it! And it’s addictive!” Later, however, he explained the bottom line: “I drink George Dickel or, used to ’til I got this still. You take a liter, it’s what? Twenty-four-something dollars a bottle. This [making it himself] is four dollars a liter.”[\[48\]](#)

Speed Racer illustrates how the 21st century has resulted in some technological innovations useful for moonshining in the new millennium. Over the centuries, changes in the process have been slight, but Speed Racer acquired his still from a website dedicated to hobby distillers. Along with gaining access to useful ingredients like turbo yeasts, he was able to call for tech support if he encountered any problems during the process. Several such

sites exist, some stating explicit warnings that these stills are for decoration only or disclaimers that visitors/customers who practice the continued illegality of home distilling should “use at your own risk.” Despite such disclaimers, the rebellious cultural memory, admiration of the craft, and thirst for moonshine remain intact and enticing enough to encourage risk-taking and law-breaking.

Individuals or groups depicted in media as deviants blamed for crime or other social problems are what Stan Cohen calls “folk devils.”[\[49\]](#) Moonshiners have certainly been subject to such portrayal in **folklore**. They have also been seen as folk heroes, and the current renaissance uses a cultural celebration of their deviance and defiance in rebranding these rebellious spirits for new markets and media. Simon Hallsworth describes how, throughout centuries of history, the paradoxical theme of “the outlaw” exists both as folk hero and folk devil, at times respected or reviled, demonized or romanticized.[\[50\]](#) Media and public opinion ebb and flow and laws come and go, but moonshine and moonshiners persist. Whether made and marketed for mass consumption in licensed and taxed distilleries or in more intentionally illicit manners and locations, moonshine certainly seems to be here to stay. Likewise, the attitude of many in Appalachia is that some laws are made to be broken. While moonshine may not be of particular interest to those tasked with Appalachia HIDTA, the political and economic conditions that made it such an attractive option for so many in the region persist to this day. Perhaps both structural conditions and subcultural dispositions are important in understanding underground economies in general.

Conclusion

For much of U.S. history, distilling spirits has been considered a natural right. Entire regions, including those within Appalachia, have used the process to supplement income, to create a product for cleaning, to develop fuel, and to craft other medicinal and/or recreational purposes. Taxes have come and gone, particularly rising around wartime, and in the past century, laws have shifted from pure prohibition to legalization for purposes of craft distilling. Federal law still prohibits home distillation for personal use or profit, however, and much like every other legislation meant to slow or stop this age-old practice, this law continues to be creatively ignored and resisted in Appalachia and elsewhere. The motivations for moonshining in the history of Appalachia were primarily a result of

economic hardships imposed by structural forces such as industrialization for the extraction of natural resources and associated exploitative labor practices. In the 21st century, national legalization in favor of the craft distilling of moonshine provides the possibility of profit to entrepreneurs willing to pay for proper permits, taxes, and other prices of admission. Despite this easing of legislation, many modern moonshiners still seem more interested in ensuring that “America’s Original Rebel Spirit” continues to be made in the same tradition of Popcorn Sutton and so many before him: illicitly.

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[2] Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, 73.

[3] Stewart, "Fire Up the Stills," 50.

[4] Hutcheson, *This Is the Last Dam Run of Likker I'll Ever Make*.

[5] Schlimm, *Moonshine: A Celebration of Americas Original Rebel Spirit*, Chapter 8.

[6] Stewart and Lippard, "Introduction: The Revival of Moonshine," 1.

[7] Hill, "Ole Smoky Distilleries Most Visited in the World."

[8] Churchill, *The Churchill Wit*. 49.

- [9] McFee, "Usquebaugh," 457.
- [10] Middleton, "The Evolution of the Whisky Cask."
- [11] Mitenbuler, *Bourbon Empire*, 18.
- [12] Meacham, *Every Home a Distillery*, x.
- [13] Ibid, 24.
- [14] Stewart and Lippard, "Introduction: The Revival of Moonshine," 2.
- [15] Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 97.
- [16] Ibid, 113.
- [17] Franklin, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, 69.
- [18] Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 30.
- [19] Pierce, *Corn from a Jar*, 15.
- [20] Bustard, *Spirited Republic*, 15.
- [21] Miller, *Revenuers & Moonshiners*, 28.
- [22] Stewart, *Moonshiners and Prohibitionists*, 30.
- [23] "IRS History Timeline."
- [24] Ibid.
- [25] Miller, *Revenuers & Moonshiners*, 15.
- [26] Stewart, "Fire Up the Stills," 31.
- [27] Miller, *Revenuers & Moonshiners*, 30.
- [28] Rogers, *Will Rogers' Weekly Articles & Moonshiners*, 346.
- [29] Miller, *Revenuers & Moonshiners*, 8.
- [30] Ibid, 188.
- [31] Dabney, *Mountain Spirits*, 150.
- [32] Pierce, *Corn from a Jar*, 56.
- [33] Ibid, 72.
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- [35] Ibid.
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- [37] Stewart, "Fire Up the Stills," 40.
- [38] Presdee, *Cultural Criminology*, 16.
- [39] Sanchagrin, "The Rise of 'Legal' Moonshine," 113.
- [40] "Distilleries."
- [41] Sanchagrin, "The Rise of 'Legal' Moonshine," 107.
- [42] "Legacy."
- [43] Wolfe, "The Last American Hero Is Junior Johnson. Yes!"
- [44] "Junior Johnson Pardoned," *The Tennessean*.
- [45] Lyng, *Edgework*, 40.
- [46] Kosar, *Moonshine*, 20.
- [47] The General, interview.
- [48] Speed Racer, interview.
- [49] Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 5.
- [50] Hallsworth, *Street Crime*, 41.

The Waterlord:

Gus Isom and the Tennessee Valley Authority

Shawn Kimbro and Lisa Day

To many generations of Appalachian residents, the word “development” is nearly a curse. It’s often used to justify radically changing residents’ daily lives and their property to the point of displacement from lands where multiple generations of one family have raised their children, planted their gardens, and managed their livestock in an independent, self-sustaining manner. In the early 1930s when federal officials in Tennessee spoke the word “development” in close proximity with “general welfare of the citizens,”^[1] it signaled widespread loss while it also brought greater access to utilities. As a result, waterways changed course, dams and reservoirs appeared, access to utilities improved, and residents moved their homes and communities to dry land. Among the many displaced families, the Gordon Isom family of Hawkins County, Tennessee, shifted their sense of home as they re-settled into other counties, and Gus Isom made a new livelihood for himself as a **waterman** in east Tennessee.^[2]

The New Deal

When the **Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)** formed, its main goal was to provide hydroelectric power to state residents along with flood control of the Tennessee River. The creation of the TVA in 1933 as a key pillar of **Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal** had been well reported in all the local newspapers. The TVA’s stated mission was to improve flood control, open the rivers to navigation, provide recreation, and generate

inexpensive electricity for people living in the Tennessee Valley and surrounding regions. However, development brought sacrifice: TVA infrastructure eventually displaced over 14,000 rural Appalachian families, acquired over 1.3 million acres of land, and altered the course of almost every major stream in the Tennessee River watershed.^[3] Many residents of the impoverished region welcomed the economic opportunities the agency promised to bring. The government bought land “at a price deemed fair and reasonable” from displaced residents, many of whom did not have the modern conveniences of electricity (98%) and indoor plumbing (41%),^[4] but to paraphrase Woody Guthrie, this land was *their* land. For many, it was the land where their formerly enslaved grandparents had toiled, and even though east Tennessee's unforgiving, over-cultivated soil had nearly broken their backs, they felt a deep connection to it.

Construction on **Norris Dam** began in 1936,^[5] and when recruiters fanned out across the region seeking laborers, they did not assign work equitably in socioeconomic and racial factors. Most of the best jobs went to **White** workers, while some **Black men** signed on to haul stone, cut brush, and perform other strenuous manual labor. More prosperous landowners were likely to supplement the TVA's purchase price with their savings to acquire land somewhere else, but poor farmers and sharecroppers were forced out of **agriculture** and into low-skill industrial work in the cities.^[6] Moreover, the TVA's relocation staff exhibited the institutionalized discrimination that affected so much of the New Deal: all of them were White. In the height of the **Jim Crow** era, these workers did not assist Black families in relocation or refer them to other agencies that could have provided assistance.^[7] While the **Great Migration** of Black individuals and families in rural Appalachia to urban areas had been occurring since 1910, largely due to the closure of coal mines, Black Tennesseans' migration to cities (mostly Nashville and Atlanta) happened mostly in the 1930s and 1940s in response to TVA **displacement**.^[8]

In the 1940s not long after impoundment of the **Holston River** by a TVA dam, **Cherokee Lake** flooded more than 30,000 acres, including small communities and fertile riverine farmland. Living humans weren't the only ones being displaced. The TVA records indicate that they “investigated” 69,000 graves in 1933 and eventually relocated 20,000 of them.^[9] As with

many Black cemeteries, many of the graves were unmarked and most likely missed in the relocation process.^[10] Only a handful of newspapers like the *Chattanooga Daily Times* reported the difficulties in the TVA relocation of cemeteries:

A rather unusual problem involved in the flooding of some of the authority's reservoirs is that of the removal of graves and cemeteries from the flooded areas. In most of the reservoirs on the main river this problem was fairly simple, since the only cemeteries flooded were small isolated ones bordering on the reservoir edge and containing only a few graves which could be easily moved to adjacent cemeteries slightly higher up: 425 graves were moved from fifty-one cemeteries in the Chickamauga reservoir.

In a reservoir such as Norris, however, the problem was greatly complicated by the fact that most of the cemeteries had been placed in the lower levels adjacent to the river, so that large numbers of them were considerably below the reservoir level. This not only increased the amount of work involved in making relocations but also made it more difficult to find other cemeteries in the immediate vicinity where relocations could be made. The 5,226 graves moved from the Norris reservoir is [*sic*] reported to be the largest program of its kind ever undertaken.^[11]

Curiously, the Chattanooga newspaper article is 24 paragraphs of crowded text; the unemphatic paragraphs regarding the cemetery removal are the eighteenth and nineteenth paragraphs, and the content is buried in a subsection titled "Effect on Utilities." While the Chickamauga reservoir near Chattanooga necessitated the removal of 425 graves from 51 cemeteries as well as "small isolated" cemeteries, the Norris reservoir alone resulted in the relocation of over 5,000 graves that caused far more difficulty in finding as well as moving elsewhere in southeast Tennessee.

The Isoms of East Tennessee

Much has been written about the economic opportunities that spread through the region with the installation of the TVA, but less has been said about the over 15,000 individuals who were displaced and relocated by the

creation of the lakes, [\[12\]](#) including the Isom Family. The Isoms offer a keen 19th century example of American history formed by the institution of slavery. In 1847 in Gate City, Virginia, located in the tri-state area with Tennessee and Kentucky, an enslaved woman known only as Janie had thirteen children with Gideon Ison, a White property owner. While family history long held that Ison never sold any of their children, more recent evidence in court records has shown that on March 1, 1865, Gate City, Virginia, the estate of Gideon Ison made a bill for hire of five “Negro boys” for amounts ranging from \$99 to \$54 and one woman named Jenny for one dollar on March 1, 1865, to be paid on March 1, 1866. [\[13\]](#) Also, at least one son (also named Gordon Ison) acquired land in the Sunrise community in Knox County, Tennessee, well known as an area where formerly enslaved individuals and families settled. [\[14\]](#)

Court records in 1870 show that Kelson Isom (known as “Kelso”) married Laura Whiteside and settled along the Holston River in nearby Hawkins County. Their eldest son, Gordon Isom (1871-1954), amassed over 200 acres, raising hogs and farming the land by the time the TVA came around and relocated his family to the other side of the river. [\[15\]](#) According to **William Isom II** (president of **Black in Appalachia Project**), family lore tells that Gordon Isom acquired the land around the turn of the century when a wealthy family deeded him thirty acres of a much larger tract in return for the tenant work he had previously done and for consideration of future labor. Genealogical records of property ownership, however, indicate that Gideon and Mollie “Doll” Isom purchased the 218+ acre farm for \$6,000 on November 6, 1930. [\[16\]](#)

The sixth son of Gordon Isom, **Augustus “Gus” Isom** (1909-1989), considered going to Morristown when TVA recruiters came in 1933 to sign up workers for the nearby Norris Dam project, but he was responsible for most of the work on the farm and needed to stay with his family. Still, the promise of steady work and good wages drew many of his friends and neighbors to clear the entire **Clinch River Valley** as part of TVA’s first massive construction project. In recollections shared with Shawn Kimbro, Gus couldn’t remember when he first heard that the land where his family farm was located in the Holston River Valley would be flooded to create Cherokee Lake. He wasn’t too worried at first because his land was nearly

30 miles upstream from Jefferson City, where the new **Cherokee Dam** was to be built. His optimism was short lived, as his father was soon notified that the Isom farm would be taken along with the land of nearly all their neighbors. Some of his neighbors tried to fight the federal government's notice of land possession by **eminent domain**, but it was immediately apparent that resistance was a lost cause. [\[17\]](#) In 1939, Isom's modest 30-acre farm belonged to the TVA, and no longer able to work his land, he took a job helping to build the dam that would eventually flood his family homestead.

TVA based its offers to landowners on an obscure classification system that assigned values to categories ranging from alluvial river bottom to steep hillside. Gus Isom's farm was classified to be "hillside," even though many of the neighboring farms received better classifications and more compensation. Landowners could contest the value and category, but that process required hiring a lawyer that many families couldn't afford. An all-White board, appointed by the TVA to allocate relocation assistance, provided better services to White families while leaving Black families to fend largely for themselves. Exemplifying this difference in treatment, the New Deal included funding for a Norris Model Community for relocated residents; however, this model deliberately excluded Black families. Moreover, Black and White workers at the dams had a separate pay scale, and Black workers were often hired only for low-paying menial and temporary jobs. Conditions at TVA sites such as **Pickwick Dam**, **Wheeler Dam**, and **Wilson Dam** were even more racially disparate in their housing and amenities. As historical evidence has indicated, the TVA amassed "one of the worst records on race compared to other New Deal initiatives." [\[18\]](#)

The Isoms took the check for their land and moved to nearby Knox County, where Gus and his father took jobs as laborers in a furniture factory. [\[19\]](#) As construction began on Cherokee Dam in the summer of 1940, a call went out for workers. This time, free of commitments to the family farm, Gus applied, and on his draft registration card in June 1941, he lists Cherokee Dam as his place of employment; [\[20\]](#) as the war raged, he was never called to serve.

SERIAL NUMBER 1818	1. NAME (Print) Augustus (None) Isom		ORDER NUMBER 2571
2. ADDRESS (Print) RFD 2		3. PLACE OF BIRTH Greene Tennessee	
3. TELEPHONE NONE		4. AGE IN YEARS 31	
4. DATE OF BIRTH JAN 30 1909		5. PLACE OF BIRTH Greene Tennessee	
5. NAME OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS MRS. ALICE S. ISOM		6. RELATIONSHIP OF THAT PERSON WIFE	
6. ADDRESS OF THAT PERSON RFD 2 MOORESBURG HAWKINS TENN.		7. EMPLOYEE'S NAME TVA	
7. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS CHEROKEE DAM		8. I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.	
REGISTRATION CARD D. S. S. Form 1		16-17105 Augustus Isom (Registrant's signature)	

Figure 1. Gus Isom's draft card in 1940 indicates his employer as Cherokee Dam. National Archives and Records Administration. Courtesy of Ancestry.com.

Gus Isom's job at the dam was to push wheelbarrows full of stone up steep scaffolding so it could be mixed with concrete. Hastened by the onset of **WorldWarII**, the "crash schedule" of Cherokee Dam construction took only sixteen months to build the dam, and the gates of the new dam closed on

December 5, 1941, [\[21\]](#) two days before the attack on Pearl Harbor. The power generated by the dams was bringing electricity to many rural families who hadn't had it before. The newly-abundant hydroelectric power was also used to build equipment and supplies for the military and to provide the energy for the atomic bomb manufacturing facility in nearby Oak Ridge.

Gus Isom left Norris Dam and found work clearing land for the high-tension power lines that were beginning to crisscross the region. Not long into this line-worker job, Gus heard about a new TVA project near Rogersville that needed laborers. The work—to stock Cherokee Lake with fish—sounded easier than clearing brush, so he signed on. With his **lived experience** as an angler and his hard work, Gus was soon promoted to foreman. Since he knew the features of the original riverbed, he helped decide where to release the fish, usually near river bottom features like shoals and deeper holes. He stocked fish until 1949, when TVA turned all fisheries management services over to the newly formed **TennesseeWildlife**

Resource Agency (TWRA). Recognizing an opportunity, he applied for commercial trotline tags and began fishing for channel and blue **catfish**. With a comprehensive understanding of the familiar underwater contours and structures, he became one of the most successful and best known fishermen in the **Tennessee Valley**. Gus felt at home on the lake and came to enjoy the seasonal fluctuations in water level as the lakes receded in the winter and filled back up in the summer.

Near the end of his time with TVA, Gus Isom began building a boat, patterned after his memories of his dad's boat building when they lived on the river. Since lumber was plentiful from all the forests that were cleared to make the lakes, he chose to construct his boat from white oak because he considered oak to be more durable and easier to shape than other native hardwoods. Upon completion, his boat was a little over 16 feet long and about 5 feet wide, with a square and slightly upturned bow and a reinforced stern. He carved the sides a little higher than most jon boats to handle the high waves whipped up by frequent thunderstorms that rolled through the valley, and he painted his boat forest green so it would blend in with the weeds and trees if he needed to hide it along the lake bank. Isom fits into the long tradition of Black men who earn a living through fishing, including men with enslaved ancestors. Reflecting on the large number of Black commercial fishermen who made a living in the Chesapeake Bay during the postbellum decades, Megan Waldrep indicates that "there is no doubt that America's commercial fishing industry is rooted in slavery.... [The] slave trade sought artisans, farmers, and fishers from Africa for their specific knowledge in sustaining living to sell and buy them for those distinct skills. From then on, generations of enslaved people worked on farms and plantations, perfecting the trade, only to hand over the harvest for others to profit." Christine Keiner adds: "one of the attractions of commercial fishing relates to the independence long associated with life on the water," further suggesting that "Independent fishermen developed such a specialized knowledge base that they found the prospect of having to take up other work alarming."^[22] Yet, even with such expertise, Black fishermen have counted on the challenges of the occupation: "the ability to adapt to rapidly changing climatic and economic conditions was and remains vital to making a living" as a commercial fisherman."^[23] According to Vincent Leggett, waterman and author of *Blacks of the Chesapeake Bay*, many "watermen"—anglers who

make a living from fishing, boat-building, sailmaking, crab picking and fish fileting, owners of seafood processing plants, or owners of seafood restaurants—come from a legacy of working on the waterways for a living, and sometimes this legacy isn't restricted to the traditional form of father to son. [\[24\]](#)

The Intertwined Stories of Gus Isom and Shawn Kimbro

The following autoethnography tells how co-author Shawn Kimbro met Gus Isom and learned how to fish and, along the way, learned first-hand about the many effects of the TVA on east Tennessee families, waterways, and overall culture.

Before I met Gus Isom, I never made much money at the dock. The only profits came from whatever we had left after paying the lease. Our landlord—or in this case, our waterlord—was the Tennessee Valley Authority. This government agency owned all the docks at that time, or rather the water they floated on. They made only a few leases available, and sites were limited to designated areas spaced many miles apart. With TVA's permission, leaseholders could build slips or add structures, but there were set limits on the number of boats that could be tied up at a time. [\[25\]](#) Because the lease for the dock and marina store didn't turn much profit, I needed more work.

I was seventeen when I met Gus. He was seventy. My father had leased a campground and marina near Fall Creek State Park on Cherokee Lake near Morristown, Tennessee. I think my dad liked the *idea* of running a boat dock more than doing it. He continued to work in his insurance business and to preach on Sundays, so it fell on me to pump gas, dock boats, and run the floating store at the marina. For convenience and out of a profound dislike for early morning awakenings, I started living there, sleeping on a cot behind the cash register in the bait shop.

My non-traditional alarm clock was the sound of muddy boots hitting the wooden gangplank as early-rising fishermen stomped in before daylight to buy **minnows** or **night crawlers**. They cursed me when the coffee wasn't ready, but I'd start a pot while counting out their bait. We kept the minnows outside in a metal tank beneath a canvas awning, which kept out the rain but not the snakes. Having pulled a **water moccasin** up in a small net from a dark tank on one bleary morning, I became forever wary of dipping minnows. As

the sky started to brighten, I'd look over toward the boat ramp to see Gus Isom backing down in his rusty red pickup truck, towing a homemade wooden jon boat filled with his gear, including the aging nets and lines that his wife, Alice Williams Isom, hand-tied for him in many hours of evening work in the years before she died. [\[26\]](#) By the time I first saw his boat, the wood was worn and the paint was faded, but it was still tight and seaworthy even though Gus had been fishing in it for nearly thirty years. Sometimes fishing from the boat floating over the same land he once farmed, Isom told me his stories as he taught me how to fish. I believe Isom is an example of the resilience demonstrated by Appalachian residents in the face of radical changes in culture and topography, and his experience is representative of the plight of many east Tennesseans, especially the Black community. He was there every morning, rain or shine, except Sunday, when I presumed he went to church but not to my dad's all-White congregation. I'd watch him launch his boat, pull the cord on his 15-horsepower Johnson Seahorse outboard motor, and putt-putt away from the ramp toward the main stem of the lake. A few hours later, he'd return with that weathered, flat-bottomed boat nearly overflowing with blue and channel catfish.

Gus was something of a legend on **Fall Creek**. In 1978, respect didn't come easily to a Black man in the still socially segregated Tennessee, but all the fishermen admired him because he caught so many fish. I'd heard the stories and seen the faded black and white Polaroid pictures on the bait shop bulletin board: Gus holding a 50-pound blue catfish and another of him struggling to hold up a paddlefish that had to weigh 100 pounds or more. Every angler—especially me—on Cherokee Lake recognized Gus as the lord of the catfish.

Gus Isom was a waterman, as they'd call him in other parts of the country. He sold fish to a few private customers and fish fries, but most of his catch went to local markets. What he couldn't sell, he donated to churches or to the nearby orphanage. His best customers were IGA Markets; these grocery stores weren't huge, but they were conveniently located in smaller communities where they didn't have to compete with the national supermarket chains. They were known for selling quality meat, including the freshest fish in the region. For that part of their reputation, I figured Gus was single-handedly responsible.



Figure 2. Gus Isom, wearing his trademark overalls, holding two catfish, and standing behind a black truck that looked like the red model he drove when Shawn Kimbro met him. Photo courtesy of William Isom II, March 11, 2024.

One morning I summoned up the courage to walk over to the boat ramp and talk to Gus. He was quiet but not unfriendly. I stammered something about the weather, and he nodded. Now at a loss for words, I blurted out, “Will you teach me how to catch catfish?” He looked down at his calloused hands, then back at me, and asked if I knew what I was getting into. “I’ll supply the bait,” I added, even though I knew my dad would never agree to that.

Gus laughed at me as he launched his boat and took me completely by surprise when he said, “Get in.”

“I can’t go today,” I backtracked. “I’m the only one minding the dock.”

“You got to fish when the fish bite,” he said as he pushed off from the red clay bank.

Walking back to the dock, I came up with a plan for the next morning. Lorne, a friend from home, had asked about working at the dock. I had to figure out how to pay him and to convince him to work in the mornings. Although he was too young to obtain a driver’s license, he could drive a boat, so I offered him free gas and use of a rental skiff in exchange for covering the early shift. To sweeten the deal, I said he could use the boat on his off days.

Before first light, I knew Gus would be fishing, and I dug out my mildewed rain gear and headed for the ramp. I was waiting in the darkness

when he pulled up. Without saying a word, he handed me the rope tied to the front of his boat and backed the trailer into the water. I was pumped with excitement when I pulled the boat up onto the clay. I was going fishing with a legend. That was the first of many days on the water with Gus that summer, and despite my aversion to getting up early, I never missed a trip.

Gus's method of catching the most fish was to set **trotlines** on Cherokee Lake. A trotline consists of a heavy main line with loops tied on about every three feet, and after the line is stretched, a lighter drop line called a snood is tied to each loop with a large J-hook attached. The line must be very tight in order to spring back and set the hook when a fish bites, and the line must be stretched with a big rock or some other kind of anchor on each end. Gus's anchors always weighed fifty pounds or more, so dropping those rocks wasn't easy. He insisted they be heavy so he could run the lines in the wind without causing slack. He attached plastic milk jugs along the line every thirty feet or so to keep the line off the lake bottom. The length of line from the floating jug to the main line determined the depth of the line. Gus usually ran three lines with 100 hooks each; he would sometimes run more before holiday weekends or when he had large orders to fill.

Commercial fishing involves a process that most people don't realize, and Gus gave me the discipline that I didn't know I needed. The first task every morning was to catch bait, and Gus used a nylon cast net to catch **shad** that formed large groups of fish on the lake's surface. These prolific forage fish gathered in schools by the thousands and rose to the surface, their heads poking just above the water. These were easier to catch early because the angle of sunlight on the water made it possible to sneak up on them. If they sensed us nearby, they'd bolt, so Gus taught me to throw the net as far as I could while making sure it opened into a big circle. I got pretty good at cast netting, but I could never throw like Gus. He could usually catch a couple hundred of the slimy, silvery shad with one massive heave.

We put the shad into a pail we called "the gut bucket." My job was to cut them up into bite-size chunks as bait for larger fish: mostly in half, the bigger ones in thirds. Once we baited all the lines, we started the motor and ran toward the floating milk jugs that marked the trotlines. As we neared the trotlines, those jugs started bobbing, sometimes even going under the water. A welcome sight, a bobbing jug signaled that the trotline was loaded with fish. Gus, sitting in the front of the boat, would take off the fish and untangle

the twisted drop lines. As he moved from hook to hook by pulling the boat along the tight line, I sat in the back, rebaiting the hooks and occasionally bailing water from the boat—not because it leaked but because it would fill with water and slime dripping from the catfish. It was messy, tedious, and time consuming. “Honest work,” Gus called it.

After a couple of weeks of running the lines with Gus, I was the lucky audience for some of his stories. One morning, he pointed toward a crumbling concrete grain silo that was protruding above the lake’s surface. I never understood why TVA tore down the houses, blew out the bridges, and cut down all the trees but left the grain silos like abandoned lighthouses. It’s the same in all the lakes.[\[27\]](#)

“You see that silo over there?” Gus pointed. “That was near my daddy’s farm.”

“You lived here?” I asked.

“Sure did,” he replied, pointing downward. “We farmed this land.”

Over the course of the summer, I heard more stories of Gus’s life in the river valley before TVA flooded it. He told me about his childhood chores on the farm, including how he chopped firewood and milked cows every morning before walking across **Poor Valley Creek** on a log footbridge to school. When he grew strong enough to work on the farm full time, he stopped going to school. During the coldest winters, the river froze, and he walked to visit his cousins who lived on the Russellville side. In the summer, a mule-drawn wagon took his family to the all-Black revival services near Clinch Mountain. Although his family was spread out, they remained tight-knit. When **Decoration Day** rolled around on the fourth Sunday in May, his family and all of his aunts, uncles, and cousins would return to the family cemetery to mow, rake leaves, lay flowers on the graves, and have “**dinner on the grounds**,” a long Appalachian tradition.[\[28\]](#) Memorializing his ancestors became even more somber due to his memory of how TVA relocated the graves of his family and others when they built the lakes.

I fished with Gus through the whole summer of 1979, when I left to go to college. The next summer, I applied to TWRA for my own commercial license. When it arrived, along with ten shiny aluminum trotline tags with my name and address on them, I was on top of the world. In my mind, I had made the transition to adulthood. I had a trade—a genuine profession: I was a commercial fisherman. I couldn’t wait to show my tags to Gus. He wasn’t

disappointed that he lost his summer help, but he let me know in no uncertain terms that I should put my lines well away from where he was fishing. I nodded in a gentleman's agreement and shook his hand. A couple of years later, I joined the Army and stopped fishing commercially. To this day, I regret that I lost touch with Gus.

Long-Term Changes in the Valley

In 1933, Knoxville-born Pulitzer Prize-winning author **James Agee** wrote, “It is the valley that is newly TVA’s to have and to hold, for better or for worse.”^[29] Today, most would agree that the marriage of TVA to the people and lands of the Tennessee Valley has been beneficial. Arguably, the dams were responsible for moving many people from a wide swath of the rural South away from subsistence farming and toward modern industrialization, but the organization keeps over 10,000 people employed. Also, 29 of the 46 dams on the Tennessee River and its feeder streams generate hydroelectricity and provide power to customers in seven states, including almost all of Tennessee and parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Virginia. It is the largest government-owned power supplier in the U.S., and its energy grid reaches as far south as Jackson, Mississippi, and as far north as Bowling Green, Kentucky. The agency now provides service to more than ten million individual customers and businesses, along with many large industrial operations and federal installations like the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Economic and employment opportunities in the once impoverished region have significantly improved.^[30]

The TVA lakes and surrounding public lands are a recreational haven for boaters, waterskiers, anglers, hunters, hikers, bird and wildlife watchers, and anyone who enjoys being on the water. With TVA came improved roadways and access points in the **Appalachian Commons**, and researchers in **outdoor recreation** have determined the enormous benefits: for example, people who visit eastern Kentucky spend nearly 50% of their time fishing—and they also spend money.^[31] They bring “millions of dollars into rural areas in Central Appalachia.”^[32] In Tennessee, not long after the construction of the Norris Reservoir, the TVA recorded around 57,000

fishing trips. ^[33] Since then, the numbers have only increased. In 2017, the University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture found that recreation on the lakes provided an annual economic benefit of nearly \$12 billion to the region, and since there are approximately 11,000 miles of shoreline, each mile was generating a value of over \$1 million. ^[34] Similarly, a report in 2022 by the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation found that 4.3 million people spent over eleven billion dollars while engaging in angling (19%), hunting (9%), or wildlife watching (71%) in Kentucky alone. ^[35] Indeed, the profits from outdoor recreation in **central Appalachia**—including hiking, climbing, mountain biking, along with wildlife recreation—as well as the tourism dollars associated with these activities, are far surpassing the economic benefits of coal and are focusing on environmental protection rather than extraction. ^[36]

In its 2022 report to the federal government, the TVA claims that “sustainability is engrained in [its] mission,” including “clean” energy, environmental stewardship, and economic development for the region. Preservation efforts include legal action to protect the snail darter, a tiny fish species native to streams in the area, resulting in the *TVA v. Hiram Hill* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to uphold the Endangered Species Act. ^[37] Subsequently, Congress passed a law in 1980 exempting the project from the Act, allowing **Tellico Dam** to be built. The controversy, however, helped sway public opinion away from dam construction and led to the cancellation of projects in other parts of the country. Other government agencies along with **whistleblowers** within the organization have repeatedly called for greater oversight than its current small board of governance.

Conclusion

Gus Isom’s experience is representative of the stories of thousands of rural Appalachian families who were involuntarily displaced by the TVA as it acquired over a million acres and altered the course of almost every major stream in the Tennessee River watershed. In some cases, entire towns were submerged by the lakes. TVA’s displacement policies were structured to favor prosperous land-owning families over poorer owners and tenants. Relocation was particularly difficult for Black families since TVA provided

them with little assistance; with scant compensation for their homes that had been destroyed, social networks broken, and the lands and graves of their ancestors inundated, most people had little choice but to move to impoverished, segregated neighborhoods in cities like Nashville, Knoxville, or Chattanooga. [\[38\]](#)

Not many Appalachian families who were displaced by TVA found the means to live near the lakes. Most remained in urban neighborhoods where their children and grandchildren live today. Gus Isom's story of commercial fishing demonstrates the determination shown by those who were forced to find new livelihoods, and even though Isom could no longer work the land his family once owned, he found a way to maintain his sense of place and his attachment to the area where he grew up. He taught himself to derive sustenance from the water that flooded his farm. His resilience and legacy stand like the silos that still rise above the surface of the lakes, monuments to the flooded lands of those who gave nearly everything in the name of progress.

While the impact of TVA in the mid-20th century brought with it extensive protests from environmentalists, **Indigenous** groups, and local farmers, the long-term effects have begun to outweigh the fragments of memory in descendent generations. The geographic changes have made it possible for increased environmental awareness as well as outdoor recreation that appeals to locals as well as tourists from all over the world. In addition, the cultural upheaval caused by the creation of the dams has inspired many artists, including second- and third-generation Appalachian families, as stories have been passed down and songs are written and sung to memorialize the area and to document its changes. To be sure, TVA has left an indelible mark on central Appalachia, and depending on the source and the specific area of concern, the impact is an enormous boon or a mournful loss. In truth, the impact is somewhere in the middle, and it's up to Appalachian residents to keep the organization accountable and to ensure that current and future generations learn about the history of Appalachia, its environment, and the diverse residents of this region.

Appendix

The Kimbro family musicians of east Tennessee were greatly inspired by Gus Isom and his stories about the TVA, evident in their songwriting and

recordings. Shawn Kimbro's folk/bluegrass song called "[Trotline](#)" (2001) recounts Gus Isom's story, and a song written by Daniel Kimbro called "[Loyston](#)" (2016) concerns a community near Knoxville, Tennessee, that was flooded by the waters of Norris Lake.

Trotline

Shawn Kimbro

I grew up proud beside a stream dammed up by TVA
500 acres of bottom land, they flooded it away
The ground beneath this water Daddy worked hard all his life
But I must make my living taking fish off this trotline

The Federal man drove up one day in a big black shiny car
They said your land is planned for progress, everyone must do his part
So we packed the truck and moved to town when the water started rising
Daddy took a job in Knoxville, come next spring, he up and died.

A factory job ain't much compared to living off the land
All I ever knew was outside work, getting by with just my hands
So, I built this old flat-bottomed boat in the spring of '49
And I learned to make my living taking fish off this trotline

Tie your hooks and count your loops and measure out your line
Stretch it out, anchor it down, then pull your floats up tight
Cast your net and cut your bait, God I hope those catfish bite
That's how I make my living taking fish off this trotline

In wintertime the lake goes down and I see Daddy's farm
But all that's left are cornerstones and the silo
What once was my inheritance, it's now just mud and slime
So I must make my living taking fish off this trotline. [\[39\]](#)

Loyston

Daniel Kimbro

The lake comes up and the lake goes down
Like the sun on my hometown
The red clay mud is hallowed ground
The lake comes up and the lake goes down

They said that the power they would generate
Would revolutionize my state
A brand-New Deal from TVA
But Loyston town was in the way

I drove up from Knoxville so to see
Men stop the river with concrete
The men worked hard in the summer heat
Lest the wall should ever leak

The name they chose was Norris Lake
And I watched the dam take shape
Gentle shoals turned to waves
Empty holes our flooded graves

The water rolled up through the hills
And washed away the soil I tilled
It washed away the house I built
Foundation rocks now sandy silt

The lake comes up and the lake goes down
Like the sun on my hometown
The red clay mud is hallowed ground
The lake comes up and the lake goes down

Old Clinch River sent below
The valley floor I've always known
I took my family to a brand-new home
Electric power and a telephone

But the blackest sky on a winter's night
Is by far a warmer sight
Than that pale green glowing light

Seen from the shores of my birthright

Summertime on the Loyston Sea
But you forget what you can't see
There's a town that lies buried
Beneath your boats and waterskis

Out of sight and out of mind
Is the town that I left behind
Dive down deep and all you'll find
Are broken dreams and fishing line

The lake comes up and the lake goes down
Like the sun on my hometown
The red clay mud is hallowed ground
The lake comes up and the lake goes down^[40]

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Native American Cultures of Appalachia

Sarah Gripshover and Kelli Carmean

With over 10,000 years of occupation by Native American peoples and, more recently, Euro-American settlers, Appalachia has a deep cultural heritage. The history and cultural significance of Appalachia containing ancestral Native homelands began to be recorded in the region's precontact archaeological record as well as in the early historic ethnographies of its Native peoples. The most well-known Native peoples around the time of European contact (see figure 1) include the **Cayuga, Erie, Seneca, Mohawk, Oneida**, Northern Iroquoian-speaking **Onondaga**, and **Susquehannock**, all in **Northern Appalachia**. To the east are the **Algonquin**-speaking **Powatan, Delaware** (now commonly called **Leni Lenape**), and **Shawnee**. The southern regions of Appalachia were the homelands of two different linguistic groups, the Southern Iroquoian-speaking **Cherokee** and **Tuscarora** as well as the Muskogean-speaking **Catawba** in the Carolinas and the **Creek** (now commonly called **Muscogee**) in Georgia and Alabama. To the west, in Kentucky, the most well-known early historic tribe was the Shawnee, who famously besieged Fort Boonesborough in September 1778.

In anthropology's 19th-century infancy, **Lewis H. Morgan** theorized three stages of human cultural evolution (he called it "progress"), from savagery to barbarism to civilization, in his label accompanying the map of the *Distribution of the Barbarous Tribes East of the Mississippi*. Savagery was hunting and gathering (now called food foraging), barbarism was **horticultural** farming, and civilization was, of course, European society.

[1] Among the many problems with Morgan's three stages is their Eurocentric value judgments. Clearly, the anthropological discipline has come a long way since Morgan's time, even though general public perception about the primitiveness of precontact Native people has frequently persisted.



Figure 1. Distribution of contact period tribes and language groups east of the Mississippi. Courtesy of the Florida Center for Instructional Technology at University of South Florida. Map credit: Courtesy of the private collection of Roy Winkelman. Florida Center for Instructional Technology (<http://fcit.usf.edu/florida/maps>).

Of all the **Indigenous** groups of Appalachia, the Shawnee of the Northeast Culture Area and the Muscogee of the Southeast Culture Area best illustrate their regions, especially the cultural differences and similarities among Native Appalachian peoples. Like so many, both the Shawnee and the Muscogee were eventually forced off the land after a series of failed treaties with the U.S. government, culminating in the **Indian Removal Act of 1830**. Many removed and reduced tribes were successful in gaining federal and/or state recognition through formal petitions. Legal recognition in and of itself, however, is distinct from a more informal acknowledgment of Indigenous populations' traditional presence and continuing regard for their ancestral homelands.

Archaeological Developments

The Arrival of Hunters and Foragers

Native peoples arrived in the Appalachian region during an era that archaeologists call the **Paleoindian Period** (about 12,000 BCE to 8000 BCE [or 10,000 to 14,000 years ago]).^[2] This initial settlement era occurred at the end of the last **Ice Age** and is typically characterized by small, highly mobile bands of foragers, hunters, and fishers.^[3] Fluted chipped stone projectile points dating to this era have been found throughout **Southern Appalachia**. Archaeologists have matched the chipped stone points to local mountain outcrops, signifying that the Paleoindian peoples knew their environment well and thus were likely longer-term inhabitants of Southern Appalachia, not simply occasional visitors or recent migrants.^[4] Projectile points and other tools manufactured from stone local to the valleys and lowlands of Southern Appalachia have also been found in the higher mountains, suggesting the Paleoindian peoples lived in settled base camps near stone sources with an array of upland hunting sites. Similar trends are indicated through the archaeological patterning in **Northern Appalachia**, the glaciated section of the **Appalachian Plateau**.^[5] Although a majority of these more northerly sites were in the lowlands, archaeologists have found Paleoindian artifacts in the higher mountains as well.

