

# Appalachian Culture and Economic Development

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**Abstract:** For almost as long as commentators, reformers, and policy makers have worried about how to improve income, living conditions, and human welfare in the southern mountain region of the United States, a significant relationship is assumed to exist between the culture of those who live in Appalachia and the prospects for the region's economic development. Indeed, assumptions about the distinctiveness of Appalachian culture influence the very presumption that Appalachia is in fact a discrete region with a distinctive culture even though most Americans would scoff at the notion of a Rocky Mountain culture or an Adirondac culture.

A central theme in much of the vast popular and scholarly literature about Appalachia contends that deficiencies in mountain culture have contributed to, or at least reinforced, economic backwardness and poverty. Although the myth which links cultural deficiency and economic underdevelopment in Appalachia has been evolving for a century, a large body of literature written by regional scholars during the past twenty-five years, along with a reappraisal of earlier studies, demonstrates a far more complex relationship between Appalachian culture and economic development past and present than previously imagined.

In this paper we will first examine a set of once powerful beliefs about Appalachian culture and its presumed impact on economic development, and then assess existing evidence supporting those interpretations. The assumptions and beliefs include such concepts as isolationism, homogeneity, familism, and fundamentalism. These and a variety of corollary concepts grew out of a popular mythology which came to be accepted and then reified by professionals whose works were influential during the 1960s and 1970s and still influence theory and policy analysis today. The validity of these beliefs, many of which eventually calcified into stereotypes, were challenged during the period of social activism which has flourished throughout Appalachia since the 1970s. The intellectual ferment among activists, scholars, educators, writers, and artists throughout the region during this period has significantly deepened our understanding of the great diversity in Appalachia's geography, history, cultural resources, forms of social and political participation, and its relationship with the national and global markets.

This paper examines how this new knowledge of Appalachian history and culture either modifies or rejects earlier models and perspectives on the relationship between culture and economic development in Appalachia, and will postulate what the newer approaches imply for future economic development strategies and policy-making.

## I. CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF TRADITIONAL APPALACHIAN CULTURE FROM THIRTY YEARS AGO:IMPLICATIONS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In 1967, social scientists affiliated with West Virginia University's Appalachian Center and its Cooperative Extension Service, along with other invited scholars, met in Morgantown, West Virginia to "develop a conceptual framework to better understand the nature of change in rural Appalachia." They envisioned a framework that would guide "action programs" and "the social reconstruction of Appalachian society." The proceedings from that conference resulted in a widely read publication, *Change in Rural Appalachia: Implications for Action Programs* (1971), that was addressed to "professional field workers in programs of directed change," including "social workers, Extension agents, Vista volunteers, Peace Corps members, community development experts, or field representatives of other agencies" (Photiadis and Schwarzweller 1970, viii, ix, v). This landmark publication provides a relevant starting point for a review of how scholars thirty years ago conceptualized Appalachian culture and its relationship to region-wide socio-economic development strategies.

The editors of *Change in Rural Appalachia* began by asserting that "the sociocultural integration of rural Appalachia with the larger American society" was "occurring at a rapid rate." The "influx of federal funds, the development of a regional highway system, marked improvements of local roads and transportation systems" and other "developments--mainly of a technological nature," according to the editors, were "pav[ing] the way for the general diffusion of social and cultural changes...even in the more remote neighborhoods of the region." The predicted effect of these changes was that "rural Appalachia [would become] even more closely [linked] into the mainstream of contemporary America" (Photiadis and Schwarzweller 1970, 1). Old, outmoded ways of life that once served rural Appalachians well, no longer seemed viable in the fast-paced modern world. These traditional ways were breaking down and increasingly, the values of mass consumer culture and the middle class life styles of urban, mainstream America were being embraced and emulated throughout the mountains.

Nothing confirmed these changes more clearly to the social scientists gathered in West Virginia than the outmigration of hundreds of thousands of rural Appalachians from the hollows and the depressed coalfields of the region in the 1950s and 1960s who had left Appalachia in search of better economic opportunities beyond the mountains (Brown 1970). Two factors, however--one a legacy of the past and the other a reaction to the present--were believed nevertheless to be impeding the diffusion of modern values into Appalachia: continuing isolation and isolationism. As a region in transition, the most geographically remote portions of Appalachia were believed still to resemble a pre-modern ("traditional or folk") culture while, under the duress of rapid change, some Appalachians were believed to be retreating into a culture of poverty.

Subsequent research on the history of Appalachia (reported below) undermines this view from thirty years ago that, indeed, the region had once been culturally *isolated* and *homogeneous*. One conference participant articulated what most researchers apparently believed to have been the situation before them back then: "In general, Appalachia has been isolated both culturally and geographically from the rest of the country. But this isolation has been and is breaking down very rapidly and the region is becoming more and more tightly woven into the fabric of American society. . . . One might say that Appalachia is joining the nation" (Brown 1970, 26). At the time, however, such a belief

paralleled, and powerfully reinforced, the assumption by the President's Appalachian Regional Commission in the 1960s that Appalachia in large measure was still economically isolated as well, that is it functioned as a "region apart" (Whisnant, 129).

By defining the means by which Appalachia was belatedly "joining the nation" in the 1960s as a process that social scientists term "cultural modernization," conference participants were embracing the dominant theory of social change in American social science at that time, Functionalism<sup>1</sup> Articulated most fully by the eminent sociologists Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton, Functionalism postulated that social institutions in society such as kinship, religion, education, the economy, and politics form a mutually interdependent system. Like living systems, social systems are bound together by interchanges--in the societal case, interchanges among institutions. Money, power, influence, and values each flow from institution to institution, influencing mutual changes and adjustments among them, but values and cultural orientations are seen as foremost in directing change and, ideally, binding social life into a unitary system. Consequently, by this theory, if Appalachia's institutions were judged to be dysfunctional in relation to the wider social system, then what stood most likely in need of correction were its cultural values.

For the social scientists who gathered in West Virginia to devise strategies for directing change in Appalachia, cultural modernization was both a model of socio-economic change and an unquestioned goal. Cultural modernization, it was believed, held out the promise of mainstream opportunity and prosperity to rural Appalachians if only they could (and would) adapt to its demands and rigors. Thus the same theory that dominated social science thinking about development in the so-called Third World in the 1960s seemed applicable to backward and isolated regions at home as well. As an expression of this faith, Peace Corps Volunteers in the Third World and VISTA workers in Appalachia were sent out simultaneously to carry the message of modernity and progress to both peripheral zones (Photiadis and Schwarzweller 1970