Foraging, hunting, and fishing remained the subsistence for the Native peoples of Appalachia throughout the **Archaic Period** (about 8000 BCE to 1000 BCE [or 3,000 to 10,000 years ago]).^[6] Uplands like those in the **Great Smoky Mountains** contain evidence of hunting, flintworking, butchering, hideworking, and woodworking along with home constructions in the lowlands.^[7] Archaic sites have also revealed new technological developments, such as grinding stones for processing plants near residential areas and net weights for fishing the rivers.^[8] These new technologies likely indicate that a shift in culture and **foodways** was underway. A particularly significant change is the shift away from intensive **deer** and **elk** hunting along with a shift from a more mobile uplands lifeway to one that increasingly relied on tending wild plants through intensive foraging and hunting smaller game such as **turkey**, **rabbit**, **fox**, **squirrel**, and **fish**, all of which focused more on lowlands. Such subsistence shifts correspond with decreasing mobility and a transition to more sedentary village lifeways in lowland valley locations. These foodways and settlement shifts were likely occurring

in response to forest and broader environmental changes related to an increasingly warmer, more modern climate.

Development of Sedentary Village Farmers

Once cultivated plants grown in small gardens (horticulture) formed a significant portion of the Southern Appalachian diet, archaeologists define the **Woodland Period** (about 1000 BCE to CE 1000 [or 1,000 to 3,000 years ago])^[9] as having begun. Some Woodland-era crops are still cultivated today—such as **gourds**, **squash**, and **sunflower**, and a bit later, **corn** (or **maize**)—while others such as goosefoot, marsh elder, and may grass are no longer cultivated but lurk nearby as weeds today.^[10] Native farmers used slash-and-burn techniques to clear small forest openings near their villages to cultivate their gardens. Early ethnographies explain that in **slash-and-burn horticulture**, Native **men** commonly chop down larger trees, allow the felled trees to dry, and then burn them along with smaller brush to finish clearing the plot as well as to provide the soil with fertilizing ash.^[11] Cultivated by Native women, the cleared garden plots lasted for several growing seasons until the soil began to lose its fertility and yields began to decline. The **women** then cleared new plots so the old ones could be reclaimed by secondary forests that restored fertility to the soil. In this same era, **pottery** became an important new cooking and storage technology, and the appearance of **bows and arrows**—identified by the appearance of smaller chipped stone projectile points—signified the shift in hunting technology. Indeed, both pottery and arrow points are key archaeological identifiers of the Woodland Period.

Once corn became the staple crop in the **Late Prehistoric Period** (about CE 1000 to CE 1750 [or 250 to 3,000 years ago]),^[12] for the first time, there was a reliable means of subsistence that could be produced in small but significant quantities and stored in lined earthen pits or small granaries in villages. Indeed, by the Late Prehistoric Period, slash-and-burn horticulture had become so important that it actually pushed back the forest edge, providing more open habitat for game and encouraging wild edible plants to grow more abundantly near valley villages.^[13] The outcome was a decreased need to travel to distant hunting grounds in the Appalachian uplands, which meant that Native people became even more sedentary. In the

Late Prehistoric Period, many town-dwellers and villagers also began erecting defensive palisades, as in many regions competition for river valley farmland had grown quite intensive and warfare had become common throughout the Southeast, in particular.

Overall, the slow, archaeologically visible transition from mobile foraging bands to sedentary **agricultural** societies provided a stable economic foundation for the further development of cultural traditions characteristic of well-known early historic tribes of the region, such as the Muscogee in the South and the Shawnee in the North and Midwest.

Anthropology and the Role of Cultural Ecology

Human cultures adapt to constant changes, large and small, in the social and physical environments they inhabit. Anthropologists and archaeologists study this adaptation using the concept of **cultural ecology** to understand and document the adaptive changes within a given society. Many adaptations may be relatively minor adjustments to environmental changes. Hunting in the Appalachian uplands while maintaining lowland valley base camps, for example, was a Paleoindian adaptation to rapid climatic change toward the end of the Ice Age. [\[14\]](#) As the environment began to warm and dry, Northern Appalachian Paleoindian peoples utilized the upland and lowland terraces of the recently glaciated regions to remain close to glacial lakes and other water resources. Newer settlement patterns are reflected in artifact changes, including the development and elaboration of fishing technologies, such as hooks and net weights to capture newfound aquatic resources. [\[15\]](#)

The development of horticulture signaled a significant change in the relationship between Native peoples and their forests. Not only were Native people adapting to environmental changes, but they were also contributing to its change. As noted, through slash-and-burn farming, Native people actively and deliberately altered their physical environment to better and more easily cultivate their crops, gather wild plants, and increase game nearby.

Anthropologists use cultural ecology to study human adaptations to *social* changes as well. The arrival of **European** travelers, colonists, and settlers significantly impacted Native peoples and cultures throughout the Americas, including Appalachia. Relations between Native peoples and European newcomers frequently began with friendly trade agreements that

were mutually beneficial for both sides. Native peoples highly desired and actively sought European-manufactured goods—so actively that in some cases, Native people shifted the location of their villages for better access to European trade along the **Ohio River**, and in a reversal from an earlier trend, deer hunting once again intensified in order for Native people to obtain the hides required to barter for manufactured European goods.^[16]

Historically Known Tribes of the Region

Northern Appalachia: The Shawnee

The present-day Shawnee peoples comprise three separate, federally recognized tribes that live on reservations in Oklahoma and Kansas: the Absentee Shawnee Tribe, the Eastern Shawnee Tribe, and the Shawnee Tribe.^[17] Prior to settler expansion and Native removal, the Shawnee peoples (see figure 2) were spread broadly across the North and **Midwest Appalachian** regions, as well as the **Ohio River Valley**. During winter, they broke into small, mobile, dispersed bands to hunt animal populations in seasonal migration. In summer, the Shawnee lived in small or medium-sized **wigwam** villages, with women tending gardens of corn, beans, and squash and men hunting nearby game.^[18] Most of their winter hunting grounds and summer villages were spread throughout present-day Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia.^[19] Practicing mixed subsistence—a mix of foraging and farming, precontact Shawnee formed part of what anthropologists call the **Northeast Culture Area**. Like most Northeastern tribes, they spoke an Algonquian language. Social group membership through generations was, and still is, traced through the father's clan in a pattern called **patrilineal descent**. Politically, the Shawnee were loosely split into five autonomous divisions. Each division had its own main town, led by a chief whose position was at least in part inherited. Each division was responsible for performing specific ceremonial duties for the other divisions.^[20] One division, for example, may have been responsible for political decisions and

peacemaking for the tribe while others were responsible for religious rituals or for providing healers.



Figure 2. Collage of Shawnee people collected from various public domain sources. Shawnee Bill; Ah-La-Wa-Bi-A-Ci (Lizzie Pecan); F. A. Rogers; Pah-te-cóo-saw (Straight Man); Tecumseh; Ten-squat-a-way (The Open Door also known as The Prophet); Lay-láw-she-kaw (Goes Up the River); Wet-Ta-Ka (The One Who Comes also known as Charles Tucker or Ducker); and Lay-lóo-ah-pee-ái-shee-kaw (Grass or Bush or Blossom).

Southern Appalachia: The Muscogee

Presently located on their Oklahoma reservation, the Muscogee (see figure 3)^[21] were once central actors in a powerful political alliance known as the Muscogee Confederacy. Sometimes referred to as the Creek Confederacy, this alliance encompassed many Southern tribes who lived in river- and creek-side settlements in present-day Alabama and Georgia. Although the tribes maintained political autonomy and were often linguistically diverse, many were closely related culturally.^[22] Speakers of a Muskogean language, the Muscogee were sedentary village

horticulturalists, growing great quantities of corn and beans in large communal fields near rivers to take advantage of the fertile valley-bottom soils. Ethnographic sources show that some Muscogee villages were so large that some household compounds planted small family gardens beside their homes for ease of produce access, as in some cases their communal field was a significant distance from their rectangular **wattleanddaub** homes. Like most members of the **SoutheastCultureArea**, the Muskogee traced, and continue to trace, social group membership through the mother's clan in a pattern called **matrilinealdescent**. Political position among the Muskogee was inherited through an organization structure called **chiefdoms**, which was the dominant political structure for Southeastern peoples prior to European contact. During colonization by European settlers, various Muskogee tribes were divided less by their own political factions than by geographical area. **British** colonists labeled the tribes in the Southern Appalachian lowlands, with whom they had more contact, as the Lower Creeks and those Muskogee along the upland Appalachian rivers as the Upper Creeks.^[23]



Figure 3. Photo of Muscogee Nation citizens performing a traditional dance at the National Museum of the American Indian. CC BY-SA 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en>).

The Colonial Era

The “discovery” and subsequent **colonization** of North America by Europeans brought many new infectious diseases as well as increasing conflicts over land. Tribes were routinely disrupted and then displaced—first by fur trappers, then by settlers—and forced to try to find new lands in unoccupied territory, which by the **Colonial Period** (the years following CE 1750) was scarce, as the Native population was dense, particularly in Southern Appalachia. Displacements met with great resistance. Tribes such as the Shawnee and the Cherokee confronted colonists who continually entered their territory to poach game and take land, and some even launched formal complaints with colonial officials and the superintendents of **Indian**

Affairs. [\[24\]](#) Despite such Native protests against trespassing to steal the land and wild animals, little was done to prevent colonists from traveling westward into Appalachia and beyond it in search of deer and other game. [\[25\]](#)

Interaction between colonists and Native Americans was not always volatile. Some European colonists sought to establish and maintain friendly trade relations with tribes. The Muscogee Confederacy in Southern Appalachia, for example, began to trade deerskin for European goods in the 18th century. The Muscogee provided colonists with deerskin and other animal hides in exchange for woolens, cloth, metal tools, and other European

goods that had quickly become integrated into their lives. [\[26\]](#) Despite such friendly trade relations between colonists and tribes, the business of the **fur trade** had negative consequences for the tribes that participated, especially in the long term. The high demand for fur pelts and other animal hides caused Native peoples to hunt many species close to extinction in the drive to maintain favorable trade relations with the colonists. That drive frequently generated conflict among Native American tribes, particularly the Shawnee, as they competed against other Shawnee villages as well as other Native peoples for control of the hunting grounds that were needed to generate enough fur and hides to develop and preserve rival trade relationships with colonists. [\[27\]](#)

Royal Proclamation Line of 1763

Shortly after the **Seven Years’ War** (fought between France and England from 1756 to 1763), England’s King George III issued the **Royal**

Proclamation Line of 1763 (see figure 4). While the proclamation established borders for the new territories gained by the British, more significantly for Native people, it established a line to halt the expansion of western colonies, whereby colonists were prohibited from buying or selling land in or west of the Appalachian Mountains. The proclamation states, “We do further declare it [. . .] for the use of the said Indians, all the Lands and Territories not included within the Limits of Our said Three new Governments, [. . .] And We do hereby strictly forbid [. . .] all our loving Subjects from making any Purchases or Settlements whatever, or taking Possession of any of the Lands above reserved. Further, the Proclamation declares the government and militias within the colonies will enforce this new border ‘to remove all reasonable Cause of Discontent’” among the

Native populations.^[28] Intended to alleviate the very real, constant threat of colonial incursions into Native American lands, the establishment of the Royal Proclamation Line of 1763 angered colonists mightily and contributed to several acts of rebellion, all of which eventually culminated in the American Revolution.



Figure 4. Map showing, in red, the Royal Proclamation Line of 1763. East of the line are the British colonies. Lands west of the line were reserved for Native peoples and were not to be crossed by colonists. The American Revolution served to erase this line.

<http://americanrevolutionpartnership.pbworks.com/w/page/46830946/Proclamation%20of%201763>.

The American Revolution and Westward Expansion

In the early years of the **Revolutionary War**, most Native American tribes sought neutrality. As the war continued, however, due to their diverse colonial experiences, different tribes in different regions formed differing alliances with the combatants: “Some [. . .] were loyal allies of the British, others enlisted in the Continental Army, while still others stood neutral or switched sides as circumstances dictated.”^[29] The differing tribal decisions led to altered relationships with colonial and patriot powers, with other tribes, and even with competing factions within a tribe. Previously allied tribes developed strained relationships, and other tribes divided permanently into factions after establishing loyalty to one side or the other.

Following the war’s conclusion in 1783, the people of the new nation—Americans—no longer had to follow England’s laws, policies, and prohibitions, including those of the Royal Proclamation Line. This—coupled with **manifest destiny**, the worldview assuring settlers that God intended the United States to span the continent from Atlantic to Pacific—paved the way for remarkably rapid westward expansion. Not surprisingly, expansion was met with resistance. In the Ohio Valley, for example, the 1791 Battle of the Wabash saw a coalition of Native American tribes roundly defeat the United States Army.^[30] Despite such major military successes, in the long run, Native peoples were not victorious and were soon removed from their homelands through federal legislative action even as their artifacts, names, and symbols were appropriated by the incoming American settlers.^[31]

Indian Removal and the Trail of Tears

The **Indian Removal Act**, signed into law by President **Andrew Jackson** in 1830, made the forcible removal of Native peoples from their ancestral homelands legal.^[32] Removal nullified previous treaties between the United States and Native American tribes, setting the stage for the

establishment of new treaties that would entail the removal of tribes from their ancestral homelands.^[33] The enforcement of the Indian Removal Act and these new treaties resulted in the **Trail of Tears**, an over 900-mile journey that forced Cherokee off their territories in the uplands and valley lowlands of the Appalachian Mountains toward new, government-mandated land in Oklahoma.^[34] After being removed from their villages, the Cherokee were kept in internment camps for long periods before they were forcibly marched across the country, during which some four thousand died of dehydration or disease.^[35]

The Era of Treaties

Numerous **treaties** were negotiated between representatives of the United States and Native American tribes. For the U.S. government, a main treaty-making objective was the acquisition of land, primarily farmland, for the burgeoning push of immigrants from Europe. For the tribes, a main treaty-making objective was the establishment of reservations in their homelands and the preservation of traditional use rights such as hunting, fishing, and gathering on the lands they ceded. Few of those early treaties were respected or followed. The Shawnee of Northern Appalachia, for example, signed many treaties. First, an 1817 treaty granted the Shawnee who had not thus far been displaced from their Appalachian homeland three reservations in Ohio. Second, following the Removal Act, a treaty with the Shawnee that had remained in Ohio moved them to an established Shawnee reservation in Kansas. Third, an 1854 treaty significantly reduced the size of that Kansas reservation, forcing the Ohio Shawnee on the reservation to move to a reservation in Oklahoma.^[36]

In Southern Appalachia, a similar series of treaties continued the gradual cession of ever-greater amounts of Muscogee land to the United States. Initially, a series of treaties limited the Muscogee to certain rivers in Alabama and allowed the federal government to construct a horse path through Muscogee territory.^[37] Loss of territory, a federal horse path, and other compromises made by the Muscogee Confederacy during negotiations caused considerable internal division within the Confederacy, the more traditional segments of which opposed the terms of these new treaties. Disagreements developed into civil war between the Lower and Upper

Muscogee tribes, but despite this internal conflict, the Confederacy as a whole continued to negotiate and sign treaties with the U.S. government, surrendering over twenty million acres of land in 1814 alone.^[38] Following yet more treaties between the Muscogee and the United States, the Muscogee ceded all of its Southern Appalachia homelands and was forced, like so many other eastern Native American tribes, to move to “Indian Territory” in what later became the state of Oklahoma.

State and Federal Recognition

As of 2023, there are 577 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes in the United States.^[39] In order to become a **federally recognized tribe** and to receive the rights thereof, there must be an act from Congress, a decision for federal recognition from a court, or a submission of a formal petition by members of a tribe to the Office of Federal Acknowledgment (OFA) within the Office of Indian Affairs of the Department of the Interior. The OFA then makes recommendations to the assistant secretary of Indian Affairs, who “has the authority to make the decision whether to acknowledge tribal existence and establish a government-to-government relationship, or to deny acknowledging a petitioning group as an Indian tribe.”^[40] The OFA provides a list of necessary documents that must be included in a petition for federal recognition. Primary among these documents is historical evidence supporting a tribe’s continuous existence since 1900 and an official membership list.^[41] The three Shawnee tribes are federally recognized with their reservations in Oklahoma; while there are Shawnee that remained in Ohio despite treaties and removals, they are not recognized at the federal level in Ohio but are instead recognized at the state level as the United Remnant Band of the Shawnee Nation.^[42] The Muscogee are federally recognized on their Oklahoma reservation as the Muscogee Nation.

Like federally recognized tribes, tribes can be formally recognized by state governments, also following a petition process. However, **state-recognized tribes** do not enjoy the same rights as those who are federally recognized; primary of them is a government-to-government relationship with the U.S., which is a statement of Native **sovereignty**.^[43] Some states do “acknowledge the historical and cultural contribution of tribes,” but only

sixteen have legal petition processes to recognize tribes, including Alabama and Georgia, both of whom recognize the Muscogee Creek Tribes.[\[44\]](#)

Land Acknowledgments

Although the Shawnee, the Muscogee, and other Appalachian tribes may be recognized on federal and state levels, the reservations on which they currently reside are largely government-chosen and thus in most cases are not their ancestral homelands. Indeed, their true homelands, subsequently and still populated by settler societies, are usually significantly altered such that their present-day occupants may fail to grasp that the land on which they reside was once a Native homeland. When tribal citizens of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma are hiking North Carolina's **Appalachian Trail**, for example, they understand the ground they tread as Cherokee land, but most know it as Nantahala National Park.[\[45\]](#)

To resolve the issue of ignorance regarding the homelands of their nation's first inhabitants, many countries have or are composing **land acknowledgments**—formal statements that recognize an area as the ancestral homeland of a named Indigenous people. Such land acknowledgments are also meant to help all residents recognize “the unique and enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories.”[\[46\]](#) In Canada, land acknowledgment statements are now read before most public events: school, hockey games, public meetings, and other celebrations. Public events in Australia also frequently recognize the traditional land where they are held, sometimes even inviting an Aboriginal elder to make a “Welcome to Country” statement, which serves the added element that descendant people have endured.[\[47\]](#) In the United States, several states, cities, and even colleges or other private organizations have begun to develop land acknowledgment statements in order to recognize the Native American peoples that once resided in the area. Even at its most basic level, land acknowledgment recognizes that one is on land that once belonged to Indigenous people, and this basic recognition represents the first step in not allowing these histories to be forgotten.[\[48\]](#)

This example of a land acknowledgment is written by two Emory University faculty whose stated intention is that it be temporary until a more formal acknowledgment can be written in consultation with others, including

descendant Muscogee people: “Emory University is located on Muscogee (Creek) land. Emory University was founded in 1836, during a period of sustained oppression, land dispossession, and forced removals of Muscogee (Creek) and Ani’yunwi’ya (Cherokee) peoples from Georgia and the Southeast.”[\[49\]](#)

Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, has created the following:

We invite you to join us in acknowledging that the Berea College Forest is located on the traditional territories of the sovereign Shawnee and the Cherokee nations. Both nations hold these mountains in care and tradition. Tribes are often involved in work to protect land that many have been forcibly driven from. The harms inflicted by the separation and removal of Indigenous People from these ancestral lands run deep. The erasure of their language and stories further rewrites the narratives we tell about these lands and waterways to keep them conveniently open, and this only deepens wounds for Indigenous communities. Please take a moment to reflect on this beautiful land, to honor and show gratitude towards its original caretakers—the Shawnee and the Cherokee. We hope that you, too, will become a caretaker of this land.[\[50\]](#)

A shorter example for the entire Commonwealth of Kentucky reads, “Indigenous peoples have always lived on the land that is now called Kentucky and continue to live here today. The place we now call Kentucky is primarily Shawnee, Cherokee, Chickasaw and Osage land.”[\[51\]](#) Acknowledgments such as this one are important in recognizing an area as a former territory and homeland of a named Native American tribe, many of whom were displaced and forced onto reservations often in the West. Distinct from legal, federal, or state recognition of a tribe, which defines government-to-government relationships between tribes and the United States, land acknowledgments also recognize tribes’ continuing regard for their homelands, regardless of the historical fact that they no longer reside on them.

Conclusion

Appalachia was once the home of people who foraged, hunted, and farmed the region’s many mountains and abundant valley lowlands over the course of more than ten thousand years. At European contact, many Native people still lived here—hunting, foraging, and farming—and did not

willingly give up these beautiful mountains and valley lowlands. They fought mightily to retain their lands but found themselves confronted by forces far more powerful than they had the ability to control. Treaties and removals set in motion a long series of hardships of many kinds, but throughout it all, they endured, never forgetting their Appalachian homelands.

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Folklore of Appalachia

Sarah Craycraft, Jordan Lovejoy, Cassie Patterson, and Sydney Varajon

From Jack Tales to Gangsta Grass, from Decoration Day to drag shows, the folklore of Appalachia is diverse and multifaceted. Yet, romantic constructions of both folklore and Appalachia have perpetuated cultural stereotypes, resulting in oversimplified views of the region and its folklife. Neither Appalachia nor folklore is a static entity; both include living people, environments, and cultures. Appalachia offers complex and ever-changing folklore as an interplay between tradition and change that is shaped and reshaped by contemporary people in their daily lives.

Introducing Folklore and Folklife

Folklore, as a concept, is elusive. The term itself can conjure connotations of pastness, simplicity, make-believe, or untruths. When most people hear the term “folklore,” they think of fairy tales, or log cabins, the “old ways,” and generally things of the past. While folklore certainly includes historically rooted items or practices, it also includes emerging forms of expression such as internet memes, urban legends, street art, and graffiti on bathroom walls.

There are lots of different interpretations of its meaning, and like the cultural objects and processes that folklorists study, what we in the field understand as “folklore” has changed, and continues to change, over time. The term “folklore” refers to both the content of what folklorists study, the materials, and also the field of study itself, which emerged in the late 19th century.^[1] With roots in both anthropology and literary studies, folklore as an academic discipline first centered on the study of cultural items and traditions thought to belong to people and cultures of a disappearing past. The self-conscious rush to document the cultural “remnants” of one’s own

people was largely a response to cultural change brought about by urbanization and industrialization.

The word “**folklife**” is now generally used interchangeably with “folklore” and was adopted by the field when folklorists began to study material culture (e.g., foodways, vernacular architecture, textile arts) and belief, in addition to verbal forms like ballads and folktales. So, in addition to researching “lore,” we also research “life”—or, put another way, we study creative expressive culture in its various forms. Folklife includes the traditions and creative practices that we share with others and through which we make meaning in our daily lives. In an attempt to combine prior descriptions and examples of “**folklore**” (and “**folklife**,” interchangeably), Martha Sims and Martine Stephens propose this definition:

Folklore is informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures, and our traditions that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviors, and materials. It is also the interactive, dynamic process of creating, communicating, and performing as we share that knowledge with other people.^[2]

Scholars often sort folklore, or folklife, into three main categories: oral/verbal, customary, and material. Folklorists use the term **genre** to describe and organize different types of cultural items and practices. These genres often intersect and overlap within any given tradition. For example, **Decoration Day**^[3] is an annual homecoming tradition honoring the dead and involves songs and prayers (verbal), **dinner on the ground** (customary), and the flowers and decorations that adorn the gravesites (material). Folklife, then, is unofficial knowledge that is informally learned or shared, and as the examples below will show, folklife is also quite complex.

From the outset, folklorists have drawn on concepts of **tradition** (or the “traditional”) to guide who, what, and where they study. Like folklore, tradition is a concept that scholars still debate today.^[4] Traditions contain cultural patterns and meanings that persist through time and that also have the capacity to change. For example, someone may have handed down a family recipe that their descendents cook on special occasions, like a cornbread recipe or a way of preparing beans. When the new generation cooks these family recipes, they are repeating cultural patterns of preparing the dish and likely also sharing stories and meanings, too. Each time they make that dish,

they are creating a new variation, despite using the same recipe and steps for making the dish. If they cook the recipe in a place that doesn't stock the ingredients they need, they might innovate and substitute using similar ingredients that are available. Traditions comprise the folklife that we share as well as the processes we use to share them. Traditions can be understood along a continuum of continuity made up of dynamic and conservative aspects, or the parts that vary or change during transmission (**dynamism**) and the parts that stay the same (**conservatism**).^[5] In addition to the traditions themselves, folklorists have also considered the various kinds of traditions (genres) and how they are shared (transmission). Sharing traditions can happen intergenerationally, but traditions can also be passed along with members of the same generation, across and among cultural groups, and in a variety of modes and formats, including in-person (by word-of-mouth or by example) and digital spaces. Neither these traditions nor those who practice them are static or unchanging. Instead, people adapt their cultural practices in new settings, contexts, and technologies; traditions can change and new ones can be created. In contemporary folklife studies, scholars prioritize the dynamic nature of traditions in contemporary communities—living traditions in living cultures.

Linking Folklore and Appalachia

Beginning in the late 19th century in the United States, Appalachia became an abundant site for the documentation, collection, and study of folklife—from ballads and superstitions to herbal remedies and quilts. Similar to folklore, Appalachia has been defined and characterized in different ways, sometimes according to geography, other times according to economic conditions or language and speech patterns. Mary Hufford writes the following about the relationship between folklore and Appalachia:

The idea of folklore is complicated; it may be cast as antiquarian, antimodern, communitarian, traditional, vernacular, or resistant. These concepts are all linked to the idea of progress but nevertheless exhibit a profound ambivalence toward it. This ambivalence reflects two perspectives on Appalachian culture: a rational perspective that idolizes progress on one hand and a romantic perspective that fears it on the other. Viewed through

the romantic lens, Appalachia glimmers as a region uncontaminated by commerce and its excesses, a place where people know their neighbors, value their elders, live close to the land, and preserve old-time craft, music, and stories. Through a rational lens, these views give way to images of inbred, feuding, superstitious, welfare-dependent hillbillies. Both lenses serve to “distress” Appalachia as a region set backward not only in time but also in space (the “hinterlands,” the “backcountry”), separated from the rest of America.^[6]

Hufford further notes an uneasy relationship in which “modern” America is set against “premodern” Appalachia, a dichotomy that has defined cultural work seeking to understand the relationships between region and nation.

^[7] Several noteworthy studies of Appalachia give a clear picture of the ways that folklore, literature, and cultural tropes are entangled with the shaping of the region over time. Rosemary Hathaway’s study of the mountaineer figure in West Virginia demonstrates how writers, politicians, public figures, and intellectuals exemplify or demonize Appalachian regional identity according to their political and cultural agendas; depending on the context, for example, the West Virginia University Mountaineer mascot can serve as both a frontiersman culture-hero (for university public relations) or a trickster hillbilly (for exciting the crowd at games).^[8] These tropes are not only present in literature and cultural symbols; they are also present in the ways that Appalachian cultural practices are selectively curated and preserved to uphold the rural idyll that has come to characterize popular ideas of Appalachia. David Whisnant’s *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* explores how coastal elites (mostly wealthy White women) attempted to facilitate the preservation of “authentic” Appalachian cultural practices that were in line with their own ideas of progress to improve life in the region.^[9] By creating **settlement schools** and folk festivals that used handicrafts and folk songs as tools for “civilizing” mountain communities, these reformers, sometimes referred to as “fotched-on women,” sought to protect elements of cultural life that they deemed valuable as a means to promote coastal visions of development, behavior, and progress.^[10] In her work on the **Great Smoky Mountains National Park**, Michael Ann Williams points out that the park service's selective preservation of log cabins and destruction of more contemporary styles of

housing (such as frame buildings) contributed to the physical and symbolic displacement of the communities who lived there.^[11] The park's insistence on curating a bucolic, historical, pioneer landscape further promoted the image of frontier Appalachia while erasing the contemporary buildings and those who lived in them.

In each of these cases, scholars point to a curated image of Appalachians as poor Whites, sometimes celebrated for their resourcefulness and pure culture and at other times denigrated for their backwardness. Notably, these images leave out the stories and cultural practices of communities of color, urban Appalachians, Appalachian migrants, and cultural practices that defy an image of Appalachia as untouched, rustic, and set in another time. Further, these studies illustrate the dual nature of the fraught relationship between folklore and Appalachia.

This is not to say that the celebration of “old timey” aesthetics and practices kept alive throughout the generations are either not present or are harmful in and of themselves. Appalachians use folklore and cultural symbols that they identify with to express their own understandings of who they are and where they come from, and these forms of expression sometimes align with etic depictions of the region. **Etic** refers to the ways that individuals outside of that group membership understand and analyze the group, whereas **emic** refers to the ways in which individuals within a group understand themselves, their group, and the beliefs and customs they practice. The above illustration of the National Park Service’s strategic editing of the landscape is an example of an etic interpretation and representation of the region. An example of emic communication is the way that people use slang within their conversations. **Slang** is often (though not exclusively) generationally coded, quickly shifting language that signals in-group status through proper use (which is why it can be funny when someone doesn’t use a slang term correctly). For instance, some people use “Bubby” or “Bub” to refer to their brother or to a male friend. Of course, etic and emic interpretations can overlap, too. For instance, Dolly Parton, a “relentlessly creative”^[12] and famous musician who grew up in Tennessee, uses tropes of rustic charm and rural life to paint a particular image of Appalachia in her mountain amusement park, *Dollywood*, for tourists of all types.^[13] This portrayal of Appalachia may resonate with many people who call the region home, but it is not prescriptive of all emic experiences of the region.

In sum, folklore can be used to maintain an image of Appalachia that perpetuates an idea of the region and its people as part of the past. As in previous examples, folklorists and scholars have played a role in perpetuating these images. However, the approaches that contemporary folklorists use—careful listening, collaboration with community partners, attention to emic meanings, and an eye toward noticing how a form takes shape and acquires new meaning through practice—can provide rich, nuanced depictions of everyday life.

Stereotypes & the Politics of Representation

Although the folklore of Appalachia is multifaceted, it often responds to (mis)representations and regional stereotypes. Notions of representation are often at the heart of any discussion of the Appalachian region. Concepts of representation in politics, for example, occur when elected delegates are expected to communicate the will of their constituents to broader audiences, such as in Congress. **Representation** is the act of an individual or smaller group speaking for a larger group. Similarly, folklorists have long been interested in understanding how everyday people's experiences, especially historically **marginalized** groups' experiences (e.g., women, children, BIPOC, LGBTQQIAP2S+, people living in poverty), reflect in scholarship, legislation, and popular culture.^[14] Representation is a fraught process in and beyond Appalachia because the region has historically been depicted in limited, disparaging, romanticized, and simplified ways—through tropes that become stereotypes.

Stereotypes are generalizations that are made about a group of people that inform what individuals within a society believe and say about (as well as how they behave toward) the group. Stereotypes can affect national, regional, state, and local policies that impact the daily lives of Appalachians and people living within the region. A common stereotype about Appalachia is that the region is populated only by White people who have lived in rural areas for generations. While the contemporary Appalachian region as a whole is indeed predominantly White, historical analyses of Indigenous movements and dispossession as well as studies of the experiences and migrations of **Asian American**, Black, Latine, and White people have and continue to shape the region.^[15] Appalachian Studies scholars have likewise

documented the **Great Appalachian Migration** that led to the **urban Appalachian** diaspora.^[16]

The **politics of representation**—the ways in which people negotiate the meanings that texts and images convey about a group and place—is an important topic in both folklore and Appalachian Studies precisely because notions of “the folk,” including residents and diasporas of the region, have been subject to these persistent stereotypes. Residents of the region engage in advocacy with one another, elected officials, regional organizational leaders, and the broader public about depictions of Appalachian communities because of the ways that funding, legislation, and commerce (especially that of extractive and polluting economies) impact the quality of their livelihoods and cultures.

So, how do stereotypes and representational politics show up in the folklore of Appalachia? Many people associate folklore with storytelling, legends, superstitions, or traditions—things that people often associate with the past—and Appalachia with an unmodern, rural, White, and simple experience. Too often, what folklorists have historically collected, preserved, and curated does not fully represent the diverse experiences within Appalachia but rather has contributed to or bolstered stereotypical perceptions of people and place. New technologies, however, can equip people with the tools to expand upon existing—and limited—curations of folklore in the region. More recently, both folklorists and the folk are increasingly in conversation with one another through digital environments (like social media), and these interactions can illustrate the meaning and work of folklore in Appalachia. Below is an example of the politics of representation as seen in the historic collection of traditional storytelling through the Jack Tale as well as how folks employ emergent technologies to widen an understanding of folklore in Appalachia.

Storytelling & Humor: From Jack Tales to *Ramp News*

When many scholars consider Appalachian folklore, they may first think of Jack Tales, which are types of fairytales, or Märchen. **Jack Tales** are magical stories, often told orally, about a young protagonist named Jack who goes on adventures and accomplishes tasks. A mainstream version

of the Jack Tale is Jack and the Beanstalk, which originated from English oral tradition and was eventually popularized through mainstream collections of children's fairy tales.^[17]

During the early 20th century, many politicians and story collectors in the United States wanted to identify a national spirit that would differentiate American culture from other places, which often led them to Appalachia. Collectors found Jack Tales orally told in the Appalachian region, but they argued that the Jack character and his relationship with magic and place are usually quite different from the popular British version. Whereas Jack is assisted by magic in the British version, the American Jack is more self-reliant and overcomes the magical forces used against him. Folklorist Carl Lindahl argues that the American Jack's independence from magic suggests the unlimited opportunities in the United States where magic isn't necessary to survive or thrive.^[18] Lindahl also notes, however, that the politicians and collectors of the early 20th century were very narrow in their search for a singular (American) Jack figure who could sum up a national personality through storytelling. In order to present a singular Jack figure, they curated a collection that excluded other types of diverse Jack heroes and tales that also exist within Appalachia and America.^[19] Although Jack Tale collectors curated a limited version of the American Jack, the internet provides a space where people have the ability to represent themselves to others and negotiate the meaning of Appalachian folklore and the representation of diverse beliefs and experiences in the region.

The essentialized depiction of the region through a curated collection of stories has created one unified image of folklore in Appalachia, but emerging technologies offer new tools for sharing stories and other genres of folklore, like jokes and legends, that expand this depiction. Digital spaces provide new avenues for participation in the collection and transmission of folklore. From conspiracy theories and podcasts to hashtags and TikTok videos, folklore is a major part of our social and digital lives. Tagged as #AppalachianFolklore, social media contains numerous images and videos of people sharing stories, expressions, and beliefs that are unique to the region, like the traditional knowledge of herbalism, spiritual healers (e.g., dowsing), **cryptid** legends and encounters with **Mothman** and **Sheepsquatch**, and Appalachian ballad singers.^{[20] [21] [22] [23]} Folklore legends like West Virginia's Mothman have exploded across the internet, leading to a surge in local artists who rework the cryptid's image away from

doom and gloom and into a more empathetic, human-like creature who carves jack-o-lanterns or surfs the web.^[24] ^[25] ^[26]

Numerous forms of folklore genres—like legends, jokes, satire, and even fake news—occupy digital spaces. Sometimes, these folklore genres may even leak or blend into one another, as is the case with the West Virginia cryptid legend of **Bat Boy**. Although often considered to be a local cryptid, the Bat Boy is not actually based on any claimed sightings or family legend. Instead, the story of the half-boy/half-bat creature who was found in a West Virginia cave was created in the 1990s by a fake news tabloid called *Weekly World News*. Bat Boy quickly became one of the tabloid's most popular figures, and several joke stories followed, including Bat Boy running for president of the United States.^[27] The “legend” of Bat Boy is an example of what Michael Dylan Foster calls *folkloresque*: “popular culture’s own (emic) perception and performance of folklore” that seemingly “derive directly from existing folkloric traditions,” like legends.^[28] Through the folklore genre of a **legend**, or a narrative told as true that entertains the possibility of belief, satirists can spread stories that mirror the traditional components of the genre. Much like the invented legend of the **Slender Man**, some people may begin to believe that variations of the created story come from personal narratives or experiences.^[29] Foster also notes that the popular culture connection of the folkloresque often leads to greater exposure, which can inspire “a feedback loop in which the folkloresque version of the item is (re)incorporated into the folk cultural milieu that it references.”^[30] As such, the Bat Boy has recently been welcomed into the league of regional cryptids, and Lost World Caverns in Greenbrier County, West Virginia, now claims the Bat Boy was found in their caves.^[31] The Bat Boy legend and its transformation over the years is an example of how digital media intersects with several folklore genres (and popular culture) in Appalachia.

Like the *Weekly World News*, other satirical or parodic media outlets also rely on our understanding of how traditional genres function in order to create joke variations of informational news through intentional, humorous “fake news” stories. *The Onion*, for example, is a satirical news source famous for using the recognizable genre of a news article to deliver humorous stories by following the “default public genre for describing objective reality” that has been employed for centuries.^[32] According to Ian

Brodie, fake news outlets like *Weekly World News* and *The Onion* work as recognizable jokes or satire as long as they meet these criteria:

(1) their performance of objective reportage demonstrates a fluency with the form; (2) the dissonance between the presented text and our understanding of the world is resolved through the recognition of an appropriate incongruity; and (3) a reflective process akin to the evaluation of legend, that is, how the story, which we know to be untrue, is not so much plausible as it is plausibly plausible, that we are not fooled by it but we can imagine those who would be.^[33]

As variations of stories, legends, and fake news spread, are transmitted, or even altered to garner quick clicks across the digital world, though, their recognizability as humorously fake, intentionally misleading, or outright false might also become fuzzy. Tom Mould notes three variations of fake news today: “fake news that is created knowingly as false with the intention to mislead, fake news created knowingly as false with the intention to satirize, and fake news that is deployed rhetorically as a label to dismiss stories that we do not like or do not believe to be true.”^[34] Identifying intention and holding emic knowledge, then, can be incredibly important for getting the joke or recognizing the lie when encountering fake news in its various forms. That emic knowledge is especially helpful in a local variation of *The Onion*-style reporting in the *Ramp News*, the new home for “the hardest-hittingest, breakiest of breakingness news from the Holy Mountain State, West Virginia.”^[35]

Ramp News was started by a group of friends in West Virginia who are fans of satirical news sites like *The Onion*. Much like *The Onion*, *Ramp News* does not outright identify itself as a humorous fake news outlet, but those familiar with the genre as well as Appalachian foodways like a ramp, a wild onion that grows across the Appalachian region, will recognize the intention of the storytelling on the site. For example, many folks associate the state of West Virginia with the popular John Denver song “Take Me Home, Country Roads,” but those deeply familiar with the state and its geography often question whether the lyrics of the song are more descriptive of the state of Virginia than West Virginia. *Ramp News* identifies its emic status as a localized fake news site by humorously including this knowledge in their self-description: “From the Blue Ridge Mountains to Shenandoah River, the *Ramp News* is here to take you Home.”^[36] The creators of *Ramp News* comment on Denver’s lyrics in the opening of the song: “Almost

heaven, West Virginia / Blue Ridge Mountains, Shenandoah River.”^[37] Although West Virginia may be almost heaven, both the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Shenandoah River are geographic features more commonly associated with Virginia. If a reader misses such emic jokes, though, they may still catch onto the satirical fake news intent through the content published by the outlet.

The creators of *Ramp News* believe the state of West Virginia is misunderstood and too often a stereotypical punchline for jokes. Rather than using humor to further such stereotypes, the folks at *Ramp News* acknowledge how emic and etic interpretations interact with cultural performances and representations: “Our articles are meant to shed light on the political influence of the shortcomings of our state, rather than demonizing the individuals affected by the outdated and backwards policies that continue to hinder our potential.”^[38] By using the satirical form, *Ramp News* creators shift the focus away from individual shortcomings and toward institutional failures. Similarly, the memes examined below are a form of critique (or what others have called “backtalk”) that also reframes the stereotypical punchline of the joke and shifts the intended group from a dominant popular culture to a more in-group audience.^[39]

Memes

One of the most recognizable forms of internet folklore is probably the meme. **Memes** are digital expressions that are shared or transmitted over and over again, transforming a little with each new iteration that is recreated by a new person.^[40] Memes even have their place as a part of Appalachian folklore and often are shared as celebrations or humorous commentary of unique cultural beliefs, practices, expressions, and even dialect features. Jordan Lovejoy, for example, notes how leftist Appalachian social media groups employ stigmatized dialect features through memes that reclaim authority over the construction of identity and culture; rather than mock regional dialect features (like demonstrative *them* and alveolar *-ing*) and stereotype all Appalachians as backward,^[41] the memes intentionally incorporate those vernacular features to celebrate diverse language use and highlight progressive beliefs within the region.^[42] One meme format that

made its way around internet groups over the past few years was Interview Possum.^[43]



Figure 1. Interview Possum is a meme that has changed its text and context frequently. Photo courtesy of Wild West Wildlife Rehabilitation Center.

The foundational image of the Interview Possum meme (the traditional component) is a woman with blonde hair holding a stressed-looking possum that appears to be screaming into a microphone held by a human reporter, but as the meme format spreads, people change the text to reflect their personal thoughts or feelings (the dynamic component), and those two components together solidify memes as folklore, especially as they are shared with others. When the memes express and share Appalachian identity or culture, they are also pieces of Appalachian folklore.

One example of the Interview Possum meme that circulated around some of the Appalachian social media groups placed this text around the image: "...Then after I killed all the ticks, mice & snakes in her backyard, she had the NERVE to ask me if I have RABIES!?!?! And I says, 'Lady, YOU'RE more likely to get rabies than I am!!!'"^[44] Opossums—most widely known as "possums"—are the only marsupials in North America, and they are common critters in the Appalachian region. Much like Appalachians, possums are often associated with trash, property destruction, and ugliness or negative stereotypes like spreading rabies or being vicious and aggressive. In reality, though, the marsupials are not threatening at all, do not carry rabies or dig up land, and actually eat ticks, rattlesnakes, and others' waste, making them important players in local ecosystems. Because of the possum's bad reputation and its association with Appalachia, many communities, fearing

even further representational harm, have worked to disassociate their place from the marsupial. Others, though, are breathing new life and power into the animal as a positive representative of Appalachia: much like the residents of this region, this misunderstood creature has an unfair, untrue reputation. Deeper than the stereotypes, the meme conveys the benefits, beauty, and necessity of such a creature (or culture). Many artists, makers, and advocates for Appalachia are reclaiming the creature as a representative of resilience that should be celebrated, and the possum memes they create and circulate contribute to the reshaping of that narrative. [\[45\]](#) [\[46\]](#)

As these examples reveal, folklore circulates in both face-to-face interactions and in virtual spaces, making it possible for folks to share their own folklore in ways that expand an understanding of genre, tradition, and cultural practice in Appalachia. Another arena where folklife, representation, and cultural meaning are debated is public commemoration.

Public Commemoration and Cultural Critique

Public commemoration, the act of creating, maintaining, and modifying aesthetic representations in public spaces, can take many forms, from highly formalized productions like the Smithsonian Folklife Festival to informal, even spontaneous arrangements, such as graffiti or **roadside shrines** for those killed in motor vehicle accidents (also called “spontaneous shrines”).

[\[47\]](#) Representations of the Appalachian region take center stage in the public landscape through exhibits (such as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival), commemorative markers (e.g., statues, murals, historical districts and designations), tourist attractions (e.g., historic reenactments, theme parks), and gatherings (e.g., festivals, parades, protests). Folklorists, among others, have long studied these culturally and politically charged public displays, theorizing their meanings and significance. [\[48\]](#)

In Portsmouth, Ohio, several organizations and individuals have contributed to articulations of what the city means to them. For example, both the Portsmouth Street Art Project and the Portsmouth Unity Project have intentionally opened space for local artists’ work and to promote solidarity, while a longstanding mural project continues to grow by addressing previous omissions. [\[49\]](#) [\[50\]](#) Portsmouth is known for its large-scale murals project, which depicts 2,000 years of local history. The entire project has been

painted in a historical realist style: images of major figures, events, and industries of the area join other thematic scenes, such as a tribute to the loyal motorcycle club and windows into Portsmouth's sister cities—Orizaba, Mexico; Corby, England; and Zittau, Germany.^[51] While the majority of the Portsmouth Floodwall Murals have depicted a predominantly White and conflict-free history, as of 2024, plans are underway to commission another mural that focuses on the Underground Railroad activity in the area, a subject previously referenced only in the border of a tribute to the Civil War. The planned mural is a collaboration between the City of Portsmouth, Portsmouth Murals, Inc., the 14th Street Community Center, Dr. Andrew Feight (professor of history at Shawnee State University), and muralist Robert Dafford.

In contrast to a more formalized project that seeks consistency of artistic style, the Portsmouth Street Art Project hosts “free walls” around the city where anyone can paint or add graffiti.^[52] Grassroots artists in the city are taking representation into their own hands by engaging in artistic expression and articulating a desire for racial solidarity.^[53] The Portsmouth Street Art Project hosts “free walls” around the city where anyone can demonstrate their artistic talent. The Portsmouth Unity Project, which formed in 2020, also installed multiple murals throughout the city to directly address racial divisions by promoting solidarity.^[54]

Understandably, representations that are highly visible and are built on public land with public funds spark debates about their capacity to encapsulate the experiences of those they aim to represent as well as the symbolic work such representations do in the world. Specifically, since commemorative projects seek to pick out particular individuals and moments in history in order to elevate them in public awareness, the decision-making processes involved in selecting, funding, designing, installing, and maintaining public displays brings the politics of commemoration to the forefront. Whose history is being commemorated, and which stories are being told? Whose stories are not being told and why? Who is able to participate in the decision-making processes that determine what public spaces look like?

The examples below, which span contexts ranging from the national to the local, reveal how public commemoration sparks debate about the ways that marginalized groups and their histories are excluded and/or depicted in the public realm. At the heart of these debates is the question of whose

experiences and culture are worthy of elevation as well as how groups of people are represented and represent themselves. Similarly, the examples illustrate what is at stake in such representations and how both researchers and residents of the Appalachian region “talk back” to these representations. The politics of representation of Appalachia asks, who gets to represent Appalachia? Which representations of Appalachia are able to challenge these powerful stereotypes? And what impacts do Appalachian stereotypes have on the lives of those who live in the region and call it home?

Appalachian Studies scholar Emily Satterwhite engages these questions and the politics of representation within the realm of folklife in her analysis of visitor experiences at the 2003 **Smithsonian Folklife Festival** exhibit, *Appalachia: Heritage and Harmony*. Satterwhite compared how Appalachia was exhibited under a “national framework” (dating back to as early as 1976, when the event was called the **Festival of American Folklife**) and when it was exhibited under an “international framework,” after the festival was rebranded as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 1988.^[55] The Smithsonian Institution describes its annual Folklife Festival as “an international exposition of living cultural heritage annually produced outdoors on the National Mall of the United States in Washington, D.C.”^[56] Situated both physically and conceptually between Scotland and Mali, Satterwhite’s interviews with attendees of the exhibit “insisted over and over...that the [Appalachian] region embodied ‘real American culture’ and the ‘roots of the whole culture.’ The point of the Appalachian program, they averred, was ‘To be reeducated into our own roots, who we are, where we came from.’”^[57] Satterwhite compares the previous American Folklife Festival with the newly rebranded, globally focused Smithsonian Folklife Festival:

Both eras, then, manifested a kind of rural longing for Appalachia as untainted by modern or postmodern commercial society. But in 2003, Appalachia took on an added meaning of “home.” Appalachia as home and nation became a site from which visitors understood *all* Americans as simple pioneers facing a global frontier full of dangers that threaten to victimize a people simply trying to make do and get by... Despite repeated attempts on the part of festival staff and other organizers, the dominant images of Appalachia have remained

essentially unchanged romanticizations of rural agrarian culture from the 1960s to the twenty-first century.^[58]

Satterwhite demonstrates both the meanings visitors took away from this exhibit and *how* those meanings were created through aesthetic choices. Black and white photos throughout the exhibit tapped into stereotypical representations of Appalachia, especially in contrast to the colorful photos present in the Scotland and Mali exhibits, connecting with visitors' stereotypes of the region. Satterwhite argues that using images of the region that evoke a sense of a historic past (instead of more contemporary images) enabled festival goers to identify with Appalachia as both home and nation in a way that allowed them "to deny the real power and ambition of the United States in the world."^[59] That is, identification with simplistic ideas of the region fostered a notion of false innocence among visitors about the role of the United States in global affairs.

As Satterwhite explains, Appalachia has historically been invoked as the historic "home" of the nation. Indeed, in his 2014 keynote address to the Appalachian Studies Association, **Silas House** said, "The truth is, Appalachia is America. We always have been, yet we have always been underneath a microscope...we are a mirror being held up to the face of the country."^[60] As a mirror of the nation, then, interpretations of Appalachia's past take on new significance amid contemporary reflections on inequality more broadly. After **George Floyd** was murdered by Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, a national re-awakening to the impacts of structural racism turned attention to public commemoration of Civil War heroes through large statues placed in prominent locations throughout the nation, particularly in the South. The call for their removal sparked fierce debate over the symbolic and emotional impact of these statues on residents as well as what to do with such large, historic, and controversial figures.^{[61] [62]}

At the **University of Kentucky** in Lexington in 2020, the debate over cultural and historical representation played out over a 1934 Public Works of Art Project mural by **Ann Rice O'Hanlon** depicting bucolic rural life, including scenes of slavery.^[63] Students from the **Black Student Advisory Council** staged a sit-in to advocate for the removal of the mural because it was a painful reminder of the oppression of their ancestors in a room that is frequently used for university events. **Wendell Berry**, a prominent poet,

Appalachian Studies scholar, and alumnus of University of Kentucky, filed a lawsuit against the university when the administration announced that the mural would be removed, claiming that the University of Kentucky had a responsibility to uphold the original intention toward the public when the mural was commissioned.^[64] **Karyn Olivier**, a Black artist who was commissioned in 2018 to paint *Witness*, a counter mural in response to critiques of O’Hanlon’s mural, also advocated for the 1934 mural to remain installed since her piece directly responds to it. *Witness* repaints the figures from O’Hanlon’s mural on a gold dome in Memorial Hall with a quotation from Frederick Douglass that reads, “There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven, that does not know that slavery is wrong for him.”^[65] The students from the Black Student Advisory Council, Berry, and Olivier make differing claims about the contested roles, purposes, and effects of public art, illustrating how humans continually confront the legacies of the past through their personal experiences in the present. University officials decided to remove the mural in June 2020,^[66] but in March 2024 Kentucky’s 48th Circuit Court Judge Thomas Wingate dismissed Berry’s lawsuit. However, Judge Wingate also declared that the mural “must be maintained and cannot be removed” since its removal would result in its destruction.^[67] The debate around this mural continues longstanding and important questions about the commemoration of traumatic histories.

Public commemorations are highly contentious and subject to contestation not only because they can exclude some groups while privileging others, but also because, as is often the case in Appalachia, they may serve as important economic drivers within struggling communities that are redefining their future after the departure of anchor economies such as coal mines and steel factories. In some instances, goals of expedient economic revitalization may be pitted against deliberative processes that ensure equal and just representation. To appeal to the tourism industry, communities can engage visitors by demonstrating the significance of local events, achievements, industries, and ideas to broader audiences, including local, regional, out-of-state, and international visitors. In Appalachian Ohio, for instance, large-scale murals commemorating the steel industry in Portsmouth and Steubenville connect working-class people to national physical infrastructure. The Steel Industry mural painted by Robert Dafford is part of the Portsmouth Floodwall Murals project described earlier. The murals project aims to attract tourists (who will hopefully spend money

locally during their visit) while it also promotes civic pride. The prevalence, however, of smaller commemorative projects surrounding and responding to the narrative of the Floodwall Murals sparked one folklorist's curiosity about the relationship between large historical representations and smaller, less funded projects within the city.

Cassie Rosita Patterson describes how Portsmouth engages in “commemorative dialogues,” a proliferation of local commemorative sites (physical as well as digital), projects, and actions that offer “differing conceptions and representations of place.”^[68] Patterson explains how residents produce their own commemorative representations that speak back to the Portsmouth Floodwall Murals, a large-scale, 30+ year project run by a local nonprofit organization that depicts a largely White-centered and conflict-free narrative of local history. A granite bench with Portsmouth resident Walter Stout's poem “A Struggle to Be Free” about a freedom-seeker crossing the Ohio River along the Underground Railroad, a swimming pool reopening that celebrates racial integration through the slogan “fun in the sun for everyone,” graffiti, and social media for the Black community in the area challenge the idea that the Portsmouth Floodwall Murals tell the full story of the city by populating the digital and physical landscape with Black history and life. “Investigating the commemorative dialogues that occur through various inscriptions on the local landscape,” Patterson argues, “provides insight into the struggle for representational space and power in a small postindustrial city.”^[69]

Participatory Methodologies

Since the decision-making processes behind any public commemoration are crucial for ensuring that installations reflect the people who live with them, some artists and organizations have developed more inclusive approaches that center the needs, lives, and futures of Appalachian communities and environments, especially those that have been historically excluded and exploited. Artist-activist Lacy Hale, for instance, who coined, popularized, and now sells merchandise with the phrase “No Hate in my Holler,” consulted school children living in Jenkins, Kentucky, a former coal town, to design a mural that not only reflected their personal experiences of place but also included their artistic efforts.^[70] Along with collaborator Pam

Oldfield Meade, Hale “designed a paint-by-numbers system which allowed for community painting parties where over 60 people, from children to senior citizens, could add their touch to the installment.”^[71] In Harlan County, the Mountain Mega Mural Fest of 2018 supported artistic as well as administrative education around producing enduring public art. Farther north, Ohio’s Winding Road, developed by grassroots nonprofit leaders at Sunday Creek Associates, offers locally relevant and curated historical and ecotourism experiences that support the local economy in the Little Cities of Black Diamonds, which are former coal towns located across Hocking, Perry, and Athens Counties. Tours focus on labor history, Black history, and innovative mine reclamation strategies, such as the collaboration between Rural Action and Ohio University to transform acid mine drainage into paint pigment.^[72]

Folklorists and Appalachian Studies scholars share an interest in participatory methodologies and approaches as ways for communities to advocate for themselves and to engage in direct cultural representation. Finding common ground in analyses of dynamic cultural expressions from the region, **participatory methodologies** center individuals and groups that are most impacted by policies and representations in the decision-making processes that bring about change in their communities. Participatory methodologies blend emic and etic understandings of culture by continually prioritizing community understandings, engaging in reflection and dialogue, and being committed to outcomes that are relevant to the participants. Susan Keefe explains that the “purpose of intervention through participatory development is to strengthen stakeholders in contesting power holders’ authoritative control of cultural meaning.”^[73] By engaging in participatory research, inclusive dialogues, local capacity building, and shared decision-making, collaborators work together to shape the folklore of Appalachia so that it is equitable and reflective of the individuals and groups that constitute it.

Black By God: The West Virginian, a news outlet founded and directed in 2021 by **Affrilachian** poet, activist, and entrepreneur **Crystal Good**, for example, produces political commentary by and for Black West Virginians.^[74] Drawing on a long history of Black news publishing, *Black By God*’s Folk Reporters program recruits Black writers and artists from the state to interpret legislative information that is typically communicated

through a White cultural perspective and translates it into culturally relevant stories, opinion pieces, and comics that cater to a Black readership.^[75] In Charlottesville, Virginia, the **Lua Project's Mexilachian Son** project draws inspiration from founder Estela Knott's personal history of blended Mexican and Appalachian heritage to produce new songs that blend the two musical traditions.^[76] Sophia Enriquez argues that acknowledging the Latine history of Appalachia and the creation of new sounds like those produced by the Lua Project "fosters a better understanding of how Latinxs find belonging in spaces where they are not part of the dominant cultural narrative and creates the possibility of musical resistance and response to xenophobic ideologies."^[77] Creators and scholars like Good, the Lua Project, and Enriquez live out the very definition of tradition: the dynamic interplay of cultural continuity and innovation.

Conclusion

The folklore of Appalachia (some of which readers may not have realized were folklore!) demonstrates the connection between the two fields of inquiry—Folklore Studies and Appalachian Studies—as well as major concepts that sit at the intersection of their approaches to studying culture and aesthetic practices of the region.

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- [1] American Folklore Society, "What is Folklore?"
- [2] Sims and Stephens, *Folklore*, 8.
- [3] Jabbour, "What is Decoration Day?" vii.
- [4] Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore*, 1-2; Glassie, "Tradition," 188; Sims and Stephens, *Living Folklore*, xiii; Blank and McNeill, "Introduction: Fear Has No Face," 3-23; Noyes, *Fire in the Plaza*, 4.
- [5] Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore*, 39.
- [6] Hufford, "Folklore and Folklife in Appalachia," 843.
- [7] Hufford, "Interrupting the Monologue," 64.
- [8] Hathaway, *Mountaineers are Always Free*, 5.
- [9] Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine*, xix.
- [10] Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine*, 32-33; Stoddart, *Challenge and Change in Appalachia*, 12-13; Smith, "Walk-Ons in the Third Act," 5.
- [11] Williams, "Vernacular Architecture," 35.
- [12] Hoppe, *Gone Dollywood*, 3.
- [13] Ibid, 12-13.
- [14] Benedetti, "Dreams of Democracy, Logistics of Crowds," 104-108.

[15] According to the Appalachian Regional Commission's data overview generated from the [American Community Survey](#) of 2023, 79.8% of the region identifies as White alone (not Hispanic), while people who identify as Black comprise 10.2%; Latine, 5.8%; and other ethnicities, 4.2% (Pollard, et al., "The Appalachian Region," 22). See also Brown, *Gone Home*; Enriquez, "Penned Against the Wall"; hooks, *Appalachian Elegy*; The Lua Project, "Mexilachia"; Ludke and Obermiller, "Recent Trends in Appalachian Migration"; Obermiller and Howe, "New Paths and Patterns of Appalachian Migration"; Warren, *The Worlds the Shawnees Made*.

[16] See Obermiller, et al., *Appalachian Odyssey*; Obermiller, et al., "Appalachians Outside the Region."

[17] Lindahl, "Introduction to Jack Tales," xiv-xv.

[18] Ibid, xviii.

[19] Ibid, xxviii.

[20] Vance, "Appalachian Witchery."

[21] Merchant, "The Mysterious Art of Dowsing."

[22] Mallow, "An Ode to a Hometown Creature."

[23] "Appalachian Monsters."

[24] Tan, "Modern Business."

[25] Pavlovic, "Fall Cryptids."

[26] Ibid.

[27] Lake, "Bat Boy for President."

[28] Foster, "Introduction: The Challenge of the Folkloresque," 5.

[29] Blank and McNeill, "Introduction: Fear Has No Face," 7.

[30] Foster, "Introduction: The Challenge of the Folkloresque," 5.

[31] Vannatter, "The Legend of Bat Boy."

[32] Ibid.

[33] Brodie, "Pretend News, False News, Fake News," 451-59.

[34] Mould, "Introduction to the Special Issue," 373.

[35] "About Us."

[36] Ibid.

[37] Denver, "Take Me Home, Country Roads."

[38] *The Ramp News*, Personal Communication.

[39] Billings, Norman, and Ledford, *Back Talk from Appalachia*, 17.

[40] McNeill, *Folklore Rules*, 83.

[41] Lovejoy, "Redneck Memes," 115-29.

[42] Both demonstrative *them* and alveolar *-ing* are common dialect features in Appalachian English varieties. In general, there are four demonstrative pronouns in English: this, that, these, and those; in vernacular use, however, another plural form is often found: them. This term is known as demonstrative

them. Additionally, there is variation in how people phonetically produce the “-ing” sound at the end of a word like “walking”: some people may pronounce the word with a velar nasal /ŋ/ where the “g” sound is heard. In Appalachia, some people may pronounce the word with an alveolar nasal /n/ where the “g” sound is not heard, and this feature is known as alveolar *-ing*.

[43] Adam, “Interview Possum.”

[44] Wild West Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, Opossum meme.

[45] Pavlovic, “Rednecks Against Racism.”

[46] Musgrave, “Possum in Kentucky.”

[47] Santino, *Spontaneous Shrines*, 5.

[48] Gabbart, *Winter Carnival in a Western Town*; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Theorizing Heritage”;

Noyes, *Fire in the Plaza*; Santino, *Spontaneous Shrines*.

[49] Portsmouth Street Art Project.

[50] Portsmouth Unity Project.

[51] Portsmouth Ohio Murals.

[52] Portsmouth Street Art Project.

[53] Portsmouth Ohio Murals.

[54] Portsmouth Unity Project

[55] Satterwhite, “Imagining Home, Nation, World,” 11.

[56] “Mission and History.”

[57] Satterwhite, “Imagining Home, Nation, World,” 26.

[58] Ibid, 27.

[59] Ibid, 11.

[60] House, “Our Secret Places in the Waiting World,” 108-09.

[61] Niemeyer, “Sherman vs. Lee.” The ongoing debate over Civil War monuments in Appalachia has been documented by [100 Days in Appalachia](#), a digital newsroom whose mission is to “amplify the region’s diverse voices, celebrate our successes, investigate our failures and empower our communities,” through their [archive of advocacy for the removal of Confederate statues in Appalachia](#).

[62] Allen and Sisk, “Pain and Possibility.” In Harrison County, West Virginia, the debate over the call to remove one of over 21 confederate statues in the state went so far as to lead to the creation of House Bill 2174, the West Virginia Monument and Memorial Protection Act, which proposes to amend the state code to relocate, remove, alter, rename, rededicate, or otherwise change public commemorations (Mistich).

[63] Jacobs, “Students’ Calls to Remove a Mural Were Answered.”

[64] Ibid.

[65] Hale and Wells, “Memorial Hall Visitors.”

[66] Briñez, “University of Kentucky to Remove.”

[67] Kast, “Judge Dismisses Wendell Berry’s Lawsuit.”

- [68] Patterson, "The Economics of Curation and Representation," 132.
- [69] Ibid.
- [70] Marietta, "Meet the Artist."
- [71] Payne, "Community Mural Highlights Kentucky Town."
- [72] Hartenbach and Carrow, "Ohio University, Rural Action Develop."
- [73] Keefe, "Introduction," 9.
- [74] Good, *Black By God*.
- [75] Ibid.
- [76] Lua Project, "Mexilachia."
- [77] Enriquez, "Penned Against the Wall," 65.

The Intersectional Redneck:

Appalachian Identity Politics in Historical and Contemporary Perspective

**Molly Clever and Katharine Lane
Antolini**

In the rolling hills and hollows of West Virginia, a sight may confound students of Civil War history: the Confederate battle flag waving proudly from front porches, attached as stickers to the back of trucks, and emblazoned on hats and t-shirts. While the Confederate battle flag is a common sight in many rural areas, particularly in the states that made up the former Confederacy, its presence in West Virginia highlights recent transformations in White **identity politics** and its associated symbols in the United States. West Virginia became a state on June 20, 1863, after a two-year struggle to break free from the state of Virginia and to secede from the Confederacy. Abolitionist politics played a central role in the founding of the state; a pathway toward the abolition of slavery was included in the state's constitution, and the abolitionist slogan "Mountaineers are always free" was formally enshrined as the state's motto.^[1] Thus, the prominent display of Confederate symbols in the only state to secede from the Confederacy provides just one example of the many complexities of contemporary identity politics in modern Appalachia.

To disentangle these complexities, it is necessary to understand how Appalachian identity markers were constructed and evolved in the context of

intersections between race, social class, and geography. The common stereotype of Appalachian *hillbillies* and *rednecks* consists of people who are poor, White, uneducated, and racist. However, this trope obscures a complicated intersectional history of race and class in Appalachia. For decades, Appalachian scholars have warned that such cultural caricatures problematically essentialize and universalize the residents of an entire geographic region. [\[2\]](#) Since the early 20th century, cultural outsiders have applied these slurs to denigrate Appalachians, building a taxonomy of the terms *hillbilly* and *redneck* that rests firmly on the foundations of Whiteness, unconcealed racism, and inherent violent tendencies. The intertwining of these characteristics has been so thorough that contemporary outsiders are perpetually perplexed when cultural insiders proudly embrace the monikers of *hillbilly* or *redneck* and their associated symbols. Such actions resonate as proof in the minds of national commentators of the region's ingrained ignorance and further sustains its “**Othering**” in comparison to the rest of the country.

West Virginia serves as a case study for the evolution of these terms through the aftermath of the **Civil War**, the **labor movement**, and the **Civil Rights movement**. As the only state completely within Appalachia, national pundits and popular media often evoke West Virginia as representative of the entire region. Unfortunately, even Appalachian cultural insiders have ignored or dismissed aspects of the state's history to cater to the current outsider depiction of its unquestionable and unapologetic Whiteness and political defense of racial privilege. To be sure, West Virginia illustrates evidence of interracial coalitions within the state's history, complicating common stereotypes.

This history reveals a construction of Appalachian identity that has operated through two mutually constructive and highly contentious pathways: on the one hand, as a source of empowerment through cross-racial coalition building among workers, and on the other hand, as a source of racial division for the purposes of economic exploitation by elites. This complex weave of racial and social class politics has led to contemporary social movements for racial and economic justice in Appalachia.

Intersectionality in the Appalachian Context

Intersectionality is an analytical and theoretical framework for examining the interactions of various forms of privileged and oppressed identities. Intersectional theory emerged as an alternative to conventional **additive models**, which conceptualize identity-based oppressions in terms of discrete categories such as race, class, and gender. In contrast, intersectionality centers the *interactions* between these identities in analyses of identity-based oppressions. In its contemporary iteration, intersectionality gained prominence within **critical race theory** in the 1980s and 1990s. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term to describe the ways in which anti-discrimination law rendered invisible problems facing Black women.

[3] However, as many intersectional scholars have emphasized, Black feminist scholars and activists have been referencing the need to conceptualize the interactions between multiple identities in the fight for justice as early as the mid-19th century. [4]

Intersectional theory has most often been associated with Black feminism, both due to its origins within Black feminist critical race theory and because of its utility in describing the unique forms of marginalization and social invisibility that women and queer folks of color often encounter. Crenshaw's formulation of intersectionality grew out of a need to render visible problems of employment discrimination faced by Black women, whose marginalization in the workplace couldn't be readily classified as racial- or gender-based discrimination when the employer in question hired both women (who were White) and people of color (who were men). Crenshaw argued that conventional additive models were insufficient to explain the nature of the oppression experienced by Black women, and that intersectionality offered a way to "highlight the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression were experienced so that the problems would be easier to discuss and understand." [5]

Similarly, applying an intersectional framework to Appalachian identity illuminates unique problems that occur within the interactions between race and social class. Compared to the rest of the United States, the Appalachian region is more White, more poor, and less educated. Within Appalachia, West Virginia specifically is even more disproportionately White, poor, and less educated (see Figure 1). [6] These demographic realities contribute to a cultural identity formation of Appalachians that is rooted in White poverty. According to **bell hooks**, this pattern creates a

“politics of invisibility” that is manipulated by elites to maintain economic control through a “divide and conquer strategy”:

Better to have poor and working-class white folks believe white supremacy is still giving them a meaningful edge than to broadcast the reality that the poor of any race no longer have an edge in this society, or that downsizing daily drags previously economically sound white households into the ranks of the poor.^[7]

Thus, the intersectional lens offered here by bell hooks uncovers an avenue for understanding the problems of economic marginalization in the Appalachian region by examining how poverty is structured within the broader economy. Appalachia’s disproportionately high levels of poverty in general, and West Virginia’s in particular, are rooted within the economic dynamics of extraction-based economies.

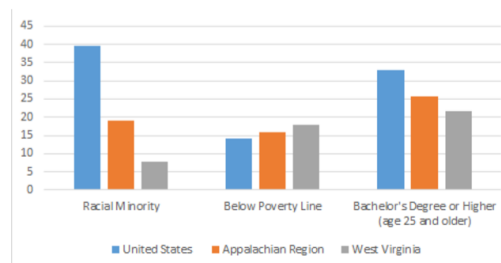


Figure 1. Race, poverty, and education indicators in the United States, Appalachia, and West Virginia by percentage of the population.

Extractive economies, such as those based on coal and timber, contribute to patterns of economic underdevelopment and political corruption. This phenomenon occurs through a process described by scholars as the **resource curse hypothesis**: because revenues from natural resource extraction go directly to corporate leaders and state coffers, there is a high potential for corruption and low incentive for building robust forms of democratic participation. This result occurs because elites have the opportunity to enrich themselves by skimming profits and have little incentive to bargain with or even learn about the needs and preferences of the

local population.^[8] Rather, elites in extractive economies are incentivized to suppress and politically marginalize their labor force in an effort to maintain high levels of profit. These profits are likewise extracted from the state—exported elsewhere for profit—rather than invested into local social and infrastructural development.

As natural-resource industries such as coal and timber declined in prominence through the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the number of people employed by (and therefore economically reliant upon) extractive

industries has also declined. In West Virginia alone, the number of people employed by the coal industry dropped from just over 131,000 in 1948 to fewer than 14,000 in 2021.^[9] In an attempt to maintain their power, political and corporate elites tied to the energy industry have engaged in identity construction strategies aimed at manufacturing a sense of cultural ideology that is inextricably tied to extractive industries and their interests, even as those interests operate in opposition to the social, environmental, and economic well-being of those in the poor and working classes.^[10] For example, the “faux grassroots front group” **Friends of Coal**^[11] was created by coal industry leaders in an effort to reduce the political effectiveness of labor and environmental advocacy groups through “the appropriation of West Virginia cultural icons and the infusion of coal-industry ideology into a variety of social arenas.”^[12] This ideological reframing strategy fuses aspects of Appalachian identity—such as rural community traditions and personal grit—with coal-industry interests. Thus, local challenges to the coal industry—such as objecting to **mountaintop removal** or pressuring politicians to divert state resources into alternative forms of economic development—become redefined as a challenge to Appalachian identity itself.

This form of cultural manipulation likewise fuses with racial identity politics, as economic elites have an interest in constructing and perpetuating racial antagonisms within the poor and working classes. White supremacist ideologies become the cultural avenue through which divisions within the labor force can be produced and maintained. These divisions are further exacerbated by politicians, who use racial identity as a strategy of mobilizing political support. This approach included the “Southern Strategy,” a political tactic developed by the Republican Party in the 1960s and 1970s to gain an electoral advantage in Southern states by directly appealing to the anxieties and resentments of White residents in the post-Jim Crow era. By design, the Southern Strategy capitalized on the emerging dynamics of identity politics in the **Civil Rights era** with the goal of shifting the priorities of White working class voters away from economic interests (that were typically shared with those of the poor and working classes of all races) and toward a focus on White identity, often framed in terms of preserving the cultural integrity of traditional rural life. The Southern Strategy is therefore just one example of

how elites politicize racial fault lines as part of a broader divide-and-conquer strategy meant to disempower the working class.^[13]

This divide and conquer strategy was enacted upon West Virginia coal miners in the 20th century alongside evidence of an intersectional politics of resistance within the **West Virginia Labor Movement**. Legacies of this history in contemporary intersectional social movements for racial and economic justice occurred not only in West Virginia but also in the broader Appalachian region.

West Virginia Red Necks

Scholars date the popular usage of the term “redneck” to the late 19th century. It was a label meant not only to describe rural farmers and their “long red necks” sunburned from hours toiling in the field, but also a term specifically designed to exemplify rural Southern White residents united behind the ideology of White supremacy.^[14] Throughout the 20th century, both rednecks and hillbillies were defined as “uncouth countrymen” resting on a violent racist nature that emerged easily when provoked. During periods of heated racial conflict, such as the struggle to integrate Southern schools in the 1950s and 1960s, media accounts resorted to stereotypical redneck and hillbilly name-calling when describing the angry White working-class crowds shouting at Black students attempting to enter all-White schools. By the mid-20th century, according to historian Nancy Isenberg, “redneck” had become “synonymous with an almost insane bigotry.”^[15]

Terms associated with groups can morph over time. For West Virginians raised on the history of the state’s coal industry, the term “redneck” is not one that invokes insane racial bigotries but one that represents an encompassing class consciousness strong enough to diminish racial and ethnic strife. In the early fall of 1921, striking miners from the state’s southern coal counties led the largest armed insurrection in the nation’s history since the Civil War, known as the **Battle of Blair Mountain**. An estimated 15,000 to 20,000 men joined the armed march that led to Blair Mountain.^[16] Within its ranks, White, Black, and immigrant miners, under the leadership of the **United Mine Workers of America**, knotted red bandanas around their necks as a symbol of their united goal to overthrow the

oppressive policies and practices of the region's coal companies. Upon witnessing the bandana-clad **union** miners as they marched past, on-scene reporters referenced the men as "red necks" in news stories that drew a nationwide audience.^[17] During the early 20th century, therefore, the term "redneck" held multiple and conflicting meanings within the context of the unionization movement in West Virginia's southern coal fields. Although the usage and meaning of the word varied between coal operators, hired mine guards, and the coal miners themselves in this period, what remained conspicuously absent from the "redneck" label was its traditional connotation of White supremacy.

The history of the coal industry in Appalachia challenges the image of the region's severe isolation and staunch homogeneity that supposedly differentiated it from the rest of the country. This perceived isolation of the region and its White mountaineer population has fed the racial narrative behind the redneck and hillbilly stereotype for centuries, prompting historian John C. Inscoe to speculate that "no other aspect of the Appalachian character has been as prone to as much myth, stereotype, contractions, and confusion as has the matter of race relations and racial attitudes among mountaineers."^[18] Early travel writers once attributed the region's apparent moral and economic aversion to slavery, for instance, as a form of racial naivety born from the Southern mountaineer's lack of interaction with Black Americans. But by the late 19th century, that same muted interracial exposure was reasoned to be the root of the redneck's violent racist nature.^[19] A closer look into the region's coal industry further complicates the discussion of racial attitudes and relationships. Scholars paint Appalachian coal towns at the turn of the 20th century as a "bewildering array of peoples and cultures."^[20] Such a depiction stands in stark contrast to the traditional image of an isolated and solely White mountain populace.

In reality, bituminous coal was a resource too massive for native White mountaineers to dig alone. The Appalachian region contained the nation's largest supply of fossil fuels, over fifty million acres, thus coal companies depended on the labor of Southern Black residents as well as immigrants to help extract the vital resource. The migration of diverse groups into the Appalachian coalfields began in earnest. This mass addition to the labor force, accompanied by access to national markets through newly constructed

railroad lines, enabled the region's coal production to triple by 1900. By 1930, 80 percent of the nation's total coal production came from the Appalachian coalfields.^[21] Of all those coalfields, however, the southern fields of West Virginia held the strongest attractions for these vital new workers, offering more economic, social, and political freedom than the neighboring coal producing states.

The primary goal of West Virginian coal operators was to build productive and profitable mines. Such productivity depended upon a well-regulated labor force. The higher transportation costs of hauling coal from remote hollows to outside markets meant operators needed to keep labor costs at a minimum. Paying the higher union wages earned by miners in the coalfields of Northern states, for example, risked West Virginia's ability to compete.^[22] Low miners' wages were essential to the industry's profit margins; pick miners in the state's southern coal counties earned 38.5 cents per "long ton" (2,240 pounds) in 1912 while miners' wages in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania reached as high as \$1.58 per "short ton" (2,000 pounds).^[23] Thus, sustaining a productive, compliant, and non-union labor force was a high-stakes investment for coal operators.

The policy of **judicial mixture** governed the industry's labor recruiting. Coal operators believed a relative balance of White, Black, and European immigrant residents would address their need for a stable and especially a non-union workforce. Native mountaineers, according to operators, were not the most reliable and disciplined of miners, prone to absenteeism and lacking deference to company authority. Operators hoped to mitigate the issues with White miners by recruiting Southern Black residents and European immigrants in larger numbers. The policy of judicial mixture was based on two main assumptions about the Appalachian labor force: First, that Black and immigrant laborers would work harder and be more obedient than White miners; second, that White miners would hold racist and nativist resentments against their Black and immigrant counterparts and that these resentments would prevent interracial solidarity and help squelch union sentiment.^[24] In other words, the policy of judicial mixture was designed to draw on, reify, and amplify existing racial and ethnic fault lines. By 1920, the judicial mixture of the state's mining force approximated 25 percent Black, 20 percent southern European immigrant and 55 percent native White.^[25]

Despite the lower wages common to the Southern coalfields, West Virginia's mines offered steadier employment and a possibility of a higher total annual income in comparison to higher paying Northern mines. [\[26\]](#) The promise of steady work lured Black miners from the Southern states. Yet Black families migrated to the state for opportunities beyond just economic gain; they sought additional opportunities nonexistent in other regions at the turn of the 20th century. In the South, Black residents lived under oppressive **Jim Crow laws** that implemented rigid social segregation, denied Black men political rights, and sanctioned the physical brutality of lynching as a weapon of intimidation and control. West Virginia, in contrast, shone as a beacon within the Appalachian Mountains. Labor recruiters promised equal wages, the right to vote, and a quality of education denied to Black residents in the South and other Appalachian states. Such opportunities served the coal industry's interests as well; they attracted new miners during periods of increased labor shortages, and, according to West Virginia coal operators, created a more productive and stable workforce. To suggest that Black miners were never victims of racial discrimination or violence would be a gross exaggeration, of course. Nonetheless, race relations proved less contentious in the company towns of the Mountain State than in other coal-producing states. By 1920, nearly 70 percent of the Black population living in Appalachia called the hills and hollows of West Virginia home. [\[27\]](#)

In addition to the South, coal companies sent labor recruiters to the Eastern port cities of Philadelphia, New York, and beyond in search of European immigrant workers willing to work in the mines. In 1864, the West Virginia legislature appointed its first immigration commissioner, Joseph H. Diss Debar, a Swiss immigrant himself, and empowered him to promote the state's merits to Americans and foreigners alike. [\[28\]](#) Diss Debar published *The West Virginia Hand-Book and Immigrant's Guide* in 1870 to better assist his efforts. He insisted the guide offered "unvarnished facts and figures" based on his own personal observations and professional experiences as a twenty-five-year resident of the state. "It is hoped that its freedom from all romance and exaggeration may secure for it the attention and confidence of that class of honest and enterprising workers in both hemispheres," stressed Diss Debar in the preface, "whom we are most anxious to welcome as permanent settlers to our infant state." [\[29\]](#) The guide provided an overall sketch of the state from its historical origins and state

constitution to a meteorological chart detailing the average weather on any given day of the year. And, of course, the guide detailed the state's diverse industries including a portrait of its mineral resources. Within the state, Diss Debar explained, laid the largest and best coal seams of the **Allegheny Mountains**—all “naturally opened to development.”^[30] West Virginia sent such guides throughout Europe in the late 19th century to promote immigration, followed by labor agents paid by the coal industry to make direct appeals in the early 20th century.^[31] Like Southern Black residents drawn to coal towns before them, European immigrants were also victims of nativist fears in West Virginia. Historical studies document clear evidence of economic and physical abuse inflicted upon immigrant miners by both the coal companies and by White and Black miners. Nevertheless, immigrants representing all the nations of Europe and numbering 32,000 people, lived and worked in the state by **World War I**.^[32]

Yet the policy of judicial mixture, designed to cultivate racist and nativist fears and generate an atmosphere of cultural suspicion and economic competition, backfired on the state's coal operators in the early 1900s. The experiences of life working deep underground forged bonds between men regardless of race and ethnicity. The majority of the nation's coal was mined by hand until 1915. Even after the adoption of machinery to cut into the coal seams, miners continued to hand-load coal cars until the 1940s.^[33] In West Virginia, all White, Black, and immigrant miners worked side by side, earned the same pay per ton of coal they dug and loaded, and emerged from the mines each evening blackened by the same coal dust. They also faced the same dangers. A miner in West Virginia was more likely to be killed by a methane gas explosion or a roof collapse than any miner employed in the United States or Europe. For example, the 1907 **Monongah mine explosion** in central West Virginia killed over 350 men and boys, and it ranks among the worst mining disasters in the nation's history. Indeed, miners in the Southern coalfields experienced a higher proportional death rate than American soldiers serving in World War I. Faced with such odds, West Virginian miners reportedly adhered to a “sacred code” that bound them to risk their own lives after a disaster to rescue trapped miners or recover every dead body. Coal operators typically blamed the gruesome injury and death rates on an “act of God” or miner carelessness to hide the company's

failure to adhere to the few mining safety codes that existed in the early 20th century. [\[34\]](#) Miners quickly learned that coal companies valued profit over their lives and the welfare of their families. Such a grim revelation bred collaboration more than competition between the men.

Above ground, the design of mining towns further lessened the total effectiveness of judicial mixture. **Company towns** were born out of necessity in the 1880s when the industry first sought to access coal seams deep in the remote hollows. In the absence of any nearby towns, companies built their own to provide the means of operations that included the need to house, supply, educate, and even entertain its miners and their families. The power that coal companies wielded in the towns they constructed throughout Appalachia is legendary—but no more so than in West Virginia. The majority of West Virginia miners, an estimated 94 percent, lived in “company towns,” and West Virginia held the highest percentage of any coal-producing state with the next closest state being Illinois at 53 percent. [\[35\]](#)

The coal company owned the entire town from the top of the coal tippie to the deepest chamber of the mine. The houses where the miners lived, the store in which they shopped, the church where they worshiped, and the school where they sent their children each week were all company property. Such an arrangement granted coal operators the power to ensure both economic and physical control over the miners. Economically, operators paid miners in company-printed money called “**scrip**” that was only redeemable in full at the company store. Contemporary investigations of coal industry practices discovered that company stores hiked prices as much as three times higher than the cost of food and clothing in stores in local towns. What losses a mine accrued during a slump in the coal market, it easily recuperated from profits made at the company store. State law also defined the relationship between coal company and miner differently in regard to housing. Miners did not have the rights and legal protections awarded the traditional renter. Instead, courts defined the relationship as one of “master and servant,” which meant they could evict a miner and his family from company housing for any reason and without warning. [\[36\]](#)

Despite the policy of judicial mixture, however, company towns were often not governed by rigid racial **segregation**. Only the **integration** of schools and interracial marriage were fully banned under West Virginia law. Thus, integrated (or at least semi-integrated) company towns were more the

norm than the exception according to historians. Some companies chose to segregate housing; sections of towns nicknamed “n***er hollow,” “little Italy,” or “hunktown” to identify the race and ethnicity of its residents testifies to that fact. Yet even when such segregation existed, the typically small size of mining towns meant Black and immigrant families remained in close vicinity to White families—perhaps no more than a few hundred yards “up the hollow.” Moreover, all miners lived in similar quality of housing and paid the same monthly rent based on the size of the house and not the race or ethnicity of its occupants. Despite the homogeneity of housing, homes in the majority of company towns were, unfortunately, equally awful. In 1925, the U.S. Coal Commission identified the living conditions in the mining towns of central Appalachia as the worst in the country.^[37]

West Virginian miners were ultimately drawn together by their **lived experiences** while working and socializing along with their shared sense of powerlessness strong enough to temporarily silence racist and nativist fears. Because coal towns were unincorporated entities, county and state officials considered them the private property of the company and respected the operators’ right to oversee their own affairs. It was common for coal companies to pay local law enforcement to either ignore the company’s management of its labor force or assist directly with that management. The most notorious example of such a relationship was with Logan County Sheriff **Don Chafin**. Coal operators paid Chafin \$2,725 each month to protect their interests, which primarily meant preventing “union agitators” from entering the county. The Logan County Coal Operators’ Association paid over \$60,000 for Chafin’s and his deputies’ services in 1921. In the absence of local law enforcement, companies hired private guards from the **Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency** in Bluefield, West Virginia, to enforce order within company towns. Historians have compared the mine guard system employed by company towns to living under a police state.^[38]

Historian David Corbin insists the combined hardships of work and life within the company towns laid the foundation for a “class over caste” solidarity among miners. “The nature of the company town focused the workers’ discontent, not on each other or on a racial or ethnic group,” explains Corbin, “but upon the employer—the coal operator—enabling the miners to develop that sense of group consciousness necessary for class feeling and behavior.”^[39] This class consciousness drove the unionization

movement. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) initiated its first campaign to unionize all West Virginia coalfields in 1897. Although able to organize the state's northern fields, the southern fields remained pugnaciously closed from UMWA efforts thanks to men like Sheriff Chafin in Logan County and the Baldwin-Felts guards in Mingo County. This period of brutal fighting over unionization is collectively known as the **West Virginia Mine Wars** (1912-1921). The decade included a series of **union** and **wildcat strikes** (including **Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike**, 1912-1913) and deadly clashes between miners and mine guards (such as **Battle of Matewan** and the **Battle of the Tug** in 1920). The Mine Wars ended with the armed Miners' March on Logan in August-September 1921. Thousands of miners initiated a march to Mingo County to rescue imprisoned miners and their families suffering under a declaration of martial law. Sheriff Don Chafin and his men stopped them in Logan County at Blair Mountain. The five-day battle, along a 12-mile front, ended only after the deployment of federal troops and the willing surrender of the miners on September 4, 1921. [\[40\]](#)

Miners, coal operators, and mine guards disputed both the right to unionize and the meaning of the term "redneck" during the Mine Wars. The connection between the symbol of the red bandana and unionization in West Virginia history dates back to the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. At that time, B & O Railroad line workers in Martinsburg donned red bandanas as they joined the rail strike in protest of successive wage cuts. It was during the Paint Creek and Cabin Creek Strike, 1912-1913, however, when the word "red neck" first appeared in print in a labor context and in reference to union miners. Coal operators and mine guards employed the word as a derogatory epithet to identify miners as both union members and poor White mountaineers. [\[41\]](#) However, not all the union men who defied coal company authority were poor White mountaineers. The strength of the UMWA movement relied on interracial collaboration during the Mine Wars. It was the union's mission to organize West Virginia miners regardless of "race, creed, or nationality," and Black and immigrant miners bravely joined its ranks in spite of the higher risk of reprisals faced by non-White miners and their families for that union support. [\[42\]](#)

The Miners' March and the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921 was a dramatic demonstration of working class consciousness and solidarity.

White, Black, and immigrant miners united against a common foe to form a “Red Neck Army.” In this context, the UMWA appropriated the “redneck” label to represent a multi-racial and ethnic unity, symbolically tied together by the wearing of a red bandana. A mundane item routinely worn underground by miners to protect themselves from the hazard of coal dust had begun to serve as an emblem of group identity in their fight to protect themselves from the abuses of coal operators and mine guards.^[43] Between 2,000 and 5,000 Black miners joined the “Red Neck Army,” and 400 of them were briefly imprisoned afterwards—twice as many as White miners.

^[44] Upon later reflection of the march, a White miner described its interracial design as a “darn solid mass of different colors and tribes, blended together, woven, bound, interlocked, tongued and grooved and glued together in one body.”^[45] The miners’ actions as they marched through the town of Sharples in Logan County exemplifies the sentiment behind the miner’s recollection. The company mess hall in Sharples was segregated by race and class. The marchers demanded that the cooks prepare food for all the miners to be served together in the room reserved for management before they continued on their way.^[46]

The miners’ self-identification as “rednecks” continued throughout the 1930s. Labor historians trace the term’s adoption by organized miners in other Appalachian states in the early 20th century.^[47] By **World War II**, however, the popular association of the term to mean “proud union man” or to represent class consciousness and multiracial solidarity faded. The positive connotations of the red bandana and “redneck” label waned within West Virginia along with the memory of the Mine Wars. Immediately after the miners surrendered at Blair Mountain, coal companies joined with state officials to effectively expunge the Mine Wars from West Virginia history. They had the power to control the narrative in the local and national media and effortlessly characterized decades of labor unrest in the West Virginia coalfields as a product of socialist propaganda concocted by outside union agitators. When the state required West Virginia history to be taught in the school systems by the 1930s, detailed accounts of labor unrest in any of the state’s industries were excluded from the approved curriculum. That was just the first step in rewriting the state’s labor history for both local and national consumption.^[48]

Fortunately, the legacy of the Mine Wars, the emblem of the red bandana, and the reclaiming of the redneck epithet to represent “class over caste” was never completely erased from the memory of later generations of West Virginians. “This is the kind of history,” notes Mine Wars historian Charles Keeney, “that turns stereotypes on their heads and redefines identity.”[\[49\]](#)

Contemporary Appalachian Intersectional Movements

The legacy of these stereotype-defying historical events is evident in contemporary intersectional social movements for racial and economic justice. In 2017, nearly a century after the Battle of Blair Mountain, teachers donned the same red bandana during the **West Virginia teachers’ strike** and embraced the historical “redneck” identity as a person who unites across class and race in defense of economic justice. In February 2017, 20,000 state teachers, school personnel, and bus drivers representing all 55 counties walked away from their jobs. The decision to shut down the state’s school systems for thirteen days was both a bold and heart-wrenching choice for the strikers. Nevertheless, they understood how fighting in defense of their own quality of life and value as state employees also meant fighting for a quality of education that all of their students deserved.[\[50\]](#)

It seemed inevitable that teachers from the southern counties emerged as leaders of the strike; they drew upon a rich legacy of parents and grandparents who bravely stood up against the authority of coal companies in defense of their own dignity as workers. In their published recollections of the strike, teachers from Mingo County especially recognized the weight of history on their shoulders. “Although there’s an understanding that striking is illegal, people in the south fear more serious repercussions: disappointing our ancestors,” wrote West Virginia English teacher Katie Endicott. She believed the willingness to stand in a picket line was instinctive to her; it was mapped on her DNA.[\[51\]](#) For thirteen days in 2017, the teachers and their allies formed a modern “Red Neck Army,” as they stormed the state capitol in Charleston fighting for the rights of all who worked within the state’s public school system. “The past was there, in the sharp and cold

mornings, when the teachers of the coalfields rose to take their place in a long tradition,” describes historian Elizabeth Catte. “The descendants of the Mine Wars have inherited the Mind Wars. March on.”^[52]

The West Virginia teachers’ strike is one example of using redneck identity in an intersectional justice frame. Other movements across Appalachia are drawing on similar constructions of identity to mobilize toward racial and economic justice, such as the **Poor People’s Campaign (PPC)**, which emerged directly from **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s** Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the late 1960s. King had long pointed to economic inequality as a key component in the fight for racial justice that characterized the Civil Rights movement. However, by 1967 he had become increasingly frustrated that the 1964 Civil Rights Act had done little to alleviate the suffering of the poorest Americans in a period in which the United States was experiencing historically high levels of economic growth and global power. King rejected the identity politics of the Black Power movement, arguing:

The unfortunate thing about [the slogan] Black Power is that it gives priority to race precisely at a time when the impact of automation and other forces have made the economic question fundamental for blacks and whites alike. In this context, a slogan of “Power for Poor People” would be much more appropriate.^[53]

The aim of the PPC was to organize a multiracial coalition of the poor and oppressed to march on Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1968 and demand that the federal government take immediate steps to alleviate the deplorable conditions of poverty through guaranteed jobs, income, and industrial development in rural areas. The movement organized **Mule Trains**—tarp-covered wagons pulled by mules—to transport groups of rural poor to Washington, D.C., where they set up an encampment on the national mall known as “**Resurrection City**.”

The high concentrations of poverty in the rural South in general, and Appalachia in particular, made the region a central focus of the PPC. Indeed, forming interracial coalitions and organizing in Appalachia were central to the Civil Rights movement throughout its history. Both Rosa Parks and King trained at the famous **Highlander Folk School** in Tennessee in the 1950s, one of the few places in the Jim Crow South where interracial meetings occurred

(albeit illegally). In a speech at the Highlander Folk School in 1957, King emphasized the relationship between racial and economic justice:

Organized labor has proved to be one of the most powerful forces in removing the blight of segregation and discrimination from our nation. Labor leaders wisely realize that the forces that are anti-Negro are usually anti-labor, and vice versa. And so organized labor is one of the

Negro's strongest allies in the struggle for freedom. [\[54\]](#)

Appalachian leaders were central to PPC organizing. Highlander Folk School founder Myles Horton became a lead organizer of Mule Train and education tents that were part of Resurrection City.

While in Memphis to help striking sanitation workers obtain better wages and working conditions, King was tragically assassinated just weeks before the PPC march was planned to begin. Nevertheless, approximately 50,000 poor and working-class Americans took the Mule Trains to Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1968 with thousands camping in Resurrection City for nearly six weeks. However, the PPC dissolved quickly in the aftermath of King's death. Public attention had shifted toward the collective grief and violence that characterized the summer of 1968, and by late June, Washington, D.C., police had forcibly expelled the residents of Resurrection City. [\[55\]](#) According to historian Robert Chase, the collapse of the PPC is best explained by the challenges to power that lies behind interracial coalitions for economic justice:

Ultimately, the PPC failed because the traditional constituency of the Civil Rights movement—the white, middle-class, liberals—was repulsed by the goals of the campaign itself. Bringing the poor together as a racial amalgamation of similar interests and goals heightened the issue of class in America and, consequently, Americans came to view the Civil Rights movement as an instrument questioning the legitimacy of

America's economic system and its capitalistic "way of life." [\[56\]](#)

In subsequent years, public perceptions of King's legacy became tightly tied to his fight for racial justice, with little attention paid to his "last crusade" to shift the balance of power in America toward the poor and working classes. Fifty years later in the spring of 2018, however, a revival of the PPC, led by Rev. Dr. William Barber II, once again marched on Washington in an effort to draw attention to the suffering of the poor and the need to focus on the interactions between racism and poverty. Central to the new PPC's core

principles is the premise that “[p]overty and economic inequality cannot be understood apart from a society built on White supremacy.”^[57]

The role of global capitalism as a barrier to economic and racial justice is likewise a focus of many recent and current social justice movements. In the 1960s and 1970s, a group from the Students for a Democratic Society chapter at Marshall University created the **Appalachian Movement Press**. The premise behind the activist press movement was to challenge the capitalist production of cultural products. By owning their own means of production, activist presses could construct cultural narratives by and for marginalized people. The Appalachian Movement Press operated under the **internal colony theory**, an extension of the resource curse hypothesis, which posits that people living in regions with extraction-based economies are systematically exploited and marginalized by their own governments for the economic benefit of those living outside the region.^[58]

This approach of seizing control of the construction of Appalachian identity away from outsiders is further evident in the **Affrilachian** artist movement. In the 1990s, Kentucky-born poet Frank X Walker coined the term Affrilachian to counter the stereotypes of “Appalachian” as a homogeneously White identity. The term spread to encompass a wide range of poets, visual artists, and musicians whose work focuses on intersectional Appalachian identity. According to Walker, “part of how we define ourselves [as Affrilachian artists] is grounded in being a champion of working class and poor people, and people who live at the margins. The Affrilachian poets have a motto, or an aesthetic, that says, ‘We make the invisible, visible,’ or try to give voice to the muted.”^[59] Today, the Affrilachian movement has created a vibrant and diverse community of artists across the region whose work centers on struggles for social justice. Taken together, these movements exemplify the long, complex, and contemporarily vibrant nature of an intersectional Appalachian identity.

Lessons from Intersectional Rednecks

Indeed, the image of the Confederate battle flag waving through the hills and hollows of West Virginia is an apparent contradiction to its origins as the only state to secede from the Confederacy. Through the complex and

stereotype-defying history traced in these pages, this contradiction serves a purpose: Rather than demonstrating allegiance to a particular political cause, the Confederate battle flag becomes a symbolic marker of identity among those whose experiences lie at the intersection of Whiteness, economic marginalization, and rural location. It is a symbol of the racial divide that is produced and maintained by political and business elites for the purposes of economic exploitation.

As bell hooks argues, however, these racial divisions among poor and working-class Appalachians are not absolute, and they are not without challenge.^[60] Recent transformations in the global economy and communication technologies have meant that “today’s culture is one where the White and Black working class and poor have more to say to each other, [and] there is a context of solidarity that did not exist in the past.” She goes on to argue that class unity has the potential to supersede racial divisions only if class-based solidarity is “rooted in a politics of resistance that is fundamentally anti-racist, one that recognizes that the experiences of underprivileged White folks are as important as those of people of color.”^[61] The intersectional rednecks of West Virginia provide one context for understanding how this politics of resistance constructs an Appalachian identity that is rooted in antiracism and economic justice.

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[1] This process was not without controversy, however. See Woods, "Mountaineers Becoming Free," 35-71; Zimring, "Secession in Favor of the Constitution," 23-51.

[2] For the most recent discussion see Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia*; Hawkins, *Appalachian Reckoning*.

[3] Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1241-299.

[4] Sojourner Truth's famous "Ain't I A Woman" speech is often pointed to as one of the earliest articulations of an intersectional framework. Also see Crenshaw, "Why Intersectionality Can't Wait"; Romero, *Introducing Intersectionality*.

[5] Crenshaw, "Why Intersectionality Can't Wait."

- [6] Pollard, "The Appalachian Region."
- [7] hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, 117.
- [8] Goldberg, "Lessons from Strange Cases," 477-514.
- [9] Bell, "Community Economic Identity," 111-43.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Ibid, 111.
- [12] Ibid, 139
- [13] Inwood, "Neoliberal Racism," 407-23.
- [14] Harkins, *Hillbilly*; Huber, "Red Necks and Red Bandanas"; Isenberg, *White Trash*.
- [15] Isenberg, *White Trash*, 265, 247-52, 255.
- [16] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*.
- [17] Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills*; Huber, "Red Necks and Red Bandanas," 203-04; Keeney, *The Road to Blair Mountain*, 48-49.
- [18] Inscoe, "Race and Racism," 103-31.
- [19] Ibid, 103-31.
- [20] Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 122.
- [21] Lewis, "Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity," 21-46.
- [22] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 108.
- [23] Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 178.
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- [25] Trotter Jr., "Black Migration to Southern West Virginia," 137-60; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 134-36.
- [26] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 31.
- [27] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 62-63; Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 169-70; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 141-56; Trotter Jr., *Coal, Class, and Color*, 102-22.
- [28] Bailey, "Strange Tongues," 243.
- [29] Diss Debar, *The West Virginia Hand-Book and Immigrant Guide*, v.
- [30] Ibid, 121.
- [31] Bailey, "Strange Tongues," 250-58; Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 168, 173.
- [32] Bailey, "Strange Tongues," 250-58; Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills*, 173-74.; Lewis, "Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity," 35-38.
- [33] Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 175-76.
- [34] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 10; Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 179-82; Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills*, 73-76.

- [35] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 8.
- [36] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 8-10; Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 182-98; Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills*, 20-31.
- [37] For a detailed discussion of the design and conditions of company towns see Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 61-101; Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 182-98; Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills*, 20-30; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America*, 146-56; Trotter Jr., *Coal, Class, and Color*, 125-44.
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- [39] Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion*, 61.
- [40] Keeney, *The Road to Blair Mountain*, 2-3.
- [41] Huber, "Red Necks and Red Bandanas," 196-97; Keeney, *The Road to Blair Mountain*, 47-48.
- [42] Huber, "Red Necks and Red Bandanas," 198-99; Trotter Jr., *Coal, Class, and Color*, 113.
- [43] Huber, "Red Necks and Red Bandanas," 204.
- [44] Huber, "Red Necks and Red Bandanas," 204; Lewis, *Black Miners in America*, 157, 163; Trotter, *Coal, Class and Color*, 112.
- [45] Trotter, *Coal, Class and Color*, 113.
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- [47] Huber, "Red Necks and Red Bandanas," 196, 207.
- [48] Keeney, "The Mind Guard System," 47-70.
- [49] Keeney, *The Road to Blair Mountain*, 68.
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Social Capital for Appalachia's Youth

**Allison L. Ricket, Jacqueline Yahn,
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Inside Appalachia is a people's history of social capital. For example, across decades in Kentucky's **Red River Gorge**, communities and climbers have progressed toward mutually beneficial relationships.^[1] Another example is multidisciplinary artist **Shaun Slifer**, whose museum work includes dusty pamphlets he salvaged in his study of the **Appalachian Movement Press**. For a decade (1969-1979) the press, located in Huntington, West Virginia, and run by a collective of workers, published and distributed literature focused on Appalachian identity and resistance to forms of regional exploitation.^[2] Yet another illustration is **Florence Reece's "Which Side Are You On?"** with lyrics that inspired coal mining families in Harlan County, Kentucky, to organize against unfair labor practices and violence in an effort to secure a living wage.^[3] Simplified, **social capital** is the acumen to access resources and networks that provide individuals and communities of people the ability to foster change or secure opportunity.^[4] Social capital has long existed in Appalachia, beginning with its historical role and moving toward the current ways social capital is being used to strengthen **community viability** (a community with sustainable economic and social infrastructure that affords a high standard of living for all its citizens) and individual opportunity. Inside Appalachia, how can a community create forms of social capital to work through dilemmas and strengthen quality of life for all its members?

A People's History of Social Capital in Appalachia

Contemporary Appalachia—the people and the place—has been shaped by the many uses of social capital across the region. At its best, social capital provides benefits that work in tandem to improve individual quality of life while enhancing a community’s viability.^[5] In the past, the mountains themselves dictated the necessity of social capital for community thriving: working the land, planting the land, and living in this mountainous region meant people had to rely on each other as neighbors to live and survive.^[6] Over the decades, Appalachian residents have persisted in generating this type of social capital to both resist economic downturn and build the profile of the region’s people and places.^[7] **Appalshop**, Appalachia’s flagship media, arts, and education center reflects this effort in its origin story, decades of achievements, and contemporary mission, which includes a focus on community-oriented storytelling.^[8]

Nevertheless, inside the region social capital has also been contentious, unfolding to yield privilege to local elites. Tensions develop within communities when one group gains power over systems such as county government, public education, and the local job sector in order to monopolize limited resources.^[9] Cynthia Duncan illustrates this phenomenon in her study of persistent poverty in a community situated within the Appalachian coal fields, identifying how familial networks controlled power dynamics within the community, particularly the schools.^[10]

Finally, leading thinkers on social capital recognize that at its worst, outside entities use their social capital to exploit a community’s resources, particularly their workforce and natural resources.^[11] This misuse of social capital looms like a band of ominous thunderstorms over Appalachian history. In the 1920s, for example, **Blair Mountain**, West Virginia, was the site of the largest labor uprising in United States history,^[12] but despite community efforts toward labor reform, many miners and local activists died; a hundred years later, Blair Mountain shows the damage wrought by **mountaintop removal**, a common mining practice in Eastern Kentucky and Southern West Virginia, starting in the late 20th century.^[13] In summation, Appalachia’s history is full of stories of how the region’s people have activated social capital since early settlement times—sometimes in the form of progress, at others as a means of resistance, and sometimes in conflict with their neighbors’ interests.

Disruptions to Social Capital Formation in Appalachia

What so many people “get wrong” about Appalachia is they believe there is a region-wide social capital deficit that is caused by Appalachians’ inability to realize the American dream—or what some call **upward mobility**.^[14] A case in point is J.D. Vance’s memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* or Ron Howard’s film adaptation of the book, which feature this worn out idea, and it should be retired. In Appalachia, like elsewhere in America, struggles with social capital arise not from lack of trying, but from unequal distribution of resources and structural inequalities.

A people’s history of the region shows that Appalachians have historically used social capital in an effort to sustain their local communities, while they have also contributed to building the United States into the nation we live in today.^[15] Since the **Civil War**, many communities in the region have played key roles in establishing and maintaining the nation’s energy, transportation, and corporate infrastructure.^[16] This advancement happened in the form of **natural resource extraction (coal, timber, oil and gas)**, with the help of the region’s labor force (mining, manufacturing, construction, and steelwork), and because of communities’ proximity to thoroughways, such as the **Ohio River**.^[17] For this reason major historical disruptions to the nation’s economy are felt acutely within Appalachian communities and come with costs to the inhabitants’ social capital.

While an exhaustive timeline of historical disruptions would fill a book, two examples provide keen illustrations. The first is the **deindustrialization** that unfurled across the United States beginning in the 1980s. Appalachia was home to many of the industries, such as steel and manufacturing, that began to shutter one after another, as companies moved their operations overseas or industries ceased to exist altogether.^[18] The second is the **opioid epidemic** that got its start when millions of pills were purposefully marketed to Appalachian communities with high rates of chronic disease linked to labor-intensive jobs, environmental degradation, and socioeconomic inequality.^[19] In each case the affected Appalachian communities experienced indefinite stress on social services as local need exceeded the system’s capacity. At the same time the community’s economy declined, threatening residents’ personal wellbeing. Appalachians did not cause deindustrialization nor did they lobby to bring **Purdue Pharma** to the

region. Still, during these times, Appalachian communities have experienced the consequences which have demanded the community's attention, depleted their resources, and strained networks. These events hamper the formation of social capital at both the individual and community levels, but unique assets within Appalachian communities provide the opportunity to rebuild community viability.

Appalachian Communities with Multiple Forms of Capital

First, Appalachia's people have a solid history of using social capital in diverse ways that have led to varied outcomes for their respective communities. Second, Appalachians have frequently experienced disruptions beyond their control that create barriers to accessing social capital. Multiple forms of **community capital** have occurred within Appalachian communities and have been leveraged to improve individual and collective social capital. Community capital includes natural resources (**natural capital**), culture and heritage, education and social organizations, community networks working toward a collective good, a democratic local government, strong local infrastructure (e.g., utilities, healthcare, emergency services), and opportunity for income security.^[20] Appalachians' historical relationship with social capital indicates that Appalachians frequently use their social capital in an effort to secure, protect, and build upon these forms of community wealth.

Inside Appalachia in the 21st century, the most pressing issue across the region is the ability to use social capital to secure community viability. In other words, Appalachians are concerned with the future sustainability of their communities.^[21] More importantly, Appalachians explain they are motivated to work toward securing this future because of the generational ties to family and friends, a deep attachment to Appalachia's landscape, and a belief that quality of life is based on both financial security and love for the community.^[22] Within contemporary trends in social capital and their contribution to Appalachians (the people) and Appalachia (the communities), this point is clear: social capital is often depicted as a personal asset, like money in a wallet. Therefore, schools and educational stakeholders often make the mistake of narrowly focusing on how individuals build social capital, overlooking the benefits of more widespread social capital in a community. Social capital is most valuable when it builds community

viability, therefore improving quality of life for all inhabitants. For example, Building Bridges to Careers is an organization in Appalachian Ohio working to build economic opportunity and quality of life by linking students to community networks that represent betterment of the region's land and people.

Contemporary Trends in Social Capital

Who an individual knows, their **social network**, connects them to resources and opportunities. Individuals rely on their social networks for intangible support such as advice, information, and socio-emotional support as well as tangible resources such as employment, housing options, and financial support.^[23] Any town or community contains people to call for advice, a piece of equipment to borrow, a recommendation for a babysitter, the best doctor to treat special needs. Job-seekers in a community may ask someone to “put in a good word” for them to leverage a hiring prospect in their direction. In fact, Julia F. Fisher and Daniel Fisher indicate that half of jobs are obtained through a personal connection.^[24] Opportunities accessed through social networks significantly impact the trajectory of an individual's life.

Social networks create access to opportunities for individuals. Research shows a more diverse, heterogeneous social network consisting of many **weak ties**, usually nonfamilial relationships or acquaintances, leads to an increased breadth of access to opportunities.^[25] Access to opportunities is critical for well-being outcomes, social mobility, and self-determination, but access to social capital, and therefore access to opportunities, is not distributed equally.^[26] Both income inequality and race greatly impact access to opportunities, as does level of education and geographic isolation. People from disadvantaged or marginalized backgrounds tend to have smaller, more redundant social networks, meaning their networks are limited to close family and friends who share backgrounds or know all the same people. This sort of **closed network** can limit access to opportunities outside the family network. In large part, networks are inherited and nurtured or constrained by the socio-cultural context in which a person lives. The difference between the networks, social capital, and therefore opportunities that an affluent child inherits from their family, and the networks, social capital, and subsequent opportunities a

poor child inherits from their family and socio-cultural context is called the **opportunity gap**.^[27]

People also use social capital in different ways. For some people, social capital is leveraged for social mobility; that is, a person's personal connections are used to gain admission to a top-tier college, land a competitive internship, find better job opportunities, pull recommendations for the most promising investment, or access the most suitable lawyer to help resolve a legal situation. For others, social capital is used to strengthen family and community ties as well as to create a sense of shared identity, responsibility, and belonging to a place. In this way, social capital sustains important cultural capital and collective community capital.^[28] Examples of social capital functioning in this way range from “**Famous Friends**” (2021) by contemporary country stars Chris Young and Kane Brown to **bell hooks's** *Appalachian Elegy* (2012). Regardless of the ways in which social capital is mobilized, opportunities created by social capital and the strength and number of social ties are important for quality of life and future building both on an individual and collective level.^[29]

Social capital affects a person's health, happiness, ability to stay in school and graduate, economic mobility, and overall well-being.^[30] Research in the health sciences shows that lack of social connection is as detrimental to physical health as smoking, and in U.S. counties such as those concentrated in central Appalachia, low social capital is linked both directly and indirectly to high levels of psychological distress.^[31] On the other hand, in places where social capital is high across the community, youth from all backgrounds benefit. Although other aspects of an individual's life and community context influence youth achievement and development, social capital—that is, social connectedness—seems the most important aspect. For example, in a statistical analysis holding constant factors traditionally associated with school achievement such as race, adult educational attainment, poverty, educational spending, teachers' salaries and class size, economic inequality, and existence of private schools in the area, social capital was the single most important predictor of state educational success.^[32] Said another way, even with other socio-economic inequities, the study showed a community's youth were able to overcome those challenges if social capital was high. Both individual and community social connectedness provide an important wrap-around supportive structure, especially for youth.

Christopher Holtkamp and Russell C. Weaver examined the relationship between social capital and economic well-being in Appalachia, finding a strong connection between Appalachian **place identity** and high social capital.^[33] Place identity is shared by members of a community that is shaped not just by socio-cultural factors but also by the physical landscape, the geography of a place—in this study, the **Appalachian Mountains**. Where communities demonstrated high levels of “a unique Appalachian identity” informed in part by attachment to place, the researchers found lower levels of economic distress.^[34] Place identity arises out of both “rootedness” to local and family relationships and relationship with nature.^[35] In Appalachia especially, social connections are often woven through and tied together with connections to the land. The geography of place not only shapes social capital but also becomes a form of social capital in and of itself, informing educational aspirations, residential aspirations, and employment choice.^[36] In places where people form bonds not only with fellow community members but also with the environment, a sense of “social insideness” contributes to **collective efficacy**, the ability of a community to take collective action toward change for the well-being of all.^[37]

Despite the bulk of research illustrating the benefits of connections of social capital on the lives of individuals and the lives of the community, research also points to declining social connectedness in the Appalachian region and beyond.^[38] Contributing to the decline of both formal and informal ties that form these important social networks are factors such as geographic isolation, economic necessity for both parents in a two-parent household to work, and privatization of leisure time. Overall, people are spending more time commuting to work, at work, and in their homes than they did in previous decades.^[39] This generational change equates to less time spent in civic spaces, volunteering, or nurturing social connections across the community.

Camille Busette and their colleagues show that most people form social connections in educational institutions or in the workplace.^[40] Schools, therefore, are consequential sites for building valuable social connections, especially for students with limited family networks or who are geographically isolated.^[41] When schools function as self-contained communities wherein student interactions are restricted to classroom teachers, administrators, and school staff, and the content of school focuses on “objective” academic knowledge divorced from local community and culture,

students' ability to grow a broad, diverse social network is limited.

[42] Because social capital is key for future thriving, opportunities for life choices, and social mobility, schools have an important role to play in providing access to social capital, building opportunities, and forming community connections.

P-12 Education and Social Capital

In the early years of formalized schooling in Appalachia, schools were shaped around community needs and geography. Small one-room schoolhouses operated in tandem with the religious leanings of the local community nestled in the hillsides, serving the immediate, surrounding geographical area. [43] Lack of flat land and reliable transportation infrastructure made larger schools impossible well into the 20th century, and for many families, the lack of access to school coupled with the need to have children as labor on the homestead meant many children received a grade-school education and no more. [44] Although education may have relegated to a necessary second priority in Appalachia, schools were tied closely to the community culture and the cycles of the land. [45] However, as industry grew in the United States at the turn of the century and thinkers like **Horace Mann** argued for standardized, compulsory, free education for all Americans, the industrial model of public education became popular in urban areas, modeled from Adam Smith's pin factory. In this model, the primary concern was not education for the imparting of community values and skills but education to prepare workers for the factories: places run by bells, segmented roles, and repetitive work done over and over all day long. Education in the industrial model was meant to feed the industrial machine with standardized, mostly literate products—that is, people—to fill the lines of the factory with competent workers. [46] Education shifted in focus and purpose away from supporting the intradependence of communal life where people are educated for the common good. With the rise of industry and the industrial model of school, education narrowed to focus on the competitive individual and what they can personally wrest from life and the market, no matter the cost. [47]

Even until the 1970s, rural places in Appalachia resisted state and federal control of schools. As Constance Elam says in her overview of education in Kentucky, “Settling into wealth, comfort, and the benefits of a

regulated society was not the mountaineer dream or preference.”^[48] Education scholars called for reform in Appalachian schools, urging for more technical training, better quality teachers, and increased adult education.^[49] Some schools, like the settlement schools and folk schools, intended to combine outside pedagogy with local culture and community services to create schools tied both to the community and to advancing practices in education. Notably, some of these settlement and folk schools still operate today with progressive models serving the community and the individual needs of students.

^[50] Funding mechanisms for public education favored urban and suburban areas, providing more money per pupil to schools in densely populated areas and areas with high property taxes, a disparity that continues in many Appalachian states to this day.

Federal reports in the 1980s such as *A Nation At Risk* that led to the 2002 policy that followed, **No Child Left Behind** (NCLB), ushered in an era of centralized curriculum and accountability measures tied to school funding, local districts in Appalachia and beyond have shifted curriculum and coursework to match the content and structure of standardized testing.

^[51] Teachers were encouraged to “teach to the test,” and to ensure students would pass the end-of-year tests, districts eliminated un-tested subjects such as shop class and art along with field trips and projects.^[52] The emphasis on accountability and testing was renewed by the Obama-era Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, a policy meant to improve teacher quality and encourage **college readiness** for all students. Since *A Nation At Risk*, districts in Appalachia echoed the “**college for all**” mantra, which had ripple effects across the region, especially in rural areas and areas without institutions of higher education nearby. The process of centralization and bureaucratizing rural schools that served to make rural schools “outposts of the national culture” shifted the focus away from school as a connecting force in the local community to school as promoter of metropolitan versions of progress.^[53]

In large part as a result of centralized education standards and curriculum, classrooms became increasingly separated from the local community. This divide encouraged distrust of **higher education** in rural areas, where parents saw school as encouraging students to leave the area to pursue higher education as the only way to a bright, successful future.^[54] This practice of **educating out**, where education is constructed and perceived as preparing students to leave, is considered to be a major contributing factor to

outmigration of rural youth and rural decline.^[55] Declining social capital both influences outmigration, also referred to as “brain drain,” and compounds the loss of social capital in rural communities. As community networks weaken and the content of schools fails to connect to the local community, students see fewer examples of options for a future in their hometowns.^[56] Additionally, collective social capital is lost as “achievers” leave small towns, taking with them their wider social connections, savvy, and institutional knowledge.^[57] As **Elizabeth Catte** says in *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* (2018), “You might think our biggest export is coal, but actually it’s people.”^[58]

On the other hand, the social capital created by strong familial, community, and place bonds in some places in Appalachia leads students to find a way to stay, or if they must, to leave for post-secondary education, then return home with new skills and networks to contribute.^[59] For some Appalachian and rural families, place attachment and strong social bonds influence their decisions to turn down job opportunities that would grant them economic mobility, but take them away from their land and families.^[60] Strong bonds with both the community and the physical land alongside students’ perceptions of job opportunities in the area shape students’ decisions to stay or remain in their home communities. In one study of rural Pennsylvania youth, researchers found that teens who value the natural environment and the outdoor recreation possibilities that a clean and protected environment affords were more likely to plan to stay in their rural communities.^[61] For these families and their youth, social capital is not just a means toward increased financial capital, it is a marker of quality of life. For suburban and urban youth, social capital is closely tied with social mobility and financial capital. However, studies indicate that for rural youth, natural capital and social capital are more closely linked, creating a tapestry of identity, purpose, and community satisfaction.^[62] By emphasizing place-based learning and incorporating community relationships in education, schools could further nurture the unique social capital of students in Appalachia.

Whether youth decide to stay or leave, social capital built into schools in large part provides students exposure and access to opportunities to build their futures. Participation in school clubs and activities is another way students build social bonds and leverage those bonds for future opportunities.

Participation in extracurricular activities provides students with access to adult mentors acting as coaches, club advisors, and facilitators. While student engagement in these smaller school networks has shown to increase student achievement, adult mentors in extracurricular activities who form positive relationships with students can also serve as bridges to additional connections, opportunities, and support for students in addition to promoting prosocial behaviors.[\[63\]](#)

However, extracurricular participation in schools is dwindling, even before the **COVID-19 pandemic**. Contributing to the decline in extracurricular activities are policies that require students to pay a fee to join a school team or club. In cash-strapped schools, cost for coaches, facility rentals, uniforms, and even transportation are passed on to families in the form of pay-to-play fees, which represent a barrier to access for students, especially disadvantaged students. Another barrier to participation, especially for rural Appalachian schools, is the sheer volume of time it takes to travel to “away” extracurricular competitions. Because of geographic isolation and fraught transportation infrastructure in the hills and hollers, many students who are needed at home for care of younger siblings cannot participate in activities that would give them access to critical network building opportunities.

School Policy Shifts to Building Connections

Schools are important sites for building social capital that construct future life paths and play an important role in bridging the opportunity gap and therefore what is called the **achievement gap**. The Coleman Report in 1964 introduced the idea of the achievement gap into mainstream discourse. This report, commissioned by Congress as part of the **Civil Rights Act**, found a gap between White and Black student achievement on math and English test scores and educational attainment. Although much focus was placed on school resources, the report found that school resources were not the main contributing factor to the achievement gap. Family background, community and neighborhood, in addition to peer group influence, what is now understood as social capital, were found to be the main factors shaping the widening and persistent achievement gap in the United States.[\[64\]](#) Subsequent

research confirmed these findings, explaining that affluent parents are able to supply their children with time, resources, and extra programming—i.e., opportunities—for learning earlier and more often than poor parents. Later research illustrated that family income and community affluence, regardless of race, results in student achievement gaps.^[65]

The achievement gap and the opportunity gap are inextricably tied, so much so that organizations such as **Teach for America** have eschewed the term achievement gap and replaced it with opportunity gap.^[66] The opportunities afforded students to learn and to grow their interests and potential are largely informed by social capital. The social networks of family and community provide the opportunities for students to engage with experts and programs that can develop their talent and interests or help them discover new ones. Furthermore, access to adults with institutional knowledge, or **savvy**, is another key to academic achievement.^[67] Savvy is the knowledge of how to navigate formal, sometimes large, bureaucratic institutions that are gatekeepers of opportunity such as institutions of higher learning and federal support agencies. When students lack the social capital to build the savvy to navigate these institutions, the opportunities are much more difficult, if not impossible to seize.^[68]

Because of the increasing attention to social capital and the opportunity gap, public policy has shifted to address ways to increase youth engagement with mentors, experiential learning, and work-based learning.^[69] Learning opportunities that engage community and business partners with students either in the classroom or in the workplace are a way to address the “critical skills shortage.”^[70] While technical skills needed by business and industry evolve quickly with advances in technology, a siloed school system that lacks communication and engagement with business and industry lags behind the world of work, so the skills students develop by graduation and the skills employers need are gravely mismatched, further limiting their opportunities for the future.^[71]

Multiple initiatives at the state, federal, and regional level attempt to address the critical skills shortage, including increasing spending in **Career Technical Education** (CTE) and targeted philanthropic efforts through organizations such as the **Appalachian Regional Commission** (ARC) to address workforce development, economic development, and education through funding targeted toward building social capital in Appalachia.

[72] Because of Appalachia's unique relationship with natural capital as a creator and foundation for social capital and historic relationship with resistance and collective action, organizations in Appalachia are taking a place-based approach to address the opportunity gap. [73] Aligning with child development, the **community and career connected learning** system deeply integrates community members into formal and informal education spaces, allowing students to explore and discover facets of the community not easily accessed via their families. [74]

Community and Career Connected Learning

Community and career connected learning is a learning system integrating community partnerships and career awareness into experiential, place-based learning. [75] This system is an overarching framework drawing together disparate approaches seeking the same goal: to strengthen the social fabric of communities to support both learners and the entire community. As an approach to learning, community and career connected learning emphasizes the importance of intentionally involving local community, business, and industry as active participants in the process of schooling. In this learning system, students learn from community members in both formal and informal spaces, in ways both outside of and connected to school objectives such as grades or graduation. Community and career connected learning refers to the activities and programs that are implemented with the intent to provide opportunities to explore, learn about, and engage with the local community and career fields. Critical facets of community and career connected learning include the following:

0. Learning extends to audiences and experiences beyond the classroom and the teacher; [76]
0. Students participate in an active learning process that involves a community member(s) (e.g., businessperson, staff from community organization, government official) also as an active participant; [77]
0. Learning incorporates assets from the local community, including its land and culture; [78]
0. Learning, in both formal and informal school spaces, includes a continuum of experiences from exploration to extended immersion, connected to careers and occupations. [79]

Examples of community and career connected learning at the program level include, but are not limited to, job shadowing, internships, mentoring, tours of local businesses, teacher externships, design challenges, career pathways, career fairs and panels, entrepreneurship clubs, and makerspace opportunities. At the classroom level, community and career connected learning includes inviting community experts to participate in classroom instruction and curriculum design, engaging business and community organizations in problem-based or project-based learning, providing students the opportunity to showcase learning to audiences of community members via presentations or participation at local meetings, outdoor education, and targeted field trips. A key differentiation between community and career connected learning and other instructional practices is the level of authenticity—that is, none of the activities are simulations. They are real, concrete interactions with local community assets that are necessarily scaffolded by the adults for students’ success at any level. Additionally, the emergence of **community schools** in rural places in Appalachia, schools providing easy access to wrap-around services—e.g., healthcare, dental care, laundry services, food pantry services through inter-agency partnerships on the school campus—dovetails with the spirit of community and career connected learning but is a separate concept. The goal of community and career connected learning is multifaceted: to allow developing students to gain opportunities so that they may explore and build connections with their community and careers within that community.^[80]

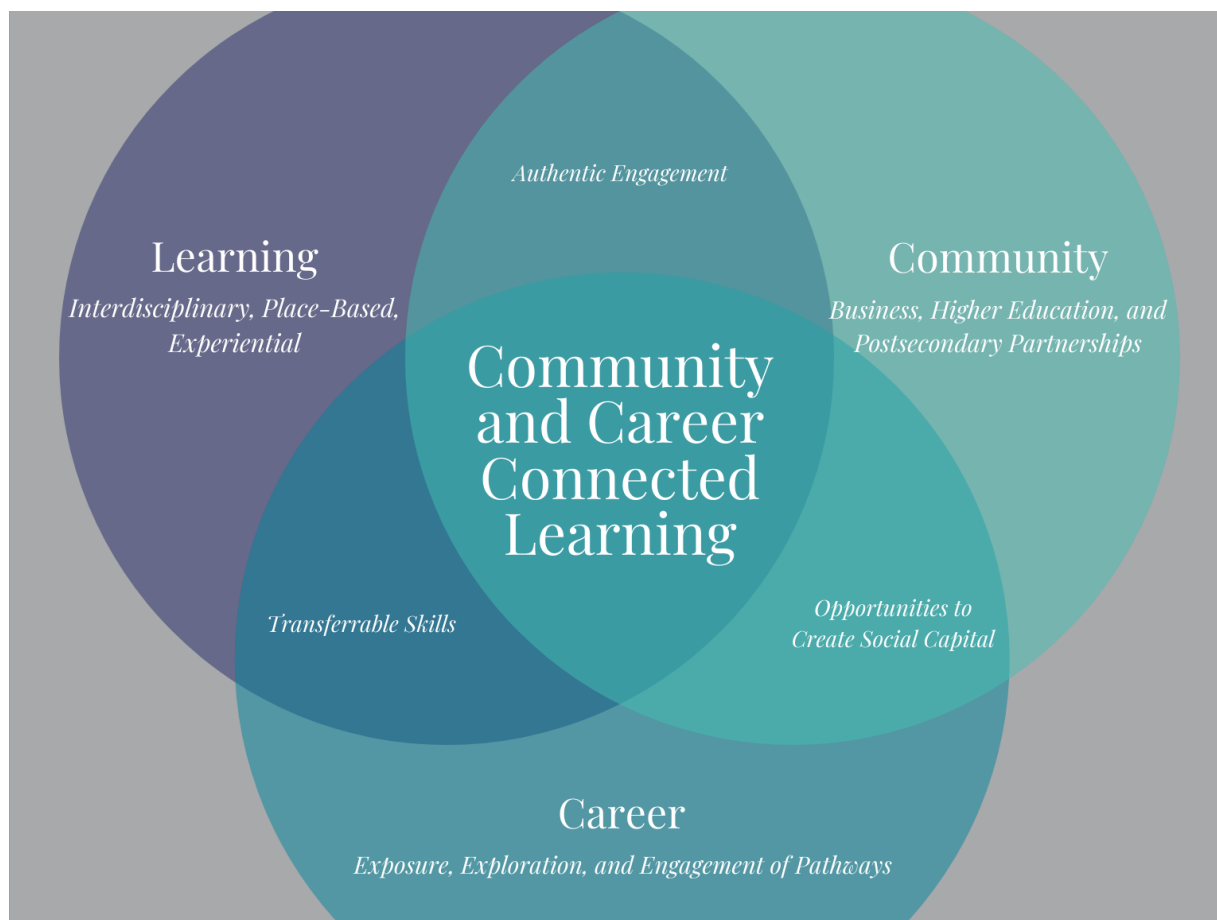


Figure 1. Multifaceted aspects of community and career connected learning.

The many terms that aim to capture the experience of students learning about, experimenting with, and deeply engaging with the community and career fields have caused considerable confusion among stakeholders and practitioners alike. Prolonged, in-depth learning experiences in a particular job or field attached to credentialing, graduation, or CTE pathway is referred to as “work-based learning, workplace learning, or work-integrated learning.”^[81] Other terms incorporating some of the explorative and connective process of community and career connected learning include service learning, connected learning, career-connected learning, linked learning, community-engaged teaching, and community connected learning.^[82] The success of education efforts integrating career knowledge and experiential learning into the learning experience relies on the effective communication and partnership of the stakeholders of local business, industry, and community organizations. Therefore, community and career connected learning is used as an umbrella term for the entire continuum of experiences, subsuming the aforementioned specific labels, programs, and activities.

An example of a vanguard organization using the community and career connected learning approach to address the opportunity gap and create critical social infrastructure in communities is the Building Bridges to Careers (BB2C) in Southeastern Ohio.

Case Study #1: BB2C Network, Southeastern Ohio

Building Bridges to Careers (BB2C) is a nonprofit organization in Appalachian Ohio that fosters student, business, and civic relationships to inspire student career choices through experience, entrepreneurship, and education.^[83] Through a comprehensive community engagement approach, BB2C involves local businesses and community members in programming that provides community and career connected learning to students. BB2C is an intermediary organization: an organization operating at the boundaries of other organizations and systems, enabling cross-sector relationships for collaboration and coordinated action.^[84] Acting as the connective tissue between sector leaders, building social capital and collective action, BB2C creates school-community-business partnerships that simultaneously impact and benefit students, schools, families, community organizations, businesses, and the wider socio-political spheres.

The catalyst for developing BB2C was the realization that one or two chance opportunities in school to learn about economic and occupational pathways was not enough to achieve college and career readiness for students. In response to lack of readiness and to community-wide issues of youth hopelessness and disengagement, lack of a qualified workforce, youth outmigration, and industrial decline, a cross-sector group of educators, businesspeople, government agency leaders, and community members convened to develop a systematic solution to these community-wide problems. The group realized the need for increasing both students' social capital and strengthening community social capital could be an innovative lever for change.

Through convening groups of people across community sectors, BB2C acts as a connector stewarding the creation of community and career connected learning opportunities for students in Appalachian communities using an asset approach to development. BB2C roots development solutions in education or makes contingent the involvement of students, the next generation of community members, workers, and citizens. BB2C's

organization shows that strengthening collective social capital leads to “successful students, strong businesses” and, ultimately, “prosperous communities.”^[85]

BB2C’s community and career connected programs spanning the Appalachian Ohio region include direct, experiential learning such as job shadowing, high school internships, mentoring, and curriculum that brings local community members into the classroom for problem-based learning.^[86] Additional programs foster students’ entrepreneurial mindset and provide hands-on application of academic learning. BB2C’s programming places the student as the ultimate beneficiary, but one key aspect of BB2C’s approach works to build the individual and collective social capital of adults in the community as well. For example, BB2C facilitates K-12 educators in building knowledge of local career opportunities, the changing nature of skills needed for success in local businesses, and the wide array of assets in the community. By building teachers’ connections to the wider community through professional development and educator-inclusive networking events, teachers begin to have knowledge of and direct contact with opportunities and resources they can then connect to students. Without building the social capital of teachers, an important link is missed in trying to build the social connectedness of students.

Community and career connected learning risks being pigeonholed in the realm of CTE courses or only for students who struggle academically in school.^[87] Limiting community and career connected learning to one population of students or one type of schooling experience will only further exacerbate the opportunity gap and limit community efficacy. However, BB2C works diligently with school districts and organizations to encourage community and career connected learning for all students in all classrooms.

Figure 2 illustrates the work of BB2C and its impact on social capital, and it represents a student’s network. As a student makes decisions about their future, they look to their networks for advice, resources, connections, and possibilities.^[88] Some students, as in this representation, might have a limited family network where all family members work in the same occupation or all know the same people. The student may have access to deep content area knowledge in their school network, but largely see only adults doing the work of school, unconnected to outside influences. Some students may have an additional network via participation in a faith-based organization or outside

club, and some students may have even smaller networks than the one pictured here.

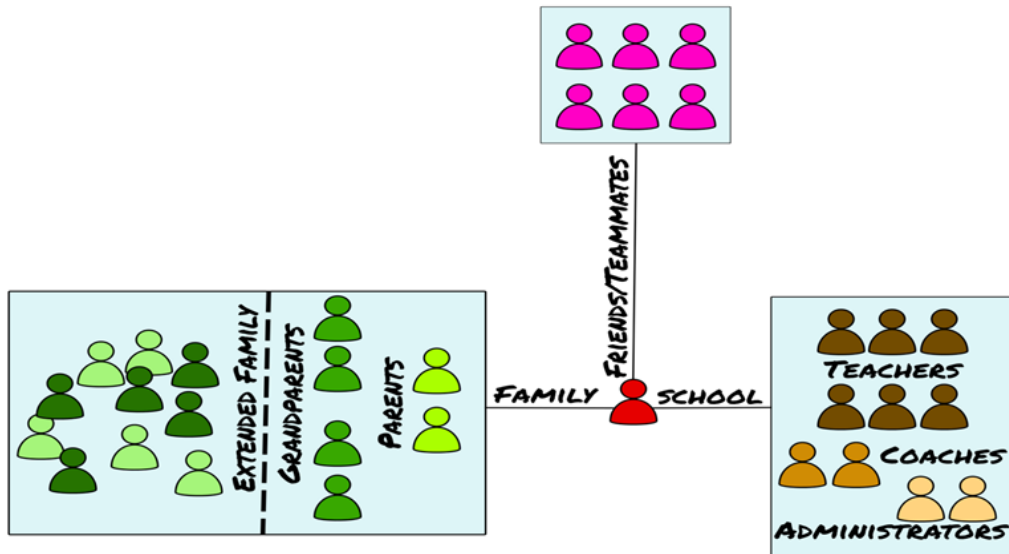


Figure 2. A student's network of school and family connections.

Through community and career connected learning, the student's network is exponentially expanded. First, the student's school network is connected with business and adults in the community who come into the classroom as speakers, problem-based learning catalysts, mentors. In other activities, the student is taken out into the community through school-sponsored experiences such as service learning, tours to businesses, job shadowing, and internships for school credit. These efforts afford the student multiple points of access to adults in the local community throughout the school day. Additionally, with an intermediary organization like BB2C, the student can be connected directly to more opportunities to intentionally engage with business and community members, which further increases their social capital.

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The Great Society in the Mountains:

Shaping Appalachia through the 1960s and Beyond

Paolo D'Amato

Appalachian poverty made national news through the late 1950s and early 1960s, becoming a public face of federal anti-poverty efforts. Many policymakers subscribed to popular images of Appalachia as an economic and cultural backwater that should be developed and assimilated into mainstream America. They hoped to confront poverty in the “other America” without changing the institutional and economic structures that had abused the region for decades.^[1] The presidential administrations of both **John F. Kennedy** and **Lyndon B. Johnson** promised government-sponsored interventions and opportunities to distressed Appalachian regions, and while varied programs addressed national and Appalachian impoverishment, their design reflected post-war economic growth theories and theories of human capital. These policies focused around “modernization” and industrial development, meaning that legislation would encourage the expansion of industry and commercial ties to the rest of the nation.^[2] In many ways, the results of the 1960s would be a continuation of those pursuits. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson built their campaigns and administrations around helping the impoverished regions of the United States, and both focused special efforts on Appalachia.

The national anti-poverty initiative gave rise to grassroots anti-poverty organizing in the region by providing implicit and explicit structures to align their grievances with the result of shaping the region for decades to come. Cooperation between national planners and local residents varied wildly between anti-poverty organizations; while some groups embraced cooperation with grassroots efforts to varying success, others bitterly resisted the voices of the rural poor in the hollers and preferred cooperation with the political elite in more urban county seats. National planners of the **War on Poverty**—officially declared by President Johnson in Martin County, Kentucky, on January 8, 1964—weren't sure if local people would assist anti-poverty efforts, and they neither publicly named any local people nor discussed how they would be involved. Appalachians, however, responded to national developments by pressing incoming organizations for their voices to be heard. Regional elites happily cooperated, as these efforts largely fit into their previous political agendas so long as they retained control of incoming benefits. By the 1960s, local elites in county governments had dominated political and economic markets in Kentucky for over a century. These county politicians had enormous power to influence the lives of locals, as the courts functioned as a centerpiece of Kentucky life. Court officials were mostly rich mine owners and merchants who used the position to pursue beneficial policies for themselves.

Decades of difficulty shaped federal interest in the Appalachian region from the 1930s into the 1970s. The **Great Depression** collapsed the coal industry, and with the **New Deal** public assistance as the miners' only replacement, Appalachia became one of the most impoverished regions in the nation. Soon **World War II** preparations saw an industry resurgence as coal prices rose, giving hope through government expenditure. ^[3] Similar patterns to the Great Depression collapse, however, emerged after World War II came to a close as market and employment expansions were followed by industry overexpansion. After the war ended, instability and competition drove vulnerability even higher for Appalachian residents, as smaller mines relied on lower wages and being non-union to compete with larger corporations. ^[4] By 1948, the end of the war meant that market demand for coal had leveled off. The mass of smaller “truck mines” that relied on immediate sale, no unions, and early mechanization collapsed quickly, leaving those Appalachians tied to the industry once more without employment.

[5] Thousands of miners were displaced as smaller Southern coal operators were forced to sell, close, or mechanize. At the end of World War II, the Appalachian region had employed 475,000 miners. By 1960, that number was halved, and lowered again to 107,000 by 1970. [6]

At the end of the 1950s, even protests like the **Roving Pickets** movement, a militant movement of miners who attempted to shut down non-union mines who refused to sign **union** contracts, failed to reverse trends. Labor violence met ever increasing violence from business hired guns and their own local legal systems alike. [7] Appalachians had responded to union and employment shrinkage with grassroots protest, but their protest failed to reverse the trends of the 1950s. The **United Mine Workers Association's** Welfare and Retirement Fund, established in 1946, had begun to decrease benefits in response to union turmoil and declining membership. Miners and widows throughout Appalachia protested, calling on the federal government to pressure the union into fulfilling its responsibilities and rallying at mines that defaulted on union payments to ensure better lives.

[8] Labor in Appalachia, however, had met its decline with the industries it relied on. By 1960, over six decades of organizing had helped mitigate the human impact of coal but left massive problems once coal declined. Little had replaced declining mining jobs, forcing families into migration away from ancestral lands or destitution. Decades of environmental damage from **coal** and **timber** extraction left a scarred landscape, even more so with the evolving practice of **surface mining** to further cheapen coal production in the 1950s. Flooding devastated central Appalachia in 1957, [9] and signs of environmental and human recovery were few. A federal assessment blamed the floods on strip mining and poor logging practices. [10] The region had been environmentally damaged to the point of social distress, and both were becoming increasingly visible to residents and outside eyes alike.

The region captured national attention in the early 1960s, much due to the floods shining light on regional issues. During the 1960 presidential primary election season, presidential hopeful **Kennedy** made “depressed areas” a major issue, making a historic trip through West Virginia that helped further center Kennedy’s ideas on rural needs as part of his future administration. [11] With Kennedy’s victory and subsequent presidency (1961-1963), Appalachian poverty became a national concern. Although

Kennedy's "depressed areas" technically had no regional target, he clearly imagined Appalachia. Appalachia was indeed "depressed" by all metrics used by the incoming administration, with areas of eastern Kentucky having one in three workers unemployed.^[12] Decades of improperly taxed coal and other industries left little infrastructure to support rural residents or to alleviate environmental issues. Letcher County lawyer and environmentalist **Harry M. Caudill** stated, "Much of the county's total land surface has been stripped of vegetation and reduced to jumbles of stone and gulling spoil-banks," in his book *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*.^[13] The environment had been scarred, and the natural and social problems resulting from those scars were visibly increasing in intensity. Caudill, alongside other local politicians and elites, called for the federal government to take action and alleviate the region's plights. Thus, the Kennedy administration instituted two separate acts to address regions like Appalachia. Those were the Area Redevelopment Act (1961), which created the **Area Redevelopment Administration (ARA)** that focused on job creation, and the Public Works Acceleration Act (1962), which was designed to jump-start flagging infrastructure in depressed regions.

The ARA was an inviting prospect, with an "appealing elegance" that promised a neat cooperation between business expertise and local community planning^[14]—a perfect cycle of government and the private sector, leading to jobs. However, an assumption underlaid the ARA's creation. The act assumed that private sector jobs and benefits to business would lead to community uplift, when those same factors of mono-industrial growth and shrinkage were what led to the region's volatile difficulties in the first place. Predictably, ARA Overall Economic Development plans drawn up by local business and political figures "increased development of coal and timber resources" while only adding recreation and tourism as new means of economic diversification.^[15] The ARA made little meaningful progress in depressed areas. Kennedy and local leaders alike grew sick of the group's limited positive impacts, beginning to phase it out in less than two years. The ARA continued to endorse tourism in Appalachia, with few other proposed alternatives, until its demise in 1965. Economic development under Kennedy, with its emphasis on the private sector and local leadership, faltered quickly with little to show for itself as it failed to meaningfully address how the region had become impoverished in the first place. His

other legislative piece, the Public Works Acceleration Act, similarly failed to address the simultaneous political and environmental issues facing the region.

In **Central Appalachia**, industrial and municipal pollution overwhelmed nearby rivers' ability to absorb waste and visibly degraded the region's waters. The North Fork of the Kentucky River, one of the same rivers devastated by the 1957 flood, was called a "fuming sump" due to the nearly black waters filled with acid mine drainage and under-treated sewage.

[16] Beyond surface waters, powerful explosives from mining operations threatened to crack the aquifers that nearly sixty percent of southeastern Kentucky residents relied on for water. These cracks could cause wells to run dry or allow pollutants to enter these aquifers, threatening the lives of residents who relied on them daily. The phrase "water—you have to drink it with a fork," may sound hyperbolic, but it was close to the truth for some in Central Appalachia who lived with water damaged from decades of industrial waste and population growth. [17] The health risks of this water pollution were numerous. When ingested through waters polluted by industry, common chemical pollutants can cause cancer, genetic mutations, infant death, fetal damage, and organ damage. [18] These towns, however, were ill equipped to provide those services. Trapped by a need for clean water and an inability to procure it, both of which were shaped by coal and timbering, municipalities looked to the state and federal governments for assistance.

President Kennedy was an advocate of public works spending. The Kennedy administration pushed through H.R. 6441, better known as the **Public Works Acceleration Act (PWAA)** of 1962. The act was intended to combat unemployment and economic recession, similar to the ARA. However, the PWAA sought to combat regional depression via increased public works spending as a countercyclical measure. The act was designed to counteract recessions by boosting employment and domestic spending via short-term funding of public works projects. The PWAA covered a wide range of state and local public works projects, and the organization considered highway facilities, educational facilities, residential buildings, sewage facilities, and water supply systems for these funding programs. Water and sewage were not the only public works under this act but offered essential means to bring federal grants to high unemployment communities like those in eastern Kentucky. Proposed improvements whose planning was

nearly completed and proposed near immediate benefits, known as “shovel-ready” improvements, would be given the most consideration under the act to ensure they were quickly funded and completed. [\[19\]](#)

Local areas competed to propose quick and easily completable improvements to entice federal spending. This process was facilitated by state representatives like **Carl D. Perkins**, representative of Kentucky’s majority Appalachian—and now defunct—7th district, who were happy to secure more significant investment into their districts by helping municipal constituents cooperate with federal agencies for approval. As a result, eastern Kentucky communities saw significantly increased grants, but also greater costs to cover local contributions under the PWAA. The total grant funding under the PWAA for sixty-four waterworks projects in Kentucky was \$10,006,121.92, but construction costs for projects totaled \$17,497,550.93.

[\[20\]](#) Many of those projects in eastern Kentucky qualified for the maximum federal share, but that could leave small local governments with tens of thousands of dollars—or even more—in costs to bear. Those costs fell to residents to repay, residents who could ill afford the additional costs they were being asked to pay to revive their region. Moreover, financial costs weren’t the only sacrifices asked of them.

The power disparities within the region became even more prevalent through Kennedy’s anti-poverty efforts. Much of the development focused on private industry and local elites, the same two groups that had spent decades constructing the 1960s central Appalachia seen through nationally known books like Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* (1962) and Harry M. Caudill’s *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s (1963). Little encapsulates these disparities within the region better than the contention over building **Carr Fork Reservoir** in southeastern Kentucky. While flooding historically has been a common occurrence for the region, decades of timbering and mining made floods ever more dangerous. The 1957 flood devastated Hazard, Kentucky, destroying more than 300 residences and 180 commercial buildings and killing six people. Total damages were estimated at around \$4.5 million. [\[21\]](#) For the nearly 6,000 citizens of Hazard, the dam promised safety, economic development, and expansion. [\[22\]](#) So long as they could be protected from “natural” devastation, the area could attract small and large businesses, catching up to the rest of the nation. The Carr Fork Reservoir

was planned to flood approximately 1,120 acres in the Knott County area, promising flood control and recreational tourism for urban centers like Hazard and Hindman. There was one problem, however. The **Carr Creek** community was “thickly populated.”^[23] Protecting Hazard from further flooding required flooding the lands and displacing hundreds of people in rural Knott County.

The federal government prioritized the visions of growth in Hazard, authorizing the dam in October 1962 to provide flood control, tourism, and increased municipal water supply to the city. Thus began the fifteen-year process of construction and **displacement**, much of it by the forceful **policy** of **eminent domain**, for a single dam. What the dam did not do was address why the land needed that protection. Hazard represented an Appalachian urban environment, at once an economic beneficiary and environmental victim of strip mining, who pushed to keep the disease and cure the symptoms by sacrificing their rural neighbors through urban favoring government infrastructural policies. The ARA, PWAA, and other massive legislative and physical projects under Kennedy’s administration shared a similar theme. Kennedy’s policies saw great changes in **infrastructure**, but little **structural change** to the social and political formations that molded the region’s needs. The War on Poverty, however, sought to differentiate itself from prior policies, continuing the spirit of Kennedy’s dedication while not replicating its disappointments.

Johnson’s War on Poverty mainly centered on the **Economic Opportunity Act of 1964**, which represented Johnson’s view of the entire directive and his differences from Kennedy’s administration. The act’s opening declaration of purpose stated that the War on Poverty would “eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty” through “opening to everyone the opportunity for education and training.” The act created numerous programs, most importantly the Job Corps in Title I and the Community Action Program in Title II, that revolved around increasing the permanent capacity of individuals. Giving opportunities to the impoverished while avoiding simply “handing out” benefits was crucial to many supporters of the act, as Johnson and others believed that poverty was born out of an “impoverishment of opportunity.” Johnson held a distaste for “welfarism” and **Sargent Shriver**, Johnson’s appointee for program planning, was explicitly told “no doles.”^[24] Unlike under Kennedy, however, the federal

government would be providing these opportunities, not private industry. Thus, the Economic Opportunity Act established the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to lead and shape a diverse set of programs, creating systems for government-provided “opportunities.”

The many programs of the Office of Economic Opportunity, however, held differing interpretations of a phrase in the Economic Opportunity Act, “maximum feasible participation of the residents.”^[25] Johnson saw the Economic Opportunity Act as delivering job training and necessary services without intruding on local elites or social **welfare** agencies. However, many others in Johnson’s administration, including the later director of the Community Action Program Fred O’Reilly Hayes, saw the phrase as a federal endorsement of politically organizing the poor to press their needs on local political figures. While Kennedy’s anti-poverty efforts held little risk to embedded political structures, Johnson’s had radical potential based on interpretations of this one phrase. The differing views of anti-poverty planning led to conflicts between local governments and anti-poverty programs and within the OEO itself. The Community Action Program potentially empowered the poor via a number of **community action agencies** that were led by locals. Veteran community organizers and civil rights activists gained many of these local leadership positions across the nation, using federal grants for political empowerment of disadvantaged groups.

Another OEO program, **Volunteers in Service to America** (VISTA), similarly impacted local politics across the nation, as the program helped fight against local housing exploitation and educate individuals on the programs and resources available to them outside the control of local political powerhouses. Rather than focusing on an impoverishment of opportunity through existing local power structures, VISTA and the community action agencies held the potential to destabilize local power structures and give political power to new groups through the phrase “maximum feasible participation.” Due to their challenge to local authority, the programs faced heavy resistance from local leadership. President Johnson also quickly backed away from the more progressive side of the Office of Economic Opportunity, stating, “To hell with community action.” The War on Poverty split very early on into the two different interpretations of “maximum feasible participation” seen in Johnson’s impoverishment of

opportunity that worked with local leadership and VISTA's direct political involvement of the poor.[\[26\]](#)

While committed to anti-poverty measures at large, Johnson's beliefs in the methods of the liberal state were more of a call to previous New Deal styles of liberal reform. His approach to anti-poverty attempted to revive and update New Deal era policies that emphasized the obligations of citizens to aid one another, through government mediation, while contributing through work to the "greater good of society."[\[27\]](#) Similarly to his predecessor, President Kennedy, Johnson did not foresee his anti-poverty policies as a means of addressing issues of structural inequalities that prevented equal access to resources. Johnson and many others involved with the War on Poverty advocated for policies on job training and education alongside local leadership, or a "trickle down" method of development similar to the ARC's and ARA's methods where a solid base for economic benefit would be created through structural improvements in areas of interest to local leadership.[\[28\]](#) Others involved with the War on Poverty presented an understanding of the War on Poverty focusing on the other interpretation of the term "maximum feasible participation," making the politicization of the poor a firm goal for their programs and saw the local leadership as creating the structural inequalities that kept groups dispossessed and impoverished.[\[29\]](#)

The partnerships between the Appalachian Volunteers (AV) and VISTA, more so than other anti-poverty organizations, were the most deeply involved with local organizing. AV and VISTA workers originally came to Appalachia with the same top-down approaches as previous anti-poverty efforts, working directly with county governance or educational projects. However, in the region they found locals already pushing for community change. Their interactions with the Appalachian grassroots groups slowly altered the missions toward structural change and assisting local organizations rather than the top-down approaches of their peer organizations. By listening to local organizers, they began to take on widely varied issues and understand the complex relationships between poverty, local power structures, and environmental destruction.[\[30\]](#) AV, in particular, became a more politically aggressive organization through their local participation, mainly due to resistance from local politics. AV members were "determined to make the Appalachian poor more aware of their capacity for

‘local political participation.’”^[31] They organized community organizations through local meetings designed to challenge county power structures, which they viewed as dominated by the coal industry. These directly contrasted the Community Action Programs in Appalachia, which—despite their radical potential—preferred to involve local political figures as representatives for local needs. AV and VISTA formed a radical arm of the War on Poverty in the region that involved itself with grassroots organization.

Faced with a War on Poverty that generally promised much but gave little voice to Appalachian poor, locals used AV and VISTAs to free themselves from local political structures when organizing. The backgrounds of Appalachian men and women in labor movements and community work, especially Appalachian women, provided **lived experience** in social organizing and a keen understanding of social welfare.^[32] Local political control, however, kept this lived experience constrained. AV members were not wrong in identifying that. In a depressed area, control over livelihoods equated to control over humans. An outside organization’s ability to provide livelihoods enabled organizing when locals ran afoul of elites. **Edith Easterling**, for example, lost her job as a school cook for her involvement with the Appalachian Volunteers; the group hired her directly as an intern, freeing her to become a lynchpin of organizing for the entire **Marrowbone Creek** area of Pike County.^[33]

Welfare rights became an organizing platform for local activism initially based on civil rights activism. Black women in Louisville, Kentucky, joined a nationwide welfare rights protest on June 30, 1966, with the **National Welfare Rights Organization** (NWRO) forming in 1967. Edith Easterling invited representatives from NWRO to Marrowbone Creek a year later, starting welfare rights groups all over the Appalachian South that brought local groups into statewide coalitions to fight for public assistance.

^[34] Appalachian members of this broader movement brought their expansive understanding of welfare outside of media stereotypes of welfare meaning **Aid to Families with Dependent Children**, including discussions of health care, food stamps, and black lung benefits. These local welfare rights groups organized thanks to local community networks creating incorporated organizations through cooperation with VISTA and AV. Despite that, Appalachian welfare rights groups like **Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization** (EKWRO) were regionally specific and locally led. Local

women formed the organizing backbone of the organization, like many others nationwide, and a Floyd County woman named **Eula Hall** led the organization herself.^[35] While state and national connections from VISTA and AV were invaluable for local movements, similar to UMWA organizers in the 1920s and 1930s, local residents spearheaded grassroots anti-poverty campaigns like EKWRO that benefited their rural Appalachian regions. Regardless of whether sympathetic national groups or local activism were more critical, their close ties gave rise to powerful anti-poverty movements in Appalachia.

The close ties of local activists and AV, however, meant that the region's anti-poverty movements were just as vulnerable as they were powerful. Changes in state and national leadership constrained the entire War on Poverty. President Johnson may have backed away from the progressive side of the War on Poverty, but it was never fully disavowed under his presidency. The hope for "community action" remained. Instead, the death knell for this short-lived side of the federal anti-poverty effort was in Kentucky governance itself. Local power brokers had seen how federal programs could disrupt political structures and helped launch a massive multi-year assault upon AV. The beginning of the end for AV, and many of the organizations they helped, was on June 29, 1967, when a farmer and retired miner named **Jink Ray** blocked a Puritan Coal Company bulldozer from strip mining the land he had farmed in Pike County for over forty years. AV, alongside the anti-strip mining group **Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People** (AGSLP), demonstrated to support Jink Ray. To avoid some of the national embarrassment, Governor **Ned Breathitt** suspended the mining permit on July 18, 1967, and two weeks later, the permit was revoked entirely.^[36] Days later, AV member **Joseph Mulloy** and **Southern Conference Education Fund** workers **Alan McSurely** and **Margaret McSurely** were arrested on charges of sedition. While a Lexington federal court ruled the state law unconstitutional three days later, the court's accusations of sedition and communism throughout the arrests were powerful enough to destabilize AV credibility. In early September, even Governor Breathitt announced that all AV funding would be cut. In the end, AV had its OEO funding restored, but grants were due to expire the following year, and renewal possibilities looked grim under new political regimes.^[37]

Breathitt's successor, the new Republican governor **Louie B. Nunn** (1967-1971 term), was instrumental in fully reining in anti-poverty organizing. The more radical ends of the War on Poverty such as AV, unpopular with local elites and President Johnson himself, had seen funding cuts and flagging support for years by this point. More than ever, they were vulnerable to local political plays rather than remaining the aloof bastions for organizers they formerly represented. In March of the year after the sedition arrests, Governor Nunn helped set up a replacement for the defunct sedition law by establishing the **Kentucky Un-American Activities Committee** (KUAC). KUAC announced it would hold hearings in Pikeville in October 1968, during which the committee portrayed AV as seditious manipulators of the poor. In a word, they were "outsiders."^[38] The injured AV, combined with an already faltering War on Poverty, failed to recover from the damaging accusations, becoming demoralized and disorganized. Grant funding reapplications were rejected, and the organization was entirely closed by summer 1970. With it, local anti-poverty movements lost their federal counterpart. Welfare rights and anti-poverty efforts lost some of their political platform, at least nationally, but environmental and anti-strip-mining movements were only picking up more steam.

Infrastructural improvements became the embodiment of the 1960s attempts at anti-poverty for state and federal governments, and their problems became characteristic of the era. Enmeshed in national narratives of growth and post-war optimism, Presidents Kennedy's and Johnson's efforts ran headlong into the decades of centralized political power and environmental destruction from the industry locally called "**King Coal**." They tackled the symptoms of poverty while tackling little of the underlying issues that created it. John Burch Jr. argues that economically and politically, the War on Poverty changed little in Appalachia, especially counties served by the **Middle Kentucky River Area Development Council**.^[39] In terms of aims—Johnson's bold claims of eradicating poverty through his "war" come to mind—the 1960s certainly fell short. Central Appalachia in the 1970s faced many of the same issues as 1960s Appalachia, which faced similar issues to 1950s Appalachia, of which remnants still appear in contemporary Appalachia.

There is a watershed moment in the War on Poverty revolving around "maximum feasible participation" and "community action," phrases-turned-

policy that had the potential to disrupt intertwined economic and political structures that shaped the region seen in the 1960s. The potential of federal support for residents against the local power structures was, for a time, real. That promise disappeared in Appalachia, as it was never truly intended to be offered in the first place. Yet, the legacies of that promise, however fleeting, are also real. The hope of federal support re-galvanized grassroots organizing throughout the region. Particularly, as Jessica Wilkerson writes, women leaders with the authority that comes with lived experience—such as Sudie Crusenberry, Minnie Lunsford, Lois Scott, and Bessie Lou Cornett, among others—fought for social justice and wove a “web of activism” that lasted long past the 1960s. The space opened by national interest and federal planning in the region gave rise for these women to create lasting networks of grassroots organizing.^[40] These networks spiraled out, becoming foundations for future movements to continue the fight on a variety of topics. Black lung benefits protests, public health activists, and the anti-strip mining movement all took advantage of this opened space to push for social justice within the region. If the 1960s were a moment of great disappointment, it was equally a moment of great and enduring hope. Perhaps poverty was not eradicated, but the legacies of the attempt certainly improved life for many within the region as well as helped platform an enduring Appalachian legacy of organizing to fight against local political and economic interests—a fight that, frankly, must continue.

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[1] Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 93.

[2] Billings and Blee, *The Road to Poverty*, 109.

[3] Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 11-12.

[4] *Ibid*, 15.

[5] *Ibid*, 18.

[6] *Ibid*, 19-20.

[7] Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 272-74.

[8] Wilkerson, *To Live Here, You Have to Fight*, 31.

[9] Lyttle, "WYMT Documentary: The 1957 Flood."

[10] Eller, *Uneven Ground*, 38-40.

[11] Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer*, 70.

[12] *Ibid*, 71.

[13] Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, 322.

[14] Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer*, 72.

[15] *Ibid*, 78-79.

[16] Shackelford, "Pollution Has Ruined North Fork River As Fishing Stream."

[17] Gaventa, "Water—You Can Drink It with a Fork," 21-22.

[18] Smith, *The Environmental Policy Paradox*, 126.

[19] Jacobs and Savage, "Kennedy's Keynesian Budgetary Politics," 523, 533-34, 540.

[20] Accelerated Public Works Program: Water Work Projects, June 15, 1964, Box 691, Appalachian Regional Commission Records, University of Kentucky, Kentucky.

[21] "Remembering the Flood of '57."

- [22] U.S. Census Bureau. The exact census population was 5,889 citizens.
- [23] Secretary of the Army, Kentucky River and Tributaries, Kentucky: Referred to the Committee on Public Works June 4, 1962, Box D-029, Perkins Papers. Estimates ranged greatly as to the number of people within the area. The survey report cites 225 “family units” alongside 27 commercial buildings, six churches, four school buildings, and five post offices. Reports protesting the dam’s construction cite as many as 3,000 people, or 500 families. Due to the historic invisibility of many rural Appalachians to federal investigation, I tend to favor the latter over the former numbers. The truth certainly lies somewhere between the two.
- [24] Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, 34-39.
- [25] Unger, *The Best of Intentions*, 82.
- [26] Orleck, “Introduction: The War on Poverty from the Grass Roots Up,” 2-15.
- [27] Mckee, ““This Government Is with Us,”” 33.
- [28] Arnett, “Eastern Kentucky,” 160-61.
- [29] Mckee, ““This Government Is with Us,”” 46.
- [30] Wilkerson, *To Live Here, You Have to Fight*, 39.
- [31] Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals*, 159.
- [32] Wilkerson, *To Live Here, You Have to Fight*, 50.
- [33] Ibid, 53-54.
- [34] Ibid, 97.
- [35] Ibid, 103.
- [36] Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals*, 188.
- [37] Ibid, 193.
- [38] Ibid, 197.
- [39] Burch Jr., “The Turner Family of Breathitt County, Kentucky, and the War on Poverty,” 417.
- [40] Wilkerson, *To Live Here, You Have to Fight*, 197.

Ravaged Land and Polarized People:

Community Response to Strip Mining in Eastern Kentucky, 1946- 1972

Jacob Johnson

Several key events in the historical evolution of strip mining in Appalachia construct a history of the common people of Appalachia, their response to the emergence of strip mining, and the ways in which they have lived in and coped with these ruined lands. Therefore, a history of the people encompasses not only the powerful grassroots opposition against strip mining but also the communal divides created by the economic and coercive influence of coal mines and coal interests, which have led to the rise of an equally powerful grassroots support in favor of practices that have continued to drastically change the landscape.

Strip mining emerged as a method of coal extraction in the 1940s and has since been a contentious subject for the region due to the destructive nature of the practice. Strip mining leaves the land virtually unrecognizable twice over. First, the surface miners themselves, in their moving of mountains, create a “lunar” landscape devoid of anything other than dirt, rocks, and coal. Then, in an attempt to return that landscape to nature, mine operators pack the dirt as tightly as possible into the form they see fit and plant all flora they can in hopes of preventing landslides. This process of **reclamation**, even when completed, leaves the land entirely different from

any of its neighboring mountains, hillsides, and hollows. The land remains virtually flat, treeless, and more closely resembling a golf course than the **Appalachian Mountains**. As a result of this destructive power, generations of opposition have been born in Appalachia, and while they have led a well-warranted fight to end these practices, many in the region still support and advocate for strip mining.

As the practice has continued over the past 75 years, support for strip mining has become even more common than opposition. Although this divided viewpoint may seem contradictory since more strip mines equate to more disturbed land, the opposite effect has occurred because a higher number of strip mines means more jobs for miners, and this effect is only multiplied by the network of family and friends of each miner. Compounded by regional insecurities of employment and ties between masculinity and coal, the **Cumberland Plateau** region of Appalachia and eastern Kentucky has become enmeshed in strong, unquestioned support of any form of surface mining—even massive, invasive, and expensive operations such as **mountaintop removal (MTR)**.^[1]

Regardless of the region's vocal support for strip mining, a few scholars have strongly rooted themselves in the perspectives of the opposition. The reasoning for this split can vary from author to author, but one of the most significant reasons comes from the historical evolution of strip mining in Appalachia. Unlike what can be found in the region today, strip mining in the mid-20th century was initially met with a serious, popular grassroots movement that sought an end to the industry. Historians, and consequently many other academics, have attached themselves solely to the opposition to strip mining and its historical evolution. That focus has prevented a proper explanation as to how and why such a vocal, community-driven opposition gave way to an equally vocal, community-based support for the industry by the 1980s. This turn in perspective is in no way meant to downplay the opposition, as they are as much a part of this history, if not more so, than the supporters of strip mining. Overall, this type of coal extraction reveals a dual narrative in which both the opposition and support rise due to strip mining's pressure on the community. However, as local residents failed to stop the spread of strip mining by the early 1970s, miners were increasingly backed into an economic corner with little choice but to accept it and reject, often violently, any form of opposition.

Remaking the Land: Strip Mining in Practice

Strip mining in itself rests at an odd point in history: the range of methods and practices that could be considered strip mining, or surface mining as it is also commonly known, consists not only of the newest, most modern methods of mining but also some of the oldest and most primitive. Early colonists in America, lacking the European technology to develop traditional mines, mined coal directly from the seam with picks and shovels, and this method had no significant impact outside of local markets.^[2] As the extraction of coal in Appalachia increasingly began to look like a certainty following the **Civil War**, industry speculators began to buy mineral rights through the **broad-form deed**, which separated ownership of the coal from ownership of the surface indefinitely—while also leaving any property taxes as the responsibility of the surface owner. Worse yet, the broad-form deed contained a clause that granted the mineral owner the right to extract the coal with nearly absolute impunity to any damages to the surface so long as it was “convenient” to the company. Although this clause later justified surface mining, most of the deeds were sold more than 50 years before strip mining was possible, and the sellers could not have even imagined its destructive force when signing over.^[3]

During **World War II**, local residents, land owners, and the courts played a significant role in the development of strip mining as a common practice in the southern Appalachian Mountains, booming from just over 12,000 tons of coal produced by strip mines to nearly 1.5 million tons in 1946.^[4] The temporary market conditions of World War II, amplified by the needs of U.S. allies, had created the boom necessary for strip mined coal to enter the market. However, the energy needs of a burgeoning post-war society that maintained its growth. The chief arbiter of this growth became the **Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)**, a New Deal program created to tame the wild Tennessee River Valley and its flooding by capturing “its boundless energy works for the people who live in this valley.”^[5] By 1953, though, the TVA’s exhausted hydroelectric dams were not solely capable of providing cheap energy to the people served by the agency, so it then turned to burning coal—specifically, strip-mined coal—to be produced far more cheaply and sold for much less than any coal mined from underground.

[6] This shift fueled the spawn of what **Harry Caudill** coined as “the TVA Companies” that were dependent on the agency’s long contracts, which could reach upward of 15 years. These TVA Companies pioneered strip mining as a low-cost, high-profit alternative to the more traditional deep mines. [7]

Strip mining in Appalachia, in these early years, typically occurred at **contour mining** sites where the miners shaved off hillsides and left a highwall of rock exposed. After removing any **overburden** (timber, topsoil, and anything else in the way), the strip miners exposed the “**bench**,” the seam of coal adjoined to the highwall, which they mined up using heavy machinery—typically bulldozers. [8] A key limiting factor in the development of strip mining, then, was technology because it required such heavy, expensive machinery, which was only compounded by the rough terrain of eastern Kentucky’s mountains. Therefore, strip mining was slow to develop in the region and not only in the sense of the emergence of mines themselves but also in the practices they used. Thus, contour mining dominated for decades as the primary mode of surface mining in eastern Kentucky with any other method either being done in conjunction with a contour mine, such as **auger mining**, or having evolved from it as in the case of MTR. [9]

Not long into the widespread implementation of the strip mining method, Kentucky courts were ruling against mining companies and finding the practice of strip mining to be an inappropriate use of the broad-form deed. [10] In 1946, *Treadway v. Wilson* ruled that strip mining was an “oppressive” force, implying that the surface owners felt threatened by the practice and actively fought against it from its first uses. [11] Whatever the damages or threat of damages in these early cases, they paled in comparison to the horrors that companies unleashed once certain of their impunity. In 1953 in *Buchanan v. Watson*, Kentucky courts ruled that since the coal was the company’s property, they did in fact have the right to extract it by any means necessary, but they would also have to pay the landowner for damages to the surface. Despite the favorable ruling that still allowed them to strip, company officials and lawyers were outraged with this ruling and petitioned for a rehearing. In the rehearing, under pressure from lawyers and lobbyists connected to big coal, the court found that the company did not have to compensate the surface owner, citing the “relatively little value” of the land and the economic status of the coal industry. [12] With this ruling strip

mining had finally gained the legal foothold in eastern Kentucky that it had needed to expand, and the tonnage produced from strip mining doubled from 1950 to 1960 with notable spikes following the ruling of *Buchanan v.*

Watson and its rehearing.^[13]

“Stirred to Action”: The Unified Front of Resistance in the 1960s

The wide-scale adoption of coal, such as with the TVA, provided a stable market for strip mining to continue its growth, but because of its volatile, environmentally disruptive nature, strip mining stunted its own growth by agitating and antagonizing Appalachian residents living near mines. By the mid-1960s, strip mining had grown large enough to be seen as a serious threat to eastern Kentucky. Describing the widespread damage of strip mining in central Appalachia, Harry Caudill’s *My Land is Dying* includes the personal account of Eva Ritchie (identified as Mrs. Bige Ritchie), who “saw a strip mine bulldozer uproot the coffin of her infant son from the backyard family cemetery and pitch it down the mountainside.”^[14] Ritchie later told Kentucky Governor **Edward “Ned” Breathitt**, “I thought my heart would bust in my breast when I saw the coffins of my children come out of the ground and go over the hills.”^[15] Although few others lacked the gravity of Ritchie’s account, the serious impediment to livelihood was becoming more and more apparent in Appalachia and so too did the notion that something must be done.

Anyone living in the vicinity of a strip mine, if they had not already been displaced by it, could feel its impacts. Perhaps the most strongly hit of any Appalachians were those who still practiced agriculture in what bit of land they might have retained in their hollow. Residents writing to their U.S. Representative **Carl D. Perkins** repeatedly denounced the practice of strip mining in this region due to its destructive effects on farmlands. Resident Curtis Cornett wrote to Perkins in 1967 asking for something to be done about strip mining because “the rocks come down and kill calves.”^[16] In a similar, slightly more detailed, letter to Perkins, Russell Belcher accounted

the damages that a company had done by strip mining near his house roughly five years earlier in 1965, including “big holes of [polluted] water and [they] some how caused [rock] slips [from the] highwall [coming] down in the pasture field.” Having just finally recovered from those damages to his homestead in 1970, he was ready to begin farming again, only after having “bought over 300 [dollars] in seeds and fertilizers” in addition to repairing a fence they damaged only to find that the company was preparing to return just as he restarted his farm. This time, however, Belcher was also worried for his “father-in-law who is 79-years-old... and has 4 cows on pasture here and sells milk... [and] if he has to sell his [cows,] I don’t see no chance for them to live.” [\[17\]](#)

By the late 1960s, even those well removed and far from the vicinity of a strip mine were beginning to feel the practice’s ecological effects. H.H. Robinson wrote to Perkins to express his fear that a recently constructed flood control reservoir was at risk of being silted up by strip mines farther down the stream. Pleading for government intervention to stop the mining method, he wrote, “A bill to end this destruction of mountain land would cost no one money but the people who sacrifice the land for quick profits.” [\[18\]](#) Rufus Reed, a naturalist and citizen of Lovely, Kentucky, summed up this growing sentiment by writing to Perkins after the Congressman’s public renouncement of strip mining that “the common people will be behind you 100%, as they are angered over the ruination of their lands, [and] also the roads by heavy coal trucks.” These descriptions offer the conditions that birthed the strong, loud, and popular opposition to strip mining, because regardless of how close they might live to a strip mine, eventually it would impact them in some capacity or another.

Mirroring the **networks of kinship** that uphold strip mining as viable employment in the 21st century, each infraction or impediment that a strip mine created against an Appalachian resident strengthened the opposition by fueling the expansion of its network. For these residents, there was no economic benefit in what they rightfully saw as a malignant encroachment on their property that violated their rights to it. In this sense, opposition to strip mining operated primarily, but not exclusively, as a form of **commons environmentalism**. [\[19\]](#) Rather than trying to preserve some idealistic, pristine wilderness, these residents were fighting to preserve the survival of commons resources and systems they heavily relied on, whether a

farmer grazing cattle, horses, or hogs; a hunter depending on deer, turkey, or small game meat; an angler for bass, bluegill, catfish, crappie, or any other edible fish; or even a driver on heavily damaged public roads. For any of these people, the costs of strip mining to those economical resources and systems they so often depended on outweighed its profits, employment, or potential for economic development.

These converging factors lead to the creation of a visibly strong, fairly centralized, and geographically consistent grassroots movement in Kentucky by 1965. **Dan Gibson**, an 81-year-old coffin maker from Clear Creek, Kentucky, gave the inspiration and backbone needed to form such a centralized opposition that spring when defending the land of his stepson, who was serving in the **Vietnam War**, from the threat of a strip mine. Knowing that there was nowhere else he could turn, no place in the legal system that could adequately shield either him or the land, Gibson turned to his .22 squirrel rifle. He successfully held back bulldozer operators for several hours until he surrendered himself under promises from the Kentucky Oak Mining Company that they would not cross the property line along with reassurances from neighbors that they would not let them. Gibson, however, would serve hardly any time for his defense as the Knott County Jail was quickly surrounded by an armed mob demanding that he be released and his charges dropped, which county officials quickly met.^[20] **Harry Caudill** immortalized this moment as the birth of the opposition, writing that “What was truly new about it was that several hundred mountain men and women...had been stirred to action by the realization that their culture, their way of life, and their long connection with the land were in danger.”^[21] Caudill continued, “At a time when most of the highlanders had long ago surrendered to apathy, the inhabitants of Clear Creek Valley, and along with them those of several nearby communities, had resolved to fight. Thus it was that the **Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People (AGSLP)** was born.”^[22]

Because of their strong local support, deeply rooted political connections, and their ability to capitalize on sympathy, AGSLP quickly became one of the most recognized and formidable factions in the opposition to strip mining. AGSLP acted rather quickly after its founding in June 1965, and by the end of the month they had gained an audience with the governor, having organized a 50-car, 200-mile motorcade to deliver to Frankfort a

petition that had amassed 3,000 signatures charging strip mines of utterly destroying the land and demanding that action be taken.^[23] Although the group had left embittered, with only a promise of new regulations if those in place were proven insufficient, they had at least managed to convince Governor Breathitt to visit Knott County to see the damages for himself. That same month the group led Breathitt on a “dusty two-hour tour of Knott County,” including several notable sites such as the Ritchie family cemetery, and by the end of his visit, Breathitt had been wholeheartedly convinced to join the fight and use the weight of his office to push for a quick and effective resolution.^[24]

The fight continued through the year, but even with the help of the governor, it was an uphill battle. Governor Breathitt, shortly after his vow of aid, began a three-pronged attack on the issue by asking the TVA to provide reclamation funds, having state officials begin drafting new regulation laws, and calling for the state’s attorney general and his office to intervene in any cases on the issue, all of which he followed through on and even saw some success in.^[25] At the grassroots level, on the other hand, the rest of the year passed rather quietly until November 1965. A recently widowed elderly woman from Lotts Creek named **Ollie Combs** came under threat of losing her land to a broad-form deed sold decades earlier by her father, which was quickly encroached on after her husband’s passing. Combs, known as the Widow Combs by most people who knew her, was ultimately able to rely on the rescue of Gibson, her neighbors, and AGSLP to defend her land from the dozers’ destruction.^[26] Although this resistance held for a few days, the dozers returned at the first chance they could, and with nowhere to go and no one to turn to, Combs and her two sons defiantly held the bulldozer operators back themselves by lying in front of them on the eve of Thanksgiving. When Combs refused to surrender herself, local law officials packed them down the mountain for violating the company’s restraining order on her own property, and she and her two sons ate their Thanksgiving dinner in the Knott County Jail that year.^[27]

Photos of Ollie Combs swept through the state, and within a month after her arrest, the news of her defiance also helped to bring the issue into the national spotlight with a lengthy *New York Times* article.^[28] This publicity reinvigorated the momentum that AGSLP had initially found in

June, and it also helped Governor Breathitt keep the issue in the forefront as officials under him continued working on legislation. By January, the Breathitt administration had finalized their regulatory bill, which had received favorable committee reports, and was preparing for three days of joint hearings with Ollie Combs scheduled to provide the final testimonial. And despite the three days of **testimony** from a wide range of influential leaders, it was Combs's account of her trials and tribulations that stole the vote. Breathitt recounted years later that "when they got through that testimony, there wouldn't a bit of noise in the house." He continued, "It was very dramatic, and when she told her story, I saw some of my friends in the opposition [to the bill] in the gallery gather up and shake their heads [because] they knew they were beat."^[29]

While the **Strip Mine Control Act** in 1966 was certainly the most significant success of AGSLP to that point, there were also severe, unexpected consequences that came with it. Until 1966, the only legal backing to recognize strip mining as a legitimate form of mining came from court rulings and weak regulations that were entirely ignored, if not actually unknown. By convincing the state government to pass strong regulations with continued public awareness, AGSLP unknowingly gave many operators who were on the fence about it a greenlight to start strip mining. By the end of the decade coal production from surface mines would triple, and between the years 1965 and 1967 the number of strip-mining permits alone doubled, which caused the industry to grow at a far more rapid rate soon invading communities that had not yet been affected by strip mining.^[30] **Charles "Buck" Maggard**, one of the more radical members of AGSLP, remembered the successful passage of the 1966 legislation as the group's ultimate defeat in a 1990 interview, saying, "What really happened in 1966, instead of regulating strip mining, for the first time we made it legal."^[31] Maggard also suggested that the bill had received "the blessing of the coal operators," and that their "crocodile tears" over the damage of this law to the industry were actually a crafty manipulation to weaken an already favorable regulation and validation of strip mining.^[32] Either way, the consequences were irreversible and totally incomprehensible to AGSLP at the time.

Through the late 1960s, opposition to strip mining became increasingly more apparent in the region, and at the root of this growth was a constant expansion of the industry and the spilling over of its sheer destructive power.

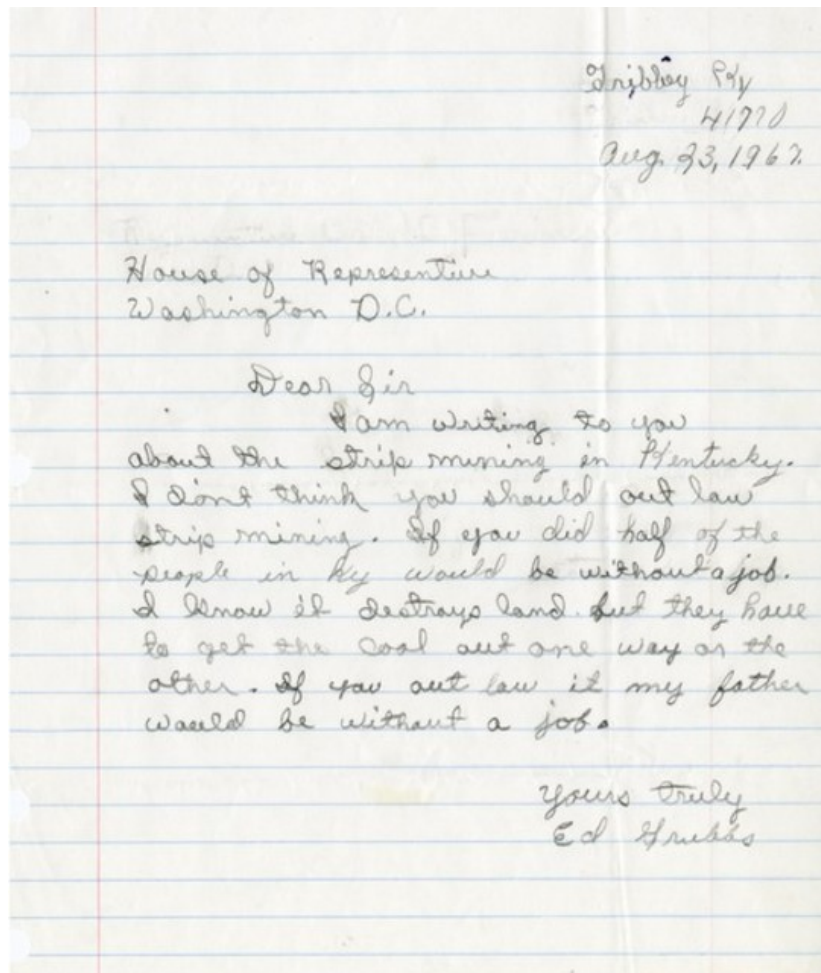
New groups and factions spread throughout eastern Kentucky, with most beginning locally and then spreading with an expanding network of grassroots opposition. Each of these groups had a separate agenda, philosophy, and strategy, but they all felt a mutual hatred of strip mining. However, these new groups, as they popped up, often became more violent or crafty in their attempts to stop strip mining. For example, AGSLP became fairly factionalized following the events of 1966 which led to the creation of the **Mountaintop Gun Club (MGC)**. If this group knew that someone's land was under threat of being stripped, they would lease the land from the owner to create a "shooting range" for as little as a dollar. This maneuver had the dual effect of protecting the land legally, since it would interfere with the broad-form deed and require litigation from the companies, while also maintaining a sense of extralegal vigilante justice, as those operators who did succeed in gaining the right to use the land would put their workers under constant threat of a "stray" bullet from one of MGC's shooting ranges.

The Second Front: Declining Opposition and Rising Support into the 1970s

The key development in the expansion of opposition was that it was spreading to communities well removed from AGSLP's sphere of influence in Knott and Perry Counties. Perhaps the largest and most significant of these new-wave groups was the **Citizen's League to Protect Surface Rights (CLPSR)**, which Joe Begley founded in 1970 in Letcher County with the intent to "join a little group in Knott County."^[33] To Begley, the most important part of determining CLPSR's success was to "get out of Blackey" in Letcher County, through collaborating with a network of opposition and getting the destruction and chaos on "radio, and television, and the newspapers."^[34] CLPSR also became one of the most heavily populated and active of these opposition groups, amassing 300 members by 1972.^[35] However, growth in the opposition also meant growth in the support of strip mining. The more that strip mine operators spread their destruction throughout the region, the more strip miners they hired and underground miners they fired. Even before the middle of the new decade, the rising

support of miners desperate for employment reached a critical mass, which led to more and more suppression of any form of opposition.

There was little support of strip mining outside of the operators and their cronies and between the miners and their families. The earliest letter in support of strip mining to come across the desk of Representative Perkins came in 1967—the only one in that year and nearly in that entire decade. The letter was written in the scrawl of a young child and read simply, “I know it destroys the land, but...if you outlaw it my father would be out of a job.”^[36]



Friday 8/24
4/770
Aug. 23, 1967

House of Representatives
Washington D.C.

Dear Sir

I am writing to you
about the strip mining in Kentucky.
I don't think you should out law
strip mining. If you did half of the
people in Ky would be without a job.
I know it destroys land but they have
to get the coal out one way or the
other. If you out law it my father
would be without a job.

Yours truly
Ed Grubbs

Figure 1. Letter from 11-year-old Ed Grubbs of Tribbey, Kentucky, to U.S. Representative Carl D. Perkins, explaining that strip mining should not be made illegal because his father would be without a job. Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Eastern Kentucky University Libraries, Richmond, Kentucky.

Following the backfire of the 1966 regulations, the opposition to strip mining had largely realigned their goals from control to outright abolition of strip mining, which was still a feasible goal at the time and naturally would have frightened those involved in strip mining, but consequently this move also helped to alienate the strip miners living within the community.^[37] Also, this letter began a trend of residents' letters written in support of strip mining in which the author recognizes the damage, but they also embed within that acknowledgement a sense of desperation for work, a sense that there was nowhere else to turn.

However, these arguments were moot to the opposition because as they saw it, an abolition of strip mining would also mean a return to deep mining, which hired more people for longer periods, but at the cost of profits.

Michael J. Halbert, a resident of Martin, Kentucky, summed up this viewpoint in a 1971 letter:

On the economic front, strip-mining is permanently destroying underground mining jobs. While we might experience a boom this year, the ultimate result will be the economic breakdown of our region. On the social front, these same men forced out of work will become additions to the welfare roles. The ruined mountain sides, the polluted streams, the silt-filled creeks, and the homes crushed by mud are the ultimate results of stripping. A region of ruined people and ruined land is the result of stripping.^[38]

Perkins himself explained the issue in a far more light-hearted manner, writing in that same month to an aspiring journalist that “the bugaboo of unemployment” had no serious effect in eastern Kentucky because the people simply knew that it did not “involve an enormous amount of employment in the first place.”^[39] This view that strip mining presented not only an ecological threat to Appalachia but also an economic one was what made opposition to strip mining so potent in this period, because the majority of people, with the exception of strip miners themselves, could find some fault somewhere with the practice. The opposition had grown so strong in this period that of all the letters, petitions, and organizations that crossed Perkins' desk in the 92nd Congress, over 1,300 asked for abolition or control, while

only 145—mostly miners given prewritten letters by their company—saw no fault in the practice as it stood.^[40]

The movement was also being boosted by Appalachia's particular spot in the national scene as well. The region had been brought to the forefront of America's attention by the success of works such as Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962) and Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* (1963), which inspired the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to launch the **War on Poverty** in 1964. Anti-poverty workers swarmed the region in this period with the aim of organizing local Appalachians around issues impacting their daily lives with the central goal of "maximum feasible participation of the poor."^[41] These anti-poverty workers had not played a role in the organizing of AGSLP, CLPSR, or similar grassroots groups, but their organizing happened almost concomitantly with the start of the War on Poverty. As historians have pointed out, local people's deep understanding of their situation and their own willingness to resist it did more to radicalize anti-poverty workers than the other way around.^[42]

Anti-poverty workers eventually joined and contributed directly to the growing opposition as the issue and practice expanded in 1966 and 1967. Even then, once anti-poverty workers were involved, namely the **Appalachian Volunteers** (AV), their role remained minimal within the opposition. Joe Mulloy, the AV field director in Pike County, stated that strip mining to the organization was simply just "the issue of the year...where we should be focusing our supportive efforts." Therefore, the organization played only a mediator role between the multitude of grassroots organizations, media, and politicians.^[43] Yet, this role must have seemed larger to coal operators as the AV funded and printed studies against strip mining, helped grassroots organizations attend or plan events and tours about the issue, and even inspired residents to fight off dozers in Pike County by founding a chapter of AGSLP.^[44] Coal operators also stood to gain a strategic advantage by exaggerating the role of anti-poverty workers because they could brand them as outsiders and agitators, which helped undermine the efficacy of a predominantly grassroots movement to bring the practice to an absolute end in the minds of not only politicians but also more neutral Appalachian residents. Regardless, Mulloy differentiated himself from the

civil disobedience that had come to define the opposition by stating plainly, “I was not holding my hand up in front of a bulldozer, I didn’t see that as my role.”^[45]

Coal operators beginning to feel the pressure from this grassroots movement took more aggressive counter-measures. AGSLP had won two major victories in the summer of 1967 that warranted significant action from the operators: first, the Island Creek chapter of AGSLP in Pike County had succeeded in stopping a Puritan Coal Company strip mine at the property line of Jink Ray’s farm; then, in the same month AGSLP successfully organized a strip mine tour with state and federal officials to see the persistent damage in spite of the 1966 law.^[46] To the operators, the former was likely more effective than the latter because AGSLP had gone from seeking regulation to abolition with the issue increasingly taking on national significance, which would have made the presence of federal officials, including representatives from the Department of the Interior who would likely oversee any federal regulation, seem all the more frightening. In August 1967 Pike County officials under the leadership of Commonwealth Attorney Thomas Ratliff, a native of Pike County and co-founder of the **Independent Coal Operators’ Association** (ICOA), placed Joe Mulloy and his two neighbors under arrest on sedition charges that branded them as communists.^[47]

This move did not have any immediate impact on the fight against strip mining, because those already in the opposition saw through the sham and did not buy the “red scare” propaganda, which was a typical tactic for operators. In truth, the arrest was a follow-through on threats from the ICOA, who had made an earlier visit with the sheriff of Pike County to warn the Mulloys of the dangers faced by previous opponents, including a thinly veiled threat that one organizer had “got in his car and turned the ignition and it blew him up.”^[48] Moreover, the issue of strip mining as a dangerous practice had largely been accepted as a federal one, so the fight was quickly changing. The arrest of Joe Mulloy first signaled this change on the other side of the aisle because leading up to the arrest, local people had consistently warned the Mulloy family of the “old days” and how local law would take outside union organizers and “dump them across the county line,” after killing them back in the 1920s and 1930s.^[49]

Although the immediate effects of the Mulloy arrest seemed minimal, it still carried an impact on the movement that only grew over time. In particular, the loss of the anti-poverty workers strained the strip mining abolition movement because they were quintessentially a dedicated staff that helped establish critical communication networks, secured funding for travel outside of eastern Kentucky, and ultimately helped to bring the movement onto the national scene. Despite Joe Mulloy's humble downplaying, the AV served a very serious and legitimate role in the movement. This impact was likely easy to minimize because of how it could present itself, such as the case of Tom Bethell, who ferried the 50-man tour of state and federal officials to and from a strip mine in his Jeep that bulldozer operators had thought they made inaccessible by damaging the roads.^[50] AGSLP still did most of the heavy lifting in organizing this trip, even using their connections with Harry Caudill and Carl Perkins to help attract federal officials, but their effort would have been moot if it had not have been for Bethell because operators would have successfully camouflaged their operations.^[51] While such a case may seem coincidental and maybe even trivial, AV support in manpower alone clearly had an effect in their brief involvement in the opposition and has left the nagging question of "what if?"

The sedition arrests also likely carried an effect on the strip mining abolition movement within the communities. This impact is best evidenced in **Jessica Wilkerson's** *To Live Here You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice* (2019), which highlights Edith Easterling, a resident of Pike County who worked closely with and even joined the AV but was socially isolated following the Mulloy arrest. In Easterling's case, she had lost much of her respect among Pike Countians and had even left her church as rumors swirled about her involvement; however, much of the negative publicity that came from the sedition arrests was not a result of the allegations of communism but instead from the connection between the McSurelys, a married couple also charged with and arrested for sedition, and the national **Civil Rights movement**.^[52] Easterling's communal shunning, then, could have potentially come as much from this connection as it could have from her connection to the anti-strip mining movement.

As 1967 wound down, the opposition found itself somewhat in decline. The loss of the AV was one of the biggest setbacks that the grassroots

movement had endured, but despite the coal operators' accusations of outside rabble-rousing, the movement had not necessarily slowed down. The more serious damage was still to come because Breathitt's term as governor was winding down and the election for his replacement had leaned in favor of the coal interests. As a final act on his last day in office, Breathitt signed orders that decreased the maximum slope of a mountain that could be strip mined from 33 degrees to 27, which was a move he felt confident in doing because he thought that the governor-elect "would no more dare to repeal these new regulations than he would be expected to put them in effect in the first place."^[53] Moreover, Breathitt had predicted correctly as Governor **Louie B. Nunn** neither enforced nor repealed any of the regulations, which helped precipitate yet another spurt of growth in strip mining that saw production tripled by 1970.

By 1968, the debate around strip mining had changed radically on the national scene despite dying down at the grassroots. Because of the rise of strip mining in coalfields around the country, this was now considered a national issue with politicians such as **Robert F. Kennedy**, **Lyndon B. Johnson**, and U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall pushing for regulatory legislation.^[54] However, as Perkins had warned AGSLP the previous year, the road to federal legislation was a long one filled with many major roadblocks like states' rights, which he correctly predicted "could easily block passage for several years."^[55] Despite the significant progress in terms of awareness, AGSLP along with the rest of the opposition was fairly quiet in this period with no major protests in the year. Buck Maggard explained this sudden disappearance for himself and many fellow grassroots activists as a response to the rise of the **Black Lung Movement**, which was quickly catching local attention.^[56] The most significant anti-strip mining display came that August when four unidentified assailants kidnapped a Round Mountain Coal Corporation nightwatchman and used the company's dynamite to destroy nearly a million dollars' worth of equipment in Leslie County.^[57] This act was a significant departure from usual tactics of the opposition, hardly resembling the violence, or rather lack thereof, in demonstrations before and after. As theorized by activists in similar movements, like the **Roving Pickets** movement that fought to preserve the **United Mine Workers Association** hospitals (now Appalachian Regional

Health), the explosion may have been a case of self-sabotage that dampened the movement's image and awarded a fat insurance check to coal operators. [58]

Instead, the conflict between the opposition and miners usually consisted of flashing guns until bulldozer operators scattered. The most telling of these stories occurs in **Appalshop's** *A Tribute to Carl D. Perkins* (1984), in which an unnamed young man recounts the story of an eastern Kentuckian intimidating a bulldozer operator attempting to work on the man's land: "he starts tearing down his fence, you know, and the [Messer] guy comes out with his gun and propped it over the fence and said 'you get down from that dozer, you on my land.'" [59] The landowner, most likely a native of Knott County and referring to AGSLP, continued: "I went over there, they called a special meeting one night, the people was all there and they all had guns and Carl Perkins got up front and said 'Let's calm down now...we should do things in an orderly manner and we should let the law handle things, I think.'" [60] Karen Mulloy recounted similar stories from her husband's and her time working in the Island Creek community, as she remembered how "there would always be these old mountain men...always be up in the hills with their rifles...and if [the bulldozer operator] dare run over anybody they were going to kill [him]." [61] Violence, then, was typically used as an intimidation tactic, which would either temporarily force dozers off the land or insure the safety of non-violent, civilly disobedient, and highly visible protestors. Such a method of protest strongly resembled the **community self-defense** approach of groups like the Black Panthers, the Chicano Movement, and the American Indian Movement. [62]

After a few more rather passive years, the issue of strip mining fully emerged again when another boom hit in 1970. After persuading the Knott County government to declare strip mining a "public nuisance," AGSLP appeared again in national newspapers for convincing the same officials to outlaw strip mining throughout the county in a 3-2 vote. [63] Sid Williams, the county judge responsible for the tie-breaking vote, attempted to invoke his right to a 30-day decision-making period, but a crowd of roughly 300 people rushed to the railings and forced a vote. [64] This advocacy illustrated the AGSLP's power to act at the local level, where their power was far better concentrated and therefore all the more influential.

Nonetheless, these county-level decisions show that in spite of the movement's relative quietness, the grassroots group was just as popular as it had been when dozers invaded Ollie Combs's land in 1965.

The opposition continued its work locally throughout this period until the issue finally peaked on the national stage in the 92nd Congress in 1971. Three major bills appeared in Congress that year, and while there were federal regulation bills as early as 1968, the 92nd Congress seriously contemplated regulation bills.^[65] The first of these bills, H.R. 4556, proposed a total abolition of strip mining and was the only of these bills to be sponsored by an Appalachian state's senator, West Virginia's Ken Hechler.^[66] AGSLP and CLPSR threw their full weight in favor of Hechler's abolition bill, and that support, combined with a handful of individuals and concerned residents, made the Hechler bill the most popular of the strip-mining legislation in eastern Kentucky.^[67] Despite this grassroots support, coming from one of the most directly impacted regions, the idea of abolition seemed too radical at the national level.^[68]

Instead, the focus on the national scene fell to the two committee bills released that same year. Senate Bill 630 was particularly weak and lax in regulating coal companies, but given that these companies did not want to be regulated at all, the industry fought against any kind of legislation through the "bugaboo of unemployment."^[69] The House's second strip-mining bill, H.R. 6482, on the other hand, was the strongest and most legitimate of the pending legislation. Despite the strength of the bill on the national stage, there was little focus on it from eastern Kentuckians. In fact, outside of the core opposition groups, such as AGSLP or CLPSR, there seemed to be minimal knowledge of what was happening within Congress, but a greater influx of letters written to Perkins indicated that eastern Kentuckians were aware that the issue had been handed off from the state to the federal government.^[70]

The quantitative challenge with these letters, though, is that many of them came from groups and organizations not dedicated to the issue with an unknown, but presumably sizable, number of supporting members. The American Legion of Letcher County, for example, wrote to Perkins to "beg [his] vote and influence against strip mining."^[71] Similarly, the Floyd County Fish and Game Club wrote that "strip mining is a complete

destruction of what all sportsmen's clubs are trying to improve.”^[72] Even a representative of the local Girl Scouts troop wrote to Perkins about how “the devastation...was unbelievable to these young girls. I couldn’t explain very well why our government had allowed this to happen. At that time they decided to see what they could do to help save our environment.”^[73] Later that same year one of the Girl Scouts themselves, 13-year-old Kim Roberts, wrote to Perkins to express her frustrations in their fight against strip mining: “We were told by people like [Governor] **Julian Carroll** and many different people that ‘we are going to do something.’ ‘We are proud of the Girl Scouts and what they are doing to abolish strip mining,’ but that’s just talk.”^[74] She concluded her letter with an acknowledgement that the issue had transferred hands by writing, “We have done the best we can. Now [it’s] your turn.”^[75] Strip mining had clearly penetrated the livelihoods of virtually all eastern Kentuckians, including anglers, hunters, veterans, and 13-year-olds, illustrating that the residents of this region were almost entirely opposed to the practice.

Despite this strong sentiment, however, the main organizations in the opposition faced a strengthening support of strip mining from the miners themselves that helped to undermine the role of grassroots activism on the national stage. This deepened support manifested in January 1972 when AGSLP, in conjunction with several other organizations, attempted to protest an operation in Elijah Fork of Knott County.^[76] They had justified the end of the operation as a means “to show the legislature if something is not done, we’ll do it ourselves.”^[77] However, despite the AGSLP’s plan to stay at the operation indefinitely, the miners and guards of the company took matters into their own hands by meeting the opposition with outright violence. The men threatened to rape the women camping out on the mountainside operation, menacing the protestors to the point that one of the strip miners rushed to their side to provide some safety, and miners at the bottom of the hill busted windows, slashed tires, and flipped some cars.^[78] The defeated AGSLP soon retreated off the mountain.

This event was essentially the last major protest from AGSLP, and it also signaled a new era in the fight over strip mining because the miners themselves took an active role against the opposition. Although this role was certainly a menacing one that bullied the opposition into submission, it

signaled that the miners themselves were involved in the matter, and even if the “bugaboo of unemployment” meant little to the opposition, it clearly was no longer the case with the men employed in the strip mines.

While the cries of unemployment were once extraordinarily exaggerated, they were becoming increasingly real warnings from the miners’ employers. Not only did this make these claims all the more credible to miners than to any neutral or oppositional parties but also justified the miners’ turn toward violent and extreme measures by the miners. By 1974, despite record-breaking profits brought on by a nation-wide energy crisis, industry leaders estimated the region had lost at least 5,000 jobs in that same year alone. [79] This undercurrent of economic hardship was only made harder by the growing damage to the region’s natural ability to offset it as previous generations had with game, fish, livestock, and other **commons** practices like gathering herbs, berries, and nuts. For these miners, there seemed to be no alternative livelihood. In the decades since, support for strip mining has only become more widespread as violence against opposition persists and keeps many Appalachians from even beginning to question strip mining, its irreversible effects, and the nature of the region’s economic dependency to it.

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Black Lung:

A Continuing Struggle for Coal Miners in Appalachia

Bennett M. Judkins and Aysha Bodenhamer

Jerry Coleman is a third-generation coal miner. He has worked for thirty-seven years in mostly underground **coal** mines in the **Appalachian Mountains** of West Virginia. His lungs are permanently and irreversibly scarred by the inhalation of coal dust. He has coal workers' pneumoconiosis (CWP), commonly known as **black lung**. Even though his doctor diagnosed him with the disease, Coleman had to wait seven years to receive the benefits guaranteed to him by the federal government to pay for his medical bills—benefits paid through his own labor in the mines. The company doctor and the lawyers from the coal company fought him in court for each of those seven years.^[1] Coleman is one of the lucky ones; many miners die from black lung before being awarded compensation, while others fight for twenty years or more.

Sadly, Coleman's struggle is not a new one. Coal workers' pneumoconiosis was first detected in a **Scottish** coal miner in 1831.^[2] Yet the disease was not widely recognized and compensated for in **Great Britain** until the 1940s. It took over 120 years for black lung to be fully recognized in the United States in the 1960s, and even then it was only after several years of organizing efforts. Following the **Farmington mine disaster** in West Virginia that killed 78 miners in 1968, 40,000 miners went on strike to advocate for health and safety in the mines.^[3] In 1969, Black lung prevention and compensation measures were solidified with the **Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act**, leading leaders to believe the disease

would be eradicated.^[4] Cases of black lung initially fell dramatically following the implementation of the Coal Act.^[5] Yet public health officials became aware that the prevalence of black lung was again increasing around the year 2000.^[6] In the 21st century the resurgence of black lung, a preventable disease, is now back with a vengeance, especially in central Appalachia (Virginia, Kentucky, and West Virginia). As a result, the story of black lung in Appalachia goes on, and the efforts of coal miners and their supporters to fight and seek redress from the coal industry, the **union**, the government, and the occupational health industry also persists.

While black lung may seem like a niche issue, it intersects with myriad institutions and social processes. In case studies, miners with black lung are exposed to issues in the healthcare system, workplace dynamics, government initiatives, and inequalities pertaining to poverty, exploitation, and education. With healthcare specifically, emergent issues include inaccessibility to care, inadequate or nonexistent insurance, and even biased doctors who sympathize with coal employers. Workplaces also develop their own culture—what does it mean to work in a dangerous field? Are government regulations followed or mocked? Are regulatory government agencies such as the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) effective? How do these dynamics change in a region plagued by persistent poverty, low educational attainment, and a deeply embedded pro-coal culture? The historical and current significance of black lung necessitates the cooperative action of institutions to reform these processes and to improve overall well-being in Appalachia.

The Early Years

Although coal was mined by **Indigenous** peoples before colonialists arrived and by early settlers in the 18th century, it was the 19th century before that it became a major commercial operation and the largest source of energy in the United States. It has always been a dangerous occupation. Risks include inhaling toxic gases, such as methane, carbon monoxide, and hydrogen sulfide; being crushed by roof falls or mining equipment; drowning when tunnels fill with water; and sustaining injury due to fires and explosions.^[7] In addition, rescuing injured miners often thousands of feet below the surface is a difficult process that sometimes turns into a recovery effort. From 1900 through the first half of the 20th century, the number of

miners killed averaged over 2,000 per year until 1930. It was not until around the mid-20th century before the numbers declined to less than 1,000 due to improved safety conditions and the lower number of miners working. In the last ten years, the average number of mine safety fatalities per year has generally been fewer than twenty; however, these figures do not include the long-term, latent effects of black lung.[\[8\]](#)

While the number of fatalities in the coal mines continued to decline in the 20th century, another malady was slowly being recognized as affecting workers' health. Miners were experiencing shortness of breath, a chronic cough, and difficulty breathing, and many were dying. The medical term for it was *coal workers' pneumoconiosis*. The American Lung Association describes two types of pneumoconiosis—simple, known as **coal workers' pneumoconiosis** (CWP), and complicated, known as **progressive massive fibrosis** (PMF). The miners called the condition “black lung” because it eventually turns lungs from their normal pink color to black. Over time the lungs harden, making it difficult to breathe and often leading to death.[\[9\]](#)

Black lung is caused by long-term exposure to and inhalation of coal and **silica** dust into the lungs. Dust exposure has long been a problem in mining but was worsened by the development of more efficient technology, specifically the continuous mining machine in the 1950s. This machine, which at the time accounted for about 45% of underground coal production, has a large, rotating steel drum equipped with teeth that scrape coal from the seam, creating a tremendous amount of dust in the process.

The expanded use of the continuous mining machine was in part the result of an agreement between labor and management in 1950, which created the **United Mine Workers Association** (UMWA) Welfare and Retirement Fund. Although the fund provided pensions and free medical care for union members, many thought it gave the union a vested interest in increasing production and the possibility of collusion between the UMWA leaders and the coal companies. Because of mechanization, the number of miners dropped from 415,000 in 1950 nationally to fewer than 130,000 in 1969. The continuous miner, with its enhanced speed and motion, also increased the amount of dust circulating in the mines and, consequently, the prevalence of black lung.[\[10\]](#)

A few years after the coal companies introduced the continuous mining machine, Isodore Buff, a West Virginia cardiologist, became interested in the

lung problems of miners. Buff noticed a significant increase in the number of miners with the diagnosis of heart failure, and he knew that heart failure was often the result of excessive tissue development in the lungs. After failing to muster any interest in a proposed study of the relationship between the work environment and lung disorders in 1959, he began a crusade to educate the mining communities about the problem.^[11]

Over the next few years pathologists Donald Rasmussen and Hawley Wells joined Buff's effort. Their work intensified in 1968 when a major mining disaster in Farmington, West Virginia, killed 78 miners.^[12] This tragedy captured the attention of the public and Congress. In the months following the disaster, a conference on mine safety brought these three physicians together, who then formed the Physicians Committee for Mine Health and Safety to tour West Virginia to speak at rallies organized by concerned miners. Whenever possible, the three physicians appeared together at protest meetings all over West Virginia. Buff would attack the coal industry and the UMWA, Rasmussen would speak about the nature of the disease, and Wells would usually end the meetings with a call to political action.^[13] The efforts of the miners and the Physicians Committee culminated in early 1969 with the formation of the West Virginia **Black Lung Association**, which was officially introduced at a rally in Beckley, West Virginia, on January 19, 1969. A total of nine black lung bills were introduced into the West Virginia state legislature in February. Several protests later and a massive strike of over 40,000 miners, the legislature and Governor Archie Moore signed the final Black Lung Benefits Act on March 11, 1969.^[14] The act contained a very liberal state workers' compensation statute and signaled a victory for the miners, as their success in West Virginia made a strong impression in Washington.

From West Virginia to the U.S. Congress

Many miners and their supporters testified in hearings on mine safety and health before the 91st Congress in 1969.^[15] Although much of the reform discussion centered on reducing levels of coal dust to prevent future miners from contracting the disease, an official amendment to establish federal responsibility for a black lung benefits program was eventually introduced. Multiple failures of past political action justified a new amendment, which would establish the first-ever federal compensation program for anyone other than federal workers. The amendment targeted

different groups to take more responsibility for the mine workers' well-being: (1) medical professionals to recognize the disease, (2) states to amend their worker compensation systems, and (3) the federal government to recognize and address the disease as Great Britain had done in the 1940s.

[16] Perhaps the most important factor was the **testimony** of the miners themselves, whose emotional recitations apparently had a tremendous impact, even on the most conservative legislators. [17]

The final bill, the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act, was passed in the House and Senate in mid-December. Although President Richard M. Nixon considered vetoing the bill, primarily because of objections to the black lung benefits provision, an unauthorized walkout of West Virginia miners is generally credited for his signature on December 30, 1969. The Coal Act of 1969 introduced sweeping reforms and regulations for the first time in the coal industry. [18] It mandated four annual inspections for underground mines and two for surface mines, enabled federal agencies to fine coal companies for violations, established a training program, created a respirable dust limit of 2.0 mg/m^3 , and created a surveillance program for underground miners. [19] The amended act, the Mine Act of 1977, established a new agency known as the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA).

Black lung benefits were initially administered by the Social Security Administration. Its purpose was to provide benefits to coal miners who were totally disabled by pneumoconiosis and to the surviving dependents of miners who died from the disease. In the first year, the initial claims processed showed approval rates above 90 percent. This success created high expectations in the mining communities of Appalachia. However, when the first major report of claims occurred in the summer of 1970, West Virginia and Kentucky had approval rates of only 32% and 57%, respectively. [20] By 1971, fourteen chapters of the Black Lung Association (BLA) had been established in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia, with a membership of 4,000 miners and widows. Although many hoped this new legislation would be the final solution to the problem of black lung, inequities in the implementation of the black lung benefits program resulted in a nationwide social movement for retired and disabled coal miners.

The Growth of the Black Lung Movement

The core of the reform efforts, and of the eventual nationwide black lung movement, was rank-and-file miners, often retired and/or disabled, who had filed a claim for compensation with their local office of the Social Security Administration. Most came to the Black Lung Association, at least initially, seeking assistance in obtaining compensation. Barbara Ellen Smith points out that local BLA chapters had three functions: (1) to offer assistance for receiving compensation, (2) to pressure the Social Security Administration and Congress to reform the compensation program, and (3) to organize a network of dissident UMWA members.^[21] Many saw the BLA as a vehicle for union reform as well, responding to the perceived collusion between the union leaders and the coal companies.

An important element to the eventual success of the black lung movement, though, was a group of young activists who came to Appalachia with an ideology of social change, social justice, and a willingness to challenge the prevailing power structure of the region. They came initially as **AmeriCorps VISTA** volunteers from Community Action Programs, a key component of the war on poverty from the Kennedy/Johnson administrations. However, it was another government program, Designs for Rural Action (DRA), a community action agency responsible for supporting community-related projects in Appalachia, that provided the staff for the BLA. Although direct money or salaries could not be put into a social movement organization, the DRA workers devised a plan to cut their salaries in half to support the early efforts of the Physicians Committee and eventually the Black Lung Association. Known as “The Charleston Office Crew,” they assisted with coordination and communication efforts between all of the BLA chapters. They published the *Black Lung Bulletin*, released press statements, sent out newsletters, and performed various other activities to help the chapters accomplish what they wanted to see done. The Charleston Office Crew was replaced in 1973 after Arnold Miller, the first president of the BLA, was elected to the presidency of the UMWA, a major victory for the black lung movement. These young staff and volunteers were important to the BLA, not only because of the energy and expertise they brought, but also because the retired and disabled miners were often not physically able to carry out many of the necessary tasks.^[22]

Although most of the efforts of the BLA were initially focused on the local area, it became clear that the battle would have to move to Washington again. Frequent marches and testimonies at Congressional hearings

eventually helped change the law and the procedures for implementing the Black Lung Benefits Program. By “offering themselves as evidence,” the passage of amendments to the original black lung law in 1972 liberalized the requirements for obtaining compensation. It was a major victory for the movement and its supporters.[\[23\]](#)

Another group of retired miners carried on the next phase of the struggle, and in an unlikely location: the city of Chicago. Unemployment caused by new technology and mine shutdowns that began in the 1950s sent many coal miners to Chicago and other cities to work in factories and foundries. Few coalfield migrants found adequate employment, and as time passed, many fell victim to pulmonary problems resulting from their years in the mines. The Chicago BLA was formed in 1976 and joined the BLA chapters in Appalachia to form the National Black Lung Association. The new National BLA was instrumental in the passage of the 1977 amendments, which further liberalized the criteria for benefits and altered the regulations regarding how claims were to be processed and financed. For the next few years, over 80% of claims were approved.[\[24\]](#)

In 1981, however, President Ronald Reagan's administration dramatically cut eligibility for black lung benefits by ending the fifteen-year presumption. This time limit assumed that miners were disabled from black lung if they had fifteen years in the mines and a disabling lung disease. Ending the presumption made it more difficult for miners and widows to receive benefits. Resistance continued and the BLA realized that without a continual fight against abuses, miners who were then working would not have black lung benefits or would be forced to quit work.[\[25\]](#) In order to build a stronger coalition, the Black Lung Association combined with two other similar social movement organizations in late 1981—the White Lung Association (WLA) and the Carolina Brown Lung Association (CBLA)—to form the Breath of Life Organizing Campaign (BLOC).

The CBLA emerged as a response to a disease that Southern textile workers were getting called byssinosis, or “brown lung,” a lung affliction caused by the inhalation of cotton dust from working in the textile mills. Because textile workers did not have the benefit of a free medical examination like the coal miners, they began setting up screening clinics, where workers often came together to talk about their disease, creating a

strong empowering effect. By 1980, the CBLA had expanded to fifteen cities in five states.[\[26\]](#)

The White Lung Association addressed illnesses in several different industries that used asbestos, exposure to which can cause either cancer or asbestosis. The workers called it “white lung.” Because of the use of asbestos in shipyards, the first WLA was formed in Los Angeles in 1979 and over the next few years expanded to Maryland, New York, Illinois, and a few other states. However, because workers shared little by way of work experience, culture, or history, and because they were spread out all over the country, the WLA never attained the status of the BLA or the CBLA.

The Breath of Life Organizing Campaign brought these three social movement organizations together, but coordinating their work was difficult because of the physical distance between them and the different industries they represented. Although there was a continuing effort to influence Congressional action, the thrust of BLOC was mainly to educate the public about the needs of diseased and disabled workers and to illustrate the features of a just compensation system.

The Resurgence of Black Lung in the 21st Century

Over the last few decades, the coal industry has changed drastically in Appalachia, including but not limited to declining mining employment, the depletion of coal seams, and the resurgence of black lung. It is important to note that the “resurgence” of black lung is somewhat misleading as the disease was never fully eradicated. However, this phrase is commonly used to discuss the recent increasing prevalence of black lung. The black lung prevention measures put in place by the Coal Act of 1969 for reducing dust exposure in coal mine operations by using mechanical controls (e.g., water sprays and ventilation curtains) and adhering to respiratory dust limit standards were deemed mostly effective for the suppression of black lung. Due to these measures, the prevalence of black lung declined to about 3% in the 1990s.

Even though these methods for controlling dust exposure were mostly effective, some miners continued to get the disease. In 1995, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommended reducing the exposure limit for respirable coal mine dust to half of the original amount, but the recommendation was not enacted.[\[27\]](#) Beginning in the early 2000s, the prevalence of black lung began to increase again.[\[28\]](#) Using

NIOSH Coal Workers' X-ray Surveillance Program data, a hot spot analysis revealed that the resurgence of black lung was concentrated in central Appalachia, particularly in Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, and West Virginia.

[29] Due to the recent resurgence of black lung and after much debate, MSHA lowered the respirable dust standard to 1.5 mg/m³ in 2014.

[30] Other recent MSHA improvements include the use of continuous personal dust monitors in an effort to improve real-time dust reporting. [31]

It was another mine disaster, however, the worst in four decades, that raised the nation's attention once again to the problems of both safety and health in the mines. The **Upper Big Branch Mine explosion** on April 5, 2010, in Raleigh County, West Virginia, killed 29 of the 31 miners at the site. Seventeen of those 29 showed signs of black lung disease on autopsy, many of whom were young miners with only a few years on the job. Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship spent a year in prison for "conspiring to willfully violate safety standards" due to the number of outstanding violations at the mine. [32] It was a wake-up call for miners, physicians, and the government that the battle for miner safety and health was far from over.

Technology again played a role in the recent resurgence of the disease, as Anna Allen and Carl Werntz point out that newer mining machines slice through coal and rock much more quickly than older models. [33] The thin coal seams of Appalachia make this method even more problematic as more rock and hazardous **silica** dust are churned up in the mining process.

[34] Recent lung pathology studies show that rapidly progressive pneumoconiosis is associated with elevated exposure to respirable silica and silicates found in thin seam mining. [35] Since 1973, NIOSH has recommended that crystalline silica exposure be limited to 0.05 mg/m³, yet MSHA only recently issued a "Request for Information" about exposure to crystalline silica in 2019. [36] Despite the recent surge in cases of black lung, silica dust continues to be unregulated in the mines.

Controversy still exists about the nature and prevalence of the disease within the medical profession. Much of this research was conducted by investigative reporters in mainstream media. In 2013, investigative research by ABC News and the Center for Public Integrity revealed that some coal companies were paying off prestigious medical professionals to deny claims

of black lung. Dr. Paul Wheeler at Johns Hopkins University reviewed 1,573 cases over a thirteen-year period, including many in which the patients had been approved for benefits by local doctors in Appalachia, but he claims to have never found a single case of black lung.^[37] These reports increased skepticism among many government agencies and persuaded them to investigate the black lung claims process and corporate malfeasance. The Division of Coal Mine Workers' Compensation (DCMWC) no longer credits the negative readings completed at Johns Hopkins and is reinvestigating many of these denied black lung claims for potential redress.^[38]

In 2016, an investigation by National Public Radio (NPR) found that coal miners were suffering from this most serious form of black lung in numbers more than ten times what federal regulators had reported. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) had reported just 99 cases of "complicated" black lung, or Progressive Massive Fibrosis (PMF), throughout the country in the previous five years. However, *NPR* obtained data from just eleven black lung clinics in Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, which reported a total of 962 cases during the same period of time.^[39]

NIOSH finally reported in 2018 that 10% of America's coal miners with 25 or more years of experience had black lung disease.^[40] Another study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that over 20% of miners with 25 or more years who were tested in Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia tested positive for black lung.^[41] A similar report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* suggested it was the largest cluster of PMF reported in the scientific literature.^[42] NIOSH had counted only 115 cases of advanced black lung nationwide through its monitoring program from 2010 to 2018. A second investigation by NPR and Frontline identified more than 2,300 cases by contacting health clinics across Appalachia.^[43] The differences in reported cases are stark. Noting the regulatory failures cited by the NPR/Frontline investigation, in 2019, the Chair of the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor finally scheduled congressional hearings on the epidemic of advanced black lung disease and the government's regulatory failures. The infamous legacy of black lung continues.

The Revitalization of the Black Lung Associations

The recent resurgence of black lung created a need for the revitalization of the black lung movement and many chapters of the Black Lung Association. While the black lung movement exists today, it looks different from the initial movement in the 1960s. A significant change is the number of employed coal miners and, consequently, the number of unionized miners. In 2021, only 43,000 working coal miners remained nationwide. [\[44\]](#)

Many chapters of the Black Lung Association have grown in recent years. There are currently ten local Black Lung Associations in Appalachia—three in Kentucky, five in West Virginia, and two in Virginia—along with several in other states. Another important organization, the National Coalition of Black Lung and Respiratory Disease Clinics (NCBLARDC), has also become an important part of the black lung movement in recent years. The National Coalition serves as an organizing body for the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)-funded black lung clinics across fourteen states. Like the BLA, the NCBLARDC is dedicated to building a unified national voice for the disease and creating a stronger public voice for respiratory disease issues in general. [\[45\]](#) Officially, the purpose of the Black Lung Clinics Program is to reduce the morbidity and mortality associated with occupationally-related coal mine dust lung disease through the provision of quality medical care, outreach, education, and benefits counseling services for active, inactive, retired, and disabled U.S. coal miners. [\[46\]](#) As of 2018, there were 28 black lung clinics located in 15 coal mining states who receive small grants from the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy within HRSA to meet the medical needs of retired and disabled miners. [\[47\]](#) Getting working miners tested, however, has been difficult. Research indicates that many active miners are fearful of losing their jobs, especially given the unstable coal employment in Appalachia. [\[48\]](#) The miners also faced continuing opposition from the coal industry, which historically has demonstrated a pattern of externalizing costs by cutting corners on health and safety. It has also shown little effort to address resurgent black lung and continues to contest the disease and to challenge prevention efforts. [\[49\]](#)

Notably, the industry has seen significant declines in economic productivity over the last several years. More than half of the U.S. coal mines operating in 2008 have now closed. [\[50\]](#) The volume of coal mined in

the U.S. has been consistently dropping since 2010, with coal production in 2020 down almost 18% compared to 2019.^[51] Many of the remaining coal operators are resistant to maintaining the dust levels required by NIOSH. Recent research finds that “hiding evidence from inspectors and falsifying dust samples has become so routinized in the mines . . . that miners are instructed to change practices when inspectors are present.”^[52]

Financial concerns exist for much of the industry and especially the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund and its beneficiaries. The Black Lung Trust Fund is financed by a coal excise tax, which requires coal companies to pay \$1.10 per ton of underground-mined coal and \$0.55 per ton for surface-mined coal.^[53] This fund was created for miners who could not identify the responsible coal operator for their black lung claim or whose former employers had gone out of business. In 2020, coal operators sought a \$220 million cut to the coal excise tax.^[54] Additionally, the coal excise tax was set to expire at the end of 2020. This expiration period meant that money for black lung benefits could dry up quickly. The Black Lung Benefits Disability Trust Fund Solvency Act of 2020, introduced to Congress in late 2020, would extend the black lung excise tax through December 31, 2030. In 2021, the Black Lung Trust Fund was under immense strain as more coal companies filed for bankruptcy and more miners filed for benefits.^[55] Of the 718,123 black lung claims made to the Department of Labor (DOL) between 1973 and 2020, only 2.5% have received compensation, excluding those paid by responsible operators.^[56]

The BLA continues to advocate for miners and black lung benefits. For instance, in 2019 the BLA brought over 150 people to Washington, D.C., to help secure black lung benefits funding through 2020. As a part of the tax extenders package attached to the pandemic relief legislation in late 2020, Congress extended the excise tax, but only for one year, through December 31, 2021.^[57] The solvency of the Black Lung Trust Fund remains questionable. A Government Accounting Office study reported in 2018 that the trust faces financial challenges and that its debt could increase to \$15 billion dollars by 2050, due in part to declining coal production and coal company bankruptcies. Expenditures have consistently exceeded revenue.^[58] In 2020, there was a \$4 billion dollar debt from the federal government.^[59]

Conclusion

The struggle to protect the health and safety of coal miners in Appalachia continues. After seventy years, we now have a better understanding of black lung disease and its causes; however, disagreement still divides the medical profession, elected politicians, and even government agencies as to how we should identify and respond to the disease. Although the UMWA is working with the Black Lung Association to eradicate the disease and to obtain compensation for miners, the coal industry continues its opposition on multiple levels. From the standpoint of disbursements paid to miners over time, the black lung movement has been immensely successful. From 1973 through 2019, there were 715,565 claims and \$166,577,569.00 paid from the Black Lung Trust Fund. These figures do not include benefits paid by responsible coal mine operators and insurers.

[\[60\]](#) Data gathered about all Appalachian states in 2023 indicates that nearly \$130 million was paid in black lung benefits. [\[61\]](#) In 2024, a coal miner with black lung will receive \$772.60 per month, which increases to \$1,545.20 with three or more children. [\[62\]](#) Most, if not all, of their medical bills are paid as well.

The movement had other non-monetary benefits as well. Jimmy Moore, the president of a Black Lung Association chapter in Whitesburg, Kentucky, worked in a union mine for 22 years. He filed an initial claim for healthcare benefits in 2019. Participating in the movement was about more than just monetary compensation. He enjoys being with his mining brothers and fighting for what they think is right for medically compromised miners, their widows, and the younger miners, like his own son, who have complicated black lung disease. [\[63\]](#)

While black lung disease is incurable and fatal, it is preventable, yet we continue to fail to protect our miners. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that every year, about 1,000 miners die from black lung. [\[64\]](#) This rate is likely a conservative estimate. Additionally, the impacts of black lung are wide-reaching based on the magnitude of disability, years of life lost, financial strain, depression, and declining quality of life for miners and their families as they watch their loved ones struggle for their next breath. Although not an isolated Appalachian problem, its disproportionate impact on the region has been devastating for many families.

The black lung movement has been, and continues to be, an important part of a broader crusade in the Appalachian Mountains to protect miners and preserve a future for Appalachians historically dependent on coal. Social and environmental injustice issues abound in Appalachia and have for centuries. The continued struggles of miners are many and include their fight for better workplace protections, the continuation of black lung benefits, and healthy employment alternatives. The black lung movement shows the need for sustained focus on occupational health issues across Appalachia and the United States.

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[14] Hume, *Death and the Mines*, 150.

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A Matter of Justice:

Legal Response to the Appalachian Opioid Crisis

Thomas Parker and Lynnette Noblitt

The opioid epidemic escalated in the 1990s after the introduction of OxyContin, an extended-release version of the pain medication oxycodone, into the prescription pain-relief market. OxyContin was initially approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) specifically for the management of breakthrough pain in advanced cancer patients,^[1] but through marketing of the drug for off-label use by a much wider population, its distribution became widespread and its abuse spiraled into a massive public-health crisis.

While no community has been left untouched, areas of persistent distress and poverty have been hit hardest by this **opioid crisis**. Appalachia—particularly areas of Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia—has suffered overwhelming consequences which threaten every aspect of its communities. As state and federal governments have attempted to reduce the proliferation of **OxyContin** use and abuse, those addicted to OxyContin have turned to more readily available substitutes such as heroin and fentanyl. Frustration has grown over the mounting costs of combating the epidemic, and legislative and regulatory efforts have proven slow and ineffective. As a result, the public has increasingly turned to the courts for solutions, with Appalachian states and communities filing multiple lawsuits in state and federal courts to seek relief and compensation.

State and federal courts play an immeasurable role in addressing the opioid epidemic and the current state of opioid **litigation**. While opioid lawsuits have garnered much attention from the public, such litigation may ultimately be both ineffective and inappropriate. Even if government lawsuits prevail and communities receive the relief requested, litigation is unlikely to

provide sufficient resources to address the epidemic fully. Furthermore, using the courts to supplant the legislative and executive branches of government will lead to ineffective and incomplete resolutions, as the judiciary is not well-suited for public-policy development and implementation.

The Cost of the Opioid Epidemic in Appalachia

The overall cost of the opioid epidemic in Appalachia is incalculable, but local and state governments tasked with addressing the effects of the epidemic have quickly realized that the total bill is enormous. Costs of the opioid epidemic affect the budget of nearly every service that the government provides. The most immediately quantifiable, direct cost of the opioid epidemic is that of healthcare associated with the treatment of overdose, addiction, and drug-related health problems. Medicaid spending on opioid-addiction medication and related treatment costs has skyrocketed in response to the epidemic,^[2] and the health costs extend beyond just those abusing prescription opioids. Although in decline, Appalachia has had the highest rate of babies born to opioid-addicted mothers in the country for decades.^[3] The area has also experienced Hepatitis C and HIV outbreaks in several communities, as individuals taking opioid pills often switch to **heroin** (an illegal opioid that is often injected in unsanitary conditions, resulting in the spread of infectious disease) over the course of their addiction due to the relative availability and cost of the drug compared to OxyContin.^[4] Finally, the widespread availability of **fentanyl**, an extremely potent synthetic opioid, has worsened addictions and resulted in a significant increase in overdose deaths.

The costs of the opioid epidemic extend well past the hospital clinic walls. For example, crime in areas plagued by opioid use has skyrocketed. Once-quiet communities note that nearly all crime in their area is now due to prescription-drug misuse and related addiction; nationwide, nearly two-thirds of incarcerated individuals have a substance use disorder.^[5] As a result, state and local governments have experienced massive overcrowding of jails and prisons. Growing inmate populations have exhausted local budgets, leaving officials to seek tax increases at significant political peril.

Opioid addiction has also exhausted existing social services in many communities. Much of this increase can be directly linked to opioid use, with multiple generations of families often becoming addicted to opioids, leaving limited options for placing a child with another family member. As a result, Appalachian communities have experienced increased demand for **foster-care** services over the past decade.^[6] In addition, schools throughout the area have also noted educational interruptions for students due to suspensions related to their parents' opioid use. Finally, **veterans** are another vulnerable population with a higher rate of overdoses than that of the average population.^[7]

As Appalachian communities struggle to pay the immense costs of the opioid epidemic, they find that the economic productivity of their communities also suffers, reducing their tax base to pay for needed services. While losses in economic productivity and resulting tax income are difficult to quantify, many of the areas hardest hit by the opioid epidemic note serious labor shortages. Local employers describe an inability to find employees who can pass drug screening to qualify to operate heavy machinery or complete other required tasks for unfilled labor positions.^[8]

Corporate Causes of the Opioid Epidemic

The opioid epidemic did not occur overnight. It also did not occur by chance. It has been in significant part the result of corporate strategy, much of which has been revealed through **whistleblowers** and court filings. While much of the pharmaceutical industry continues to deny any wrongdoing, evidence is mounting that pharmaceutical companies actively promoted the off-label use of opioids, purposefully misled medical professionals, manipulated regulatory authorities, and promoted a disregard of the addictive nature of opioid pain medications in the pursuit of profit.

Litigation discovery—the legal process by which parties are able to obtain documents and other evidence from opposing parties under the supervision and power of a court—has revealed that pharmaceutical manufacturers targeted traditional sources of information available to medical professionals, engaging in massive marketing campaigns that touted benefits and dismissed concerns about opioid medications. For decades, the medical community had been warned of the risks of drug-seeking behavior

and opioid addiction. Pharmaceutical manufacturers set out to overcome these fears by arming sales representatives with marketing materials containing unsubstantiated claims about the safety of long-term opioid use. These manufacturers also launched websites full of misleading surveys on opioid safety while stoking fears about **NSAIDs** (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), which are common alternatives to opioids with a much lower risk of addiction or abuse.^[9]

Additionally, opioid manufacturers paid influential doctors identified as “key opinion leaders” to conduct continuing-education events for medical professionals that promoted the safety and efficacy of opioids. These key opinion leaders also promoted to physicians claims of “pseudo-addiction”—the idea that patients labeled as opioid addicts were actually not addicts but individuals being under-treated for pain who should receive more opioids, not fewer—and “opiophobia,” which openly attacked as irrational the medical community’s concerns about long-term opioid use and attempts to monitor opioid prescriptions.^[10]

Opioid manufacturers also used financial donations to influence patient groups and professional organizations such as the American Pain Foundation and the American Pain Society. The goal was to promote peer-to-peer marketing among internal medicine and primary-care physicians who typically did not prescribe opioids and who had limited medical education or experience related to long-term opioid treatment. Manufacturers promoted a series of false claims related to opioid use, even presenting and publishing research studies using false data to bolster their claims of opioid efficacy and safety.^[11]

In addition to systematically marketing false information to medical professionals, pharmaceutical manufacturers and distributors engaged in a variety of other behaviors designed to thwart traditional regulation of the pharmaceutical industry and to maximize company profits. Litigation discovery has revealed evidence that manufacturers required sales representatives to meet aggressive sales quotas for the number and concentration of opioid prescriptions written; this profit motive, in turn, encouraged sales representatives to identify and target doctors with high concentrations of opioid prescriptions.^[12] Opioid sales representatives even provided phone scripts to doctors designed to mislead insurance companies

into believing that patients had cancer in an effort to persuade the insurers to cover long-term opioid prescriptions.^[13]

Pharmaceutical distributors and retail pharmacies compounded the consequences of corporate corruption of pharmaceutical manufacturers with corrupt practices of their own. Distributors systematically failed to report obviously suspicious orders of opioids placed over a period of years. Retail pharmacies also failed to counsel patients on the dangers of addiction despite being aware of overdoses and criminal activity taking place in their own parking lots.^[14]

Despite the obvious harm of these corporate actions on public health, many of these strategies did not violate any laws or regulations at the time. **Regulatory capture**—the co-opting of a regulatory authority for the benefit of a special interest—appears to have played a significant role. Despite science to the contrary, pharmaceutical manufacturers and distributors successfully lobbied a variety of governmental agencies to act to their benefit, including limiting the authority of the **Drug Enforcement Agency** (DEA) to regulate “**pill mills**” (doctors, clinics, or pharmacies that dispense prescription drugs readily and inappropriately)^[15] and convincing the Department of Veterans Affairs to increase opioid prescriptions despite high levels of addiction among military veterans.^[16]

The Legal Response to the Opioid Epidemic: First Wave Litigation

At the turn of the 21st century, individuals suffering from opioid addiction—and eventually states and local communities—started turning to the court system, filing lawsuits against opioid manufacturers and other participants in the prescription-opioid market to seek monetary damages and injunctive relief (e.g., court orders to stop companies from marketing prescription opioids in harmful ways). Opioid-related litigation formed in two waves. First-wave litigation targeted individual doctors for prescribing medications inappropriately and manufacturers for producing harmful prescription drugs. Second-wave litigation framed the proliferation of opioids as a widespread public-health epidemic resulting from the actions of drug companies, distributors, and sales representatives working together to

mislead doctors and patients alike into believing that opioid medications could be widely prescribed and used with a manageable, perhaps even minimal, risk of addiction.^[17]

First-wave opioid litigation largely focused on doctors who prescribed opioid medications and the manufacturer of the time-release opioid medication OxyContin, made by Purdue Pharma. These early civil lawsuits were largely unsuccessful. Individual patients and their family members filed individual tort claims against both specific physicians and Purdue Pharma. While some patients won limited malpractice claims against physicians, they generally did not prevail against the manufacturer. Some courts dismissed claims against pharmaceutical companies based on the “learned intermediary doctrine,” which in some states prevents pharmaceutical manufacturers from being held liable when such entities provide information to learned intermediaries—in these cases, physicians—who interact directly with the patient and ultimately make the decision to prescribe a particular medication based on their medical education, knowledge, experience, and expertise.^[18]

Courts also dismissed some plaintiffs’ claims based on illegal acts committed by the plaintiffs themselves. In a case filed against Purdue Pharma and decided in 2006, the Supreme Court of Mississippi held that “[t]his Court will not lend aid to a party whose cause of action directly results from an immoral or an illegal act committed by that party.”^[19] This stigmatization of opioid users continues in many facets of the legal system, viewing addiction not as a disease but a moral failing worthy of criminal punishment. The first wave of opioid litigation came to an end in 2007 when individual plaintiffs prevailed on state false-advertising and consumer-protection claims in addition to malpractice claims, providing a new and perhaps more promising path for seeking judicial relief. These early, relatively modest victories set the stage for a much larger second wave of opioid litigation.^[20]

The Legal Response to the Opioid Epidemic: Second-Wave Litigation

In the second wave of opioid litigation, plaintiffs are no longer focused on filing lawsuits against individual doctors or a single pharmaceutical company. Once major segments of American society began to recognize the

systemic nature of the opioid epidemic, the legal community began to seek recovery from far deeper pockets. Instead of filing lawsuits on behalf of individuals based on their personally-suffered injuries, governments sued to recover costs directly suffered by the governmental entity and in their capacity to act as legal representatives for the public. Defendants now include representatives up and down the supply chain such as drug manufacturers, distributors, pharmacy retailers, and organizations responsible for defining appropriate standards for opioid prescription and treatment.

The causes of action or basis for claims in second-wave litigation are significantly different as well. Government entities have filed lawsuits based upon violations of consumer-protection laws.^[21] Traditionally, consumer protection laws are designed to protect individuals from product hazards, particularly those for which information is unavailable to the general public. These suits allege that opioid manufacturers, distributors, and retail pharmacies knowingly mischaracterized the risk of opioid addiction to doctors and patients through marketing materials and statements. The suits also claim that these same actions defrauded Medicaid and Medicare as well as a variety of related state-assistance and insurance programs, since the defendants' making repeatedly untrue statements to doctors and payment agencies resulted in pharmaceutical manufacturers and pharmacies receiving fraudulent payments from those programs.

Government entities also filed suit based upon traditional **tort** claims of **negligence**.^[22] A tort claim asserts wrongdoing against another that results in civil or financial liability rather than criminal liability. A negligence claim specifically asserts that someone failed to take proper care when doing something. In a negligence lawsuit, the plaintiff must prove that the defendant owed the plaintiff a **duty of care** and breached (or failed to meet) that duty of care. This duty of care is the societal norm of how individuals or corporations are expected to treat each other. Once the duty of care is defined, tortfeasors (those who commit torts) are held responsible for the foreseeable consequences of their failure to fulfill obligations and expectations.

Governments allege that pharmaceutical manufacturers, distributors, and retail pharmacies all failed to meet their duty of care to the public, and that pharmaceutical distributors and retail pharmacies failed to create a system for reporting suspicious opioid orders to the Drug Enforcement

Agency and local law enforcement agencies.^[23] Furthermore, governments claim that pharmaceutical manufacturers breached their duty of care owed to the public by their aggressive, unregulated, and off-label marketing of opioids. Governments further urge the courts that this off-label marketing resulted in negligence *per se*,^[24] a legal doctrine which allows plaintiffs to establish the first two elements of a tort claim—duty and breach of duty—by showing simply that a defendant violated a law or regulation designed to promote public safety.^[25]

Most recently, governmental entities have also filed suit alleging the creation of a **public nuisance**.^[26] This cause of action is the most novel and likely most fraught with legal complications. Public nuisance claims traditionally focus on environmental factors such as noise or air pollution and are filed both to stop future pollution and to obtain damages for the consequences of past pollution. In opioid litigation, however, the plaintiffs focus on language in public-nuisance statutes that protects the public from unreasonable interference with rights of the general public, including public health, safety, and peace. The plaintiffs argue that prevalent crime, infectious outbreaks, and the increased need for social services are direct and foreseeable results of widespread opioid addiction, fulfilling the requirements of the public-nuisance statutes. This legal strategy aims to recover not only past damages but the costs of abatement (i.e., paying to fix the societal problems that the defendants' actions have allegedly created).

Based upon these causes of action, governmental entities have sought a wide variety of monetary damages and other forms of relief. In addition to civil penalties for individual violations of consumer-protection and Medicaid/Medicare fraud laws and regulations, plaintiffs have sought injunctive relief (court orders) to prohibit the defendants from future deceptive marketing as well as compensatory and punitive damages.

^[27] Although governmental entities know that courts are typically hesitant to grant relief other than carefully defined and demonstrated monetary damages, the additional injunctive remedies sought by the justice system demonstrate the plaintiffs' desire not only to recover monetary damages for past offenses, but to enact **policy** changes designed to reduce or eliminate future injury to the public.

Pharmaceutical Industry Response to Government Legal Action

The consistent response of the pharmaceutical industry to these second-wave lawsuits has been to deny responsibility for all causes of action and damages. The bases for this denial are even more varied than the claims themselves; however, all companies argue that the plaintiffs cannot establish both direct and proximate cause for their tort (negligence and negligence *per se*) claims.^[28] The defendant companies argue that the government cannot prove **direct causation** because it cannot prove that each individual would not have become addicted to opioids “but for” the defendants’ distribution of misleading marketing materials and information to doctors and consumers. The defendants further assert that the government cannot prove **proximate causation** because it cannot show that the financial consequences of opioid addiction stemming from the defendant companies’ misleading marketing were reasonably foreseeable or predictable to the defendants.

Defendants have also relied upon the doctrine of superseding cause to break the causal link between opioid addiction and damages such as those resulting in criminal activity or the need for enhanced social services such as foster care.^[29] The doctrine of **superseding cause** relieves defendants from liability even when the defendants have started the chain of events leading to the injury, if the defendants can prove that an independent and unforeseen event or cause, rather than their own initial action, produced a harmful result that the defendant could not have reasonably foreseen when it acted initially.^[30] Defendants argue that the later actions of third parties such as consumers, their family members, or others that result in criminal acts (e.g., illegal drug use, drug trafficking) were not reasonably foreseeable or predictable consequences of the actions of the pharmaceutical industry. Similarly, the defendants rely upon the derivative injury rule, under which some (but not all) states bar recovery of damages by a third party (here, the governmental entity that is suing) if that party is too far removed from the fraudulent or misleading communication by the defendant to consumers.

The pharmaceutical industry vehemently argues that public-nuisance law does not apply to the opioid epidemic.^[31] The companies argue that public-nuisance law is a private rather than a public right so the state cannot bring such a suit on behalf of its citizens. In other words, private individuals

directly suffering harm are allowed to sue under nuisance laws, not public entities suing on their behalf. Governmental entities, however, maintain that significant interference with public health and safety can form the basis for a nuisance claim. The companies once again respond that there is a lack of foreseeability or proximate causation and that illegal diversion and other activities constituted superseding and intervening acts that broke a causal link required for liability. Governments respond that the illegal actions were foreseeable and there is sufficient proximate causation to assign liability to the resultant harms from diversion.

Other arguments made by the pharmaceutical industry demonstrate that its members view—or at least portray—the opioid epidemic as an inevitable public-health problem for which they bear no responsibility. Companies argue that all cases should be dropped under the free public services doctrine, which in some states bars the government from seeking reimbursement for services funded by the general public even if the need for those public services has been created by the negligent actions of an individual or company.^[32] Successful application of this doctrine could allow the pharmaceutical industry to escape litigation with no liability at all to government entities.^[33]

Perhaps even more boldly, pharmaceutical companies present estoppel-like arguments. **Estoppel** arises when an entity makes a legal claim and then attempts to reverse this claim. Courts will rule that the entity is “estopped” from reversing their claim. The companies argue that governmental entities cannot recover damages for opioid misuse since they knew about the risks of prescription medications for a long time and did nothing to prevent their widespread misuse.^[34] The governments predictably argue that their inability to combat opioid misuse successfully is not acquiescence. Indeed, since approximately 2010, state and local governments have tried in various ways to combat opioid abuse and, in the course of doing so, learned of the defendants’ conduct that led to individuals becoming addicted and opioids being readily available to them.^[35] The governments further argue that the limited timeframe for filing suit due to statutes of limitations should be counted only from the time that the government entity learned of the defendant’s malfeasance, preventing defendants from avoiding liability based simply on the passage of time since their initial rollout of opioid medications onto the market.^[36]

Second-Wave Litigation Outcomes

The large-scale outcome of second-wave opioid litigation remains unclear. The cases filed in this period are far more complex and massive than those filed in the first wave. Discovery in many of these cases may take years to complete and the full extent of damages may never be fully demonstrated. Decisions hailed as bellwether cases may serve as a roadmap for future litigation.

A 2021 decision in Oklahoma against Johnson & Johnson may serve as a warning to both future plaintiffs and defendants.^[37] The state of Oklahoma filed suit requesting \$17.5 billion for damages allegedly caused when Johnson & Johnson engaged in dangerous false marketing which flooded the state with opioids and resulted in a public nuisance.^[38] The case, heard before a judge only rather than a jury, ultimately awarded the state \$465 million in damages—the amount required to provide a single year of services needed to combat the opioid epidemic in the state.^[39] Although state experts testified that the opioid epidemic would likely require twenty years of such services to resolve the public health crisis, the judge found that the state had not proven damages past a single year.^[40] The state of Oklahoma vowed to produce evidence of ongoing public nuisance and to seek future damages. Johnson & Johnson has already filed an appeal of the decision.^[41]

The full implications of the Johnson & Johnson decision are even less clear since it was decided in an Oklahoma state court applying Oklahoma state law.^[42] While many second-wave lawsuits allege public-nuisance claims, every state has a different body of public-nuisance law, and other states are not obligated to follow an Oklahoma state court's decision. Furthermore, Oklahoma has a uniquely broad public-nuisance law which may be the only reason that this lawsuit was successful.^[43] The implication of the Oklahoma decision for cases that other states and local entities have filed since approximately 2015 is entirely unclear regardless of the ultimate outcome of the appeal.

A second opioid case was settled in 2019 just hours before going to trial in federal court in the Northern District of Ohio. Two Ohio counties, Summit and Cuyahoga, had filed suit against opioid distributors AmerisourceBergen, Cardinal Health, and McKesson as well as opioid manufacturer Teva Pharmaceuticals.^[44] Instead of going forward with the

trial, the distributors settled the case, pledging to pay a total of \$215 million to the counties. Teva Pharmaceuticals agreed to provide \$20 million in cash and an additional \$25 million in medications to treat addiction and overdose. Since this case settled rather than going to trial, it does nothing to clarify questions of law for future litigants.^[45] Furthermore, all four companies agreed to the settlement on the condition that they did not have to admit any wrongdoing.^[46]

Although this federal settlement will provide badly needed funds for social services and medical costs to deal with the opioid crisis, it does little to shed light on the broader legal situation forming between the pharmaceutical industry and local governments. There are currently over 3,000 lawsuits filed in federal court by county, city, and tribal governments regarding prescription opioids.^[47] The lawsuits have been consolidated into one massive lawsuit referred to the National Prescription Opioid Litigation (NPOL), which is situated in the Northern District of Ohio with Judge Dan Polster presiding. Judge Polster has publicly acknowledged that he would prefer that the parties actively work toward settlement and has rebuked the legislative and executive branches of the various governments involved in the lawsuits for failing to address the opioid epidemic earlier.^[48]

The Competency of the Courts in Addressing the Opioid Epidemic

There are downsides to having the courts play such a prominent role in problems as complex and deep-rooted as the opioid epidemic, however. The tremendous scope and size of opioid-epidemic litigation have forced judges and the courts to resolve disputes that affect many parties beyond the listed litigants. In particular, the NPOL is of such a scale that a single court decision could drastically change the course of the entire pharmaceutical industry. In tort lawsuits, courts generally have two types of remedies available—monetary damages paid by defendants to plaintiffs along with injunctions (orders) issued by the court telling the defendant not to engage in certain activities (e.g., restrictions on marketing of opioids to medical professionals and/or consumers). State and federal legislatures have a much broader range of options such as creating and funding specific programs to assist the victims of opioid addiction, and these may be much more targeted

and effective than the blunt instruments of monetary damages and injunctions. In addition, some remedies ordered by courts may have unintended consequences, such as limiting availability of potent palliative-care medications to individuals who actually need them or deterring (due to liability concerns) pharmaceutical companies from investing in further research that might yield more effective and/or less addictive alternatives to the prescription opioid medications currently on the market.

While courts are limited in their available remedies, plaintiffs' attorneys also face limitations due to ethical rules that govern their conduct during litigation. Attorneys are required to zealously represent and seek the best results for the specific client or clients that they represent, rather than the best interests of others or society as a whole. In addition, when employed on a contingency-fee basis, an attorney's compensation is determined by a set percentage of monetary damages obtained. This requirement means that non-monetary remedies such as injunctions against the industry to prevent future harm to others may not be in the interest of the attorney's client, and settlements for monetary damages that directly benefit the attorney's client are incentivized. These settlements are often reached before trial begins, preventing the public and the media from obtaining information on the industry's practices through court proceedings. Settlements also often have conditions including non-disclosure agreements (in which the plaintiffs agree not to discuss any of the subject matter of the case with anyone as a condition for receiving payment) and non-disparagement clauses (in which the plaintiffs agree not to make any negative public statements about the defendants in the future as a condition for receiving payment). These conditions effectively prevent litigation from making information public, which limits opportunities to spur legislative or regulatory action through public airing of the defendants' conduct and business practices.

The adversarial nature of the litigation process also prevents any reasonable possibility for consensus building. By its very nature, litigation is coercive. One party files a lawsuit, and the other party is forced to appear in court. At the end of litigation, there are winners and losers. Even alternative dispute resolution techniques such as mediation fail to reach the same type of consensus as the legislative process. Litigation does not allow for solutions where all parties can benefit in the same way that the legislative or rulemaking process can.

Where governments have filed large-scale suits against the opioid industry, they have done so in the hope that litigation will result in large-scale monetary awards that will fund court-ordered remedies that effectively mimic legislative action paid for by placing costs (through court-awarded damages) on businesses that allegedly caused the opioid epidemic rather than taxpayers in general. But imposing a “litigation tax” upon these corporations will likely cause them to simply pass these costs back to consumers, as the companies continue to provide products and services that consumers value. This transactional cost will ultimately raise the price of pharmaceuticals, as settling lawsuits or paying for damages simply becomes a cost of doing business for drug companies and distributors.

In addition to damage awards themselves, the litigation process—including the hiring of attorneys and scientific experts, discovery expenses, and other court fees and costs—is expensive for both the industry members already named in litigation and those expecting later filings. Once again, this cost imposed upon such corporations can be simply passed onto the consumers—often the same consumers that the litigation was filed to protect and defend. Unless the lawsuits result in long-term changes in corporate practices, they may ultimately only pass the costs from one set of injured parties to the next.

In addition to the expense of the litigation process, the judiciary may not be competent to provide long-term public funding to address public health and safety issues. Damages must be proven in court with evidence, and mere speculation as to future costs may not be enough to support a verdict on appeal. Furthermore, courts are reluctant to commit themselves to overseeing long-term remedies, preferring to bring a matter to closure with a single monetary award.

Finally, courts typically do not oversee how a plaintiff uses the funds after a court has ordered a monetary award. In the case of government-filed lawsuits against the opioid industry, there is little guarantee that cash-strapped governments will use the money received through a damage award or settlement for opioid relief at all, let alone use it in an effective manner to combat and ultimately end the opioid epidemic. Public **class-action** settlements or damage awards distributed to federal or state entities can easily be diverted in the budgeting process. If funds are not clearly earmarked for use in programs addressing the specific public-health concerns at issue in the litigation, the funds can be used to fill completely

unrelated budget needs. Misdirection of such funds can occur years after the original award when parties and the public no longer have the time and attention to guard against such actions. In this sense, courts are limited in their ability to fashion effective relief and may simply end up shifting costs in a way that at best does little good for society, and at worst may actually increase costs to consumers and taxpayers.

The Appropriate Role of the Judiciary in Opioid-Addiction Policy Development

Although the judiciary may not be designed for public-policy development, some functions of the litigation process may ultimately aid in promoting the development of public policy through traditional legislative institutions. For instance, the judiciary is a competent body for the rigorous collection and examination of facts relevant to the litigation which can later be used in the legislative process. Rules of **civil litigation**, both in state and federal courts, provide for opportunities to gather information about problems otherwise hidden from the public. The discovery process allows for parties to demand that documents and other evidence be exchanged between the parties. It also requires that each party identify witnesses to provide **depositions** and other forms of **testimony** admitting facts and providing explanations. But judges can limit transparency through **sealing** documents (allowing them to be viewed only by the parties and the judge rather than the public), **redactions** (in which documents themselves may be exchanged but some information is blacked out or withheld), and other methods to maintain attorney-client privilege and litigant privacy. Rules of civil procedure limit discoverable information, and rules of evidence can prevent facts, even if unearthed and exchanged through the discovery process, from being introduced in court proceedings. Due to these rules, judicial proceedings are often decided using incomplete information that would be allowed in a legislative setting not bound by the rules governing trials.

The limitations of litigation discovery may be overcome when public scrutiny of an issue attracts media attention. Media investigation is not limited by the litigation filings and can allow broader discovery. Furthermore, the discovery process and media attention can embolden

whistleblowers to emerge from the corporate shadows, providing even further information about hidden practices. The combination of judicial and media investigation can provide powerful tools that lead to increased transparency that are not available through either tactic alone.

State and federal opioid epidemic litigation has already resulted in substantial disclosures of corporate documents and testimony that have highlighted damaging practices in the pharmaceutical industry. The cases have also inspired whistleblowers and industry members to denounce past actions. This encouragement to disclose wrongdoings in turn fuels continued public outcry and ultimately can force legislators to take positive action.

In addition to rigorously collecting and examining facts, litigation requires that parties specifically identify causes of action and form arguments that can be tested through the adversarial process. Legal trials require disciplined thinking, exacting arguments, and ultimately proof that reaches the legal threshold for liability. In contrast, public legislative hearings increasingly have become venues for politicians to pontificate or provide “sound bites” for television and social media rather than effective questioning of witnesses or reasoned debate.

Opioid-epidemic litigation has forced the judiciary to engage in a rigorous analysis of both the causes and effects of the epidemic. Claims filed under tort law require the judiciary to examine carefully both the foreseeability of the epidemic due to corporate actions and the full scope of damages that result. This analysis can serve to educate the public on the relative culpability of corporate actors as well as to change public attitudes toward the victims of opioid addiction.

Next Steps in the Search for Justice

The search for justice for communities ravaged by the opioid epidemic continues as the **COVID-19** pandemic complicated matters even further. Since the onset of COVID-19 in the United States, communities most vulnerable to opioid addiction have suffered massive disruption to their daily lives and economic livelihoods. In turn, there has been a significant increase in deaths from opioid overdose.^[49] While the consequences of corporate action have intensified under pandemic conditions, the legal system dramatically slowed. Many court systems closed to the public,

leaving them unable to docket civil cases for months and delaying access to justice and compensation for victims and communities impacted by the opioid crisis. Actions and orders in federal multidistrict litigation became sparse and inconsequential for over a year. As governmental entities focus on pandemic-related crises, there is simply less time and public attention available to demand justice for opioid victims and their communities. Even years after the courts reopened to the public, judges still struggle to clear backlogged dockets. The next steps are uncertain at this time; however, continuing to seek legal remedy seems inevitable in light of record-breaking opioid deaths, dwindling governmental resources, and an absence of legislative action.

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Restorative Justice amid Appalachia's Opioid Struggles

Holly Ningard

In Buncombe County, North Carolina, a mobile van unit operated by the Steady Collective regularly sets up shop to provide syringe exchange services, naloxone, referrals to health care services, and more resources to community members. Steady seeks to help people who use drugs do so safely, while increasing access to information regarding treatment and other resources. The mobile unit was established as an adaptation to restrictions on gatherings following the spread of the **COVID-19** pandemic. Also in response to the pandemic, staff and volunteers took up distributing masks, personal hygiene products, and hand sanitizer, as well as educational material regarding how to stop the spread of COVID-19. The Steady Collective is just one of many community-based organizations responding to public health issues, including the opioid crisis, in their backyard.

It's difficult to talk about crime in Appalachia today without discussing **opioids**. Rates of opioid misuse and overdose death were already higher in the Appalachian region than any other geographic area in the United States, and initial data indicates these rates have risen further since the beginning of COVID-19 lockdowns. [\[1\]](#) When prescription opioid misuse began to make news headlines, the painkiller OxyContin was nicknamed “**hillbilly heroin**,” and the face of the social problem became predominantly poor, white, and rural. [\[2\]](#) **Addiction** of any type is often viewed as a personal moral failure and the result of bad choices made by individuals. Such attitudes reinforce stereotypes of Appalachian people as backwards and unable, or unwilling, to pull themselves out of poverty and make a better life, while neglecting broader social conditions that created and perpetuated the **opioid crisis**.

Criminalization of substance misuse is one type of response to the opioid crisis in Appalachia. Work done by groups like the Steady Collective and others highlighted in this chapter demonstrates another. Criminologists

refer to the different approaches as retributive justice and restorative justice, respectfully. Appalachia is home to a long history of mutual aid, which offers the potential to reframe responses to widespread rates of opioid use and crime reduction strategies more broadly.

A Brief History of the Opioid Crisis in Appalachia

Opioids are a class of drugs used to reduce pain in the body. Opioids can refer to both illicit drugs, such as heroin, as well as drugs that can be legally obtained with a prescription, such as oxycodone or hydrocodone. Opioids can be taken as a pill, snorted, smoked, or injected using a syringe. Opioid misuse refers to any use of an opioid outside of the direction of a physician, and there are many reasons why someone may misuse opioids. Some do so because they develop a tolerance to the drug they are using, meaning they need to take more of the drug to achieve the same pain reduction. Others do so because the drug produces a euphoric effect. Regardless of the reason, opioid misuse can evolve into opioid use disorder (OUD), or opioid addiction, when individuals are no longer able to stop or control their drug intake and when opioid use impacts their daily life.

[3] Prolonged use and misuse of opioids can lead to physical dependency, long-term health problems, and risk of overdose death.

The **opioid crisis** or **opioid epidemic** refers to a period of time in which opioid overdose death rates began to sharply increase in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has identified three waves to this crisis. The first wave began in 1999, when the majority of overdose deaths involved prescription opioids. [4] This wave involved aggressive marketing of prescription painkillers by pharmaceutical companies. In the 1980s and 90s, the United States saw a growing demand for a solution to chronic pain, and companies like Purdue Pharma offered a seemingly easy answer: prescription painkillers like **OxyContin**. The drawback was that the pills were highly addictive; as early as the 1950s, the World Health Organization issued warnings to physicians about the addictive properties of oxycodone. However, pharmaceutical companies were keenly aware of the lack of regulation regarding marketing for their products, and so they knowingly downplayed the risk of addiction when selling their products to physicians.

[5] Opioid overdose is one example of what is known as a **disease of**

despair. Diseases of despair also include suicide and alcoholic liver disease.[\[6\]](#)

The second wave began in 2010, marking the point when heroin surpassed prescription opioids as the most prevalent opioid-involved overdose drug. The third wave, which began in 2013 and continues today, has shown an increase in deaths involving synthetic opioids like fentanyl. In 2019, over 70% of all overdose deaths involved an opioid,[\[7\]](#) while 74% of opioid-related overdoses involved a synthetic opioid product. Synthetic opioids are particularly concerning due to an increased risk of accidental overdose deaths. In 2000, 77% of opioid overdose deaths were categorized as accidental, and in 2019, 91% of opioid overdose deaths were deemed accidental. This jump is attributed to the fact that synthetic opioids can vary in strength compared with prescription painkillers.[\[8\]](#)

Beyond the risk of overdose death, opioid misuse and abuse carry a number of social and public health concerns. One concern involves people who inject drugs intravenously, most commonly heroin. People who inject drugs risk infection at the injection site, as well as the spread of disease like hepatitis-C or HIV, particularly when needles are shared. Intravenous drug use is associated with other high-risk behaviors such as unprotected sex.

[\[9\]](#) Beyond individual health risks, addiction strains family ties, negatively impacts local economies, and increases rates of incarceration. While prescription opioid use has not been linked to an increase in violent crime, it has been linked to an increase in property crimes. Such property crimes, like theft, most likely occur so that individuals can obtain more drugs.[\[10\]](#)

Opioid addiction has disproportionately impacted Appalachia; opioid prescription medication misuse and abuse, and subsequently overdose rates, are higher here than in any other region of the United States, particularly within Central and North Central Appalachia.[\[11\]](#) Four Appalachian states—Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia—had the highest rates of drug overdose deaths in the country in 2017.[\[12\]](#) While deaths resulting from diseases of despair have been steadily increasing throughout the United States, they have risen much more sharply in Appalachia. At the start of the first wave of the opioid crisis in 1999, mortality rates from diseases of despair between Appalachia and the rest of the United States were approximately equal. By 2017, the combined mortality rate from diseases of

despair was 45% higher in Appalachia than in the non-Appalachian United States. Overdose mortality alone is 65% higher in Appalachia than in other places in the United States.^[13] Addiction is often characterized as a personal moral failure. However, individual bad choices cannot account for the concentrated use and misuse of opioids within Appalachia; several cultural characteristics have made this region particularly vulnerable to the opioid crisis.

Many industries within Appalachia, such as logging and mining, rely on physical labor and carry increased risk for on-the-job injuries. Much of Appalachia is a **medical desert**—i.e., healthcare, particularly in rural areas, is historically understaffed and underfunded. Prescription opioids promise a cheap and easy solution to chronic pain; the demand for pain relief in a way that did not overburden an already thin budget meant that Appalachia was one area targeted by pharmaceutical marketing.^[14] ^[15] ^[16] Appalachians who receive disability benefits are more likely to engage in nonmedical prescription opioid use, further indicating that opioid misuse is linked to pain management.^[17] In short, the demand for pain relief intersected with a lack of access to alternative healthcare treatments and created an environment where Appalachians were over-prescribed with opioid medications.

Once opioids began to spread throughout Appalachia, additional factors enabled or exacerbated rates of misuse. For example, low educational attainment, a lack of access to mental health treatment, and higher rates of persistent poverty are three common predictors of substance use disorders, all of which are higher in Appalachia.^[18] People who use drugs often do so in groups of friends and family members, where drug use is normalized.^[19] There also exists a lack of access to comprehensive drug treatment and certified drug and alcohol counselors. When drug treatment does exist, community members may face hurdles to accessing the treatment due to the cost or unreliable transportation.^[20] Finally, addiction is often stigmatized or seen as a shameful quality in an individual. Stigma can prevent people who use drugs from seeking help, especially in small towns where everybody knows everybody.^[21] Each of these factors has contributed to higher rates of opioid use and abuse in certain areas of Appalachia.

The spread of COVID-19 has placed further strain on public health resources and services aiming to respond to the opioid crisis. Early

pandemic lockdowns restricted patient access to healthcare providers, especially those who could prescribe treatment drugs such as methadone. Individuals who work in places with hourly employment saw their hours reduced, or perhaps were laid off entirely. Depression and anxiety accompanied guidelines for isolation and social distancing from others, which may increase the desire to use drugs. A lack of access to reliable internet has further isolated especially rural Appalachians from friends, family, and school. [\[22\]](#)

Addiction is more complicated than an individual's decision to use drugs. Various social and economic factors create conditions where certain groups of people are more vulnerable to addiction than others. A lack of social and economic support can mean that people who use drugs are unable to access necessary treatment. This culmination of variables raises the question: what can be done to reduce rates of opioid misuse in Appalachia? One immediate response to opioid misuse in the U.S. has been **criminalization**. Criminalization refers to the process by which a certain behavior becomes a crime, which necessitates discussion of the larger philosophy of retributive justice.

Retributive Responses to the Opioid Crisis in Appalachia

The United States criminal justice system functions predominantly under the model of retributive justice. **Retributive justice** is a response to crime that focuses on identifying laws that have been broken, offenders who can be assigned blame for lawbreaking, and punishments that fit the crime. The public entrusts criminal justice professionals (e.g., law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and judges) to facilitate the process of determining whether or not a crime has taken place and who should be held responsible for that crime. Under this model, punishment is the focus: justice is achieved when people who break the law serve a sentence for their transgression. [\[23\]](#)

An important concept in retributive justice is the idea of **deterrence**, or what prevents people from committing crime. There are two types of deterrence that criminal justice professionals are interested in. The first is general deterrence, which is concerned with how threats of punishment influence public behavior, and the second is specific deterrence, which focuses on how a particular threat of punishment may influence an

individual's behavior. An example of general deterrence would be evaluating how a new drug law impacts a state's drug arrest rate. An example of specific deterrence would be evaluating whether individuals who are on probation reoffend.^[24] The overall idea of deterrence is that if the threat of punishment is strict and certain enough, individuals will choose not to offend in order to avoid the negative consequences of lawbreaking.

Retributive responses to the opioid prioritize law enforcement, the creation of harsh sentences like lengthy prison sentences or large fines, and the building of new prisons. These strategies represent some of the most visible responses to addiction: arrest, trial, and incarceration. Yet, harsh drug laws have done little to reduce rates of opioid misuse in Appalachia. No evidence supports the assumption that imprisonment for drug offenses reduces rates of self-reported drug use, drug overdose deaths, or drug arrests.^[25] While research has shown that access to comprehensive drug treatment programs while incarcerated can help inmates with substance abuse disorder,^[26] not all correctional facilities receive the funding or are able to hire qualified staff to provide those services, and detoxification alone has not been shown to be an effective strategy for treating substance use disorders.^[27] Because jails and prisons often are not spaces where individuals can access treatment, many individuals relapse upon release. Individuals who are released from prison are at a significantly greater risk of drug overdose death compared with the general public.^[28]

Lack of access to treatment is not the only reason that incarceration fails to deter people who use drugs. These policies fail because they do not address the root causes of addiction, including a lack of access to educational opportunities, mental health treatment, or gainful economic opportunity. At its worst, incarceration can make these conditions worse. Individuals who have been convicted of a felony often find difficulty obtaining housing and employment upon release. Because of these hardships, they often return to the same social networks that they were in before arrest. If these are the same groups of people who were also using drugs, there may be little opportunity for individuals to seek help.^[29] Criminalizing addiction thus helps to reinforce harmful negative stereotypes of poor, Appalachian addicts and contributes to a frustrating cycle of incarceration, relapse, and recidivism.

Beyond failing to curb individual drug use, strict drug laws may exacerbate the risk of overdose death. An example of this phenomenon has occurred in West Virginia. West Virginia has what are known as **Good Samaritan laws**, which protect individuals from being charged with a crime if they voluntarily help individuals during emergency situations. In theory, these laws would protect someone who was experiencing overdose. However, West Virginia is also one of 25 states which have drug-induced homicide laws. [\[30\]](#) Under these laws, sharing drugs with someone who dies of an accidental overdose can result in murder charges. These two seemingly contradictory laws place people who use drugs in a difficult position: if individuals are using together, and one person overdoses, others may avoid calling emergency services out of fear of being charged with a crime. [\[31\]](#)

A final consequence of retributive approaches to OUD is that they foster a culture of blame. Especially when addiction is viewed as a choice, individuals are blamed for their drug use. Blame can then be used to justify attitudes that people with substance use disorders deserve the consequences of addiction, including incarceration, barriers to secure housing and employment, poverty, or even overdose. [\[32\]](#) [\[33\]](#) To be sure, individuals have a degree of personal **agency** when it comes to drug use, but a culture of blame further stigmatizes drug use in ways that can prevent people who use drugs from seeking help. [\[34\]](#) However, throughout Appalachia, some groups are challenging the stigma surrounding drug use in an effort to move away from blame and to help people who use drugs connect to vital resources and services. A second philosophy of justice, restorative justice, can help to construct strategies for responding to the opioid crisis.

Restorative Responses to the Opioid Crisis in Appalachia

The philosophy of restorative justice began as a critique to retributive approaches to punishment. Rather than focusing on lawbreaking, **restorative justice** attempts to respond to harm by restoring what has been lost (e.g., money, property, trust) following a harmful action. This perspective acknowledges that not all behaviors which have been criminalized are harmful, just as not all harmful behaviors are criminalized. Restorative approaches ask who or what has been harmed by a given act, what is needed

to repair the harm, and who should be responsible for offering the repair. Restorative approaches often bring the experience of both victims of harm and the community into the center of discussions on how to move forward after harm has taken place.[\[35\]](#)

Appalachian cultural values of kinship, independence and pride, community, and love of place[\[36\]](#) contribute to a culture where restorative approaches to harm can thrive. Indeed, the region is home to a deep history of community organizing and mutual aid as a response to various local social problems, including drug use and abuse. Relying on local networks of family, both blood kinship and chosen family, is sometimes a preferred response due to distrust of outsiders. For example, people who use drugs in Appalachia may avoid calling law enforcement or seeking help from outside medical services because they do not trust that these groups can adequately help them.[\[37\]](#) [\[38\]](#) Local groups, staffed by volunteers and members who come from the same community, on the other hand, may have a greater understanding of the issues faced by people who use drugs in Appalachia. When it comes to responses of opioid use, staff and volunteers may be former substance users themselves, further increasing connections with people who use drugs. Many of these groups reject traditional understandings of addiction as being a choice or a personal moral failure best handled by the justice system. Instead, they seek to understand the root causes of addiction within their community and work to restore harm caused by substance misuse.

A key principle that many local groups responding to the opioid crisis in Appalachia embrace is the philosophy of **harm reduction**. Harm reduction, in contrast, begins from a place of empathy and respect for people who use drugs. It is a nonjudgmental perspective which acknowledges that drug use is a reality of human life, and it emphasizes that ignoring or condemning the behavior only increases the stigmatization of people who use drugs. Given that it is a reality that some people will use drugs, proponents of harm reduction seek to help make drug use safer, and to make sure that people who use drugs are aware of options for treatment if or when they are ready to seek help. Programs that focus on harm reduction do not ignore the problems that accompany substance use or abuse; on the contrary, given that stigmatizing drug use has such a high potential to exacerbate these harms, harm reduction seeks nonjudgmental responses which can make use safer.

[\[39\]](#) Three restorative strategies being implemented right now in Appalachia

include mobile distribution sites, needle exchange programs, and medication assisted treatment.

The Steady Collective's mobile resource unit is just one of many groups operating mobile units throughout Appalachia. Sometimes, **mobile distribution units** operate through health departments, such as the Mobile Harm Reduction Unit in Kentucky, which provides services for Clay, Knox, Laurel, Jackson, and Whitley counties. Each unit is different, but they provide a variety of services: distribution of health information, fentanyl testing, screening for diseases such as hepatitis-C and HIV, basic wound care, and a list of local healthcare and service providers. Importantly, mobile resource units often offer training to instruct community members how to recognize and respond to an overdose. Such training is often accompanied by the distribution of **naloxone**, a drug used to reverse opioid overdose. Naloxone distribution is sometimes a controversial issue, but it is essential for reducing opioid overdose deaths. [\[40\]](#) Sometimes, mobile resource distribution takes the form of setting up a table at a community event. For example, the **Travelin' Appalachians Revue (TRA)**, based in West Virginia, is an arts show that features poetry, music, and art at various festivals and productions throughout the region. In addition to celebrating Appalachian art, TRA regularly sets up information tables to provide harm reduction information. Mobile resource units such as these help build trust between providers and community members, and they also reach community members who may have limited ability to travel. Ultimately, the goal of many units is to provide healthcare to community members and to reduce the harms associated with substance abuse through education and community building.

Sometimes, mobile resource units will also offer **syringe exchange programs (SEPs)**. SEPs may be offered at standing locations, such as at the offices of Choice Health Network in Tennessee or at certain public health departments. For people who inject drugs, using a clean syringe each time they use is essential for stopping the spread of infectious diseases like HIV or hepatitis-C, and SEPs provide a safe way for people to dispose of used syringes and to obtain new supplies. These sites are often accompanied by information distribution, fentanyl testing, HIV and hepatitis screening, and more resources. However, people who inject drugs often face barriers to obtaining clean syringes, and some areas within Appalachia prohibit the possession of syringes without a prescription. Even in areas without these

laws, people who inject drugs may face stigma when purchasing new syringes, which can deter them from doing so.[\[41\]](#)

As with the distribution of naloxone, SEPs are controversial. Some people are hesitant to support SEPs, believing that they may encourage drug use and consequently increase used syringes in community neighborhoods. However, evidence has shown that SEPs are more likely to reduce syringe litter because they provide places for people who inject drugs to safely dispose of used syringes. There has been no evidence demonstrating a relationship between syringe exchange programs and an increase in illegal drug use, or even first drug use, meaning SEPs have not been found to encourage drug use. What's more, individuals who use SEPs are five times as likely to seek treatment for OUD than those who do not.[\[42\]](#) Researchers often point out that more education is needed regarding opioid addiction and syringe exchanges, as education can lead to increased support for comprehensive drug treatment, including SEPs.[\[43\]](#)

A final example of effective OUD intervention is **medication assisted treatment** (MAT), which refers to the use of prescription drugs, such as methadone, to help reduce cravings for opioids so that users can quit. Often, MAT is combined with therapy or other treatment options. People who participate in MAT are often stigmatized as trading one drug for another by both community members and criminal justice professionals alike.

[\[44\]](#) Educating the public about the realities of the disease that is addiction can help demystify medication-assisted treatment, especially education offered at community events.[\[45\]](#) Local organizations often carry information regarding MAT, as well as referrals to service providers to help users connect with treatment. Additionally, some mutual aid groups provide community members with microgrants, small amounts of cash assistance to cover healthcare copays or prescription costs.

Effective intervention for OUD includes public health knowledge, implementation of evidence-based strategies, and information that is sensitive to the region.[\[46\]](#) Treatment has been shown to decrease the odds of long-term nonmedical prescription opioid use, so long as that treatment goes beyond detoxification alone. High quality, evidence-based treatments show the biggest impact.[\[47\]](#) Three responses beyond incarceration for responding to OUD in Appalachia are mobile resource distribution, syringe

exchange programs, and medication-assisted treatment. These approaches are sometimes criticized as not being tough on crime, or as inviting more drug use to take place. Research has not shown support for these claims. Rather, they have been proven to be effective strategies for reducing stigma surrounding drug use and abuse, as well as rates of opioid overdose death. These approaches are more restorative than incarceration, as they seek to respond to harm and restore what has been lost.

Conclusion

Much like prescription painkillers promised an easy solution to chronic pain, retributive responses offer a seemingly easy solution to addiction. Opioid addiction is a complicated problem, and there are no easy solutions. Retributive responses to the opioid crisis often neglect the root causes of addiction. Because meaningful pathways to recovery are not often accessible through the prison system, these responses serve to reinforce stereotypes regarding addiction and exacerbate the social conditions which make certain groups vulnerable to addiction in the first place. Restorative justice, in contrast, seeks to reframe the social response to opioid addiction by addressing what can be done to restore the harms that result from addiction. When people who use drugs in Appalachia are asked what they need in order to get help, they often emphasize more comprehensive substance use treatment such as inpatient treatment, community outreach, mental health services, and certified drug and alcohol abuse counselors.

[48] Rarely is there a need for more prisons, law enforcement, or harsh drug laws. Instead, restorative justice depends on community-led organizations in Appalachia with the hope to destigmatize drug use and address addiction at the root as opposed to punishing individual people who use drugs.

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About the Contributors

The authors whose essays appear in this textbook are scholars and teachers who also manage to be “real-life humans,” as one of our contributors commented. We are more than our jobs, and our lives contain more than our research interests. We also answer email messages from readers in case you want to ask us anything about our chapters, and because email addresses can change, we encourage readers to look us up by using our academic affiliations and keywords from our biographical passages below.

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Sarah Gripshover (she/her) grew up in Northern Kentucky. She graduated with honors from Eastern Kentucky University in 2020 with bachelor's degrees in anthropology and Spanish as well as a minor in archaeology. She enjoys reading and painting as well as spending time with family, including her two dogs, and is eagerly anticipating the birth of her first nephew.

Catherine Herdman (she/her) is a West Virginia native who studied Appalachian history at Western Carolina University and the University of Kentucky. She has been teaching Appalachian Studies for over 20 years, with a strong emphasis on Appalachian economic and labor history, literature, and film. She enjoys travel, music, film, and hiking and has a daughter that keeps life warm and interesting.

Jacob Johnson (he/him) is pursuing a doctorate in history at the University of Kentucky, where he is an officer in the Graduate Appalachian Research Community and an organizer of the Dimensions of Political Ecology conference. Originally from Wheelwright in Floyd County, he grew up in his grandfather's liquor store enmeshed in the locals' oral histories of one of eastern Kentucky's last model coal towns. His work focuses on illuminating events, people, and topics increasingly forgotten from the region's recent past.

Ben Judkins (he/him) grew up in the Appalachia Mountains of Southwestern Virginia. He is a semi-retired sociologist with research and teaching interests in social movements, race and ethnic relations, occupational health, inequality, and the sociology of Appalachia. He currently teaches in the ENCORE Program for older adults at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, where he also works with the nonprofit City Fields to help revitalize overlooked neighborhoods. He enjoys disc golf, hiking, and cooking.

Shawn Kimbro (he/him) is a musician and songwriter who grew up near Cherokee Lake in East Tennessee and worked his way through college catching and selling catfish. With a strong avocational interest in history and environmentalism, he has authored three books about fishing. He serves as the director of the Sleep Medicine Program at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

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Erin Presley (she/her) is a professor of English and Coordinator of Appalachian Studies at Eastern Kentucky University. Her research focuses on literary representations of government-mandated initiatives in the Mountain South and often finds its way into her teaching. Originally from northeast Tennessee, she lives in beautiful Berea, Kentucky with her husband, daughter, dog friend, and four hens.

Allison Ricket (she/her) has lived in Appalachia for most of her adult life and currently works as an assistant professor of research and director of analytics for the Impact Measurement and Management group at Ohio University's Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Service. Her areas of interest include rural community economic development, ecosystems approaches to community well-being, and trail running.

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Tasha Werry (she/her) is an Army brat with Appalachian roots who spent the first half of her life moving around, and the second half of her life in southeastern Ohio. What began as a career in teaching led to the founding of Building Bridges to Careers, which fosters relationships to inspire career choice. As the Executive Director of BB2C, her focus is on engaging all members of the community around the career development of its children and youth.

Jacqueline Yahn (she/her) is from the Upper Ohio Valley known locally as "the Valley," where she lives with her husband and son among three generations of their families. Her research focuses on rural school and community vitality with a focus on school funding and education policy issues, especially those relevant to the Appalachian region. She is currently an Associate Professor of Teacher Education at Ohio University. She enjoys time with her family, hiking, books, and a good cup of coffee.

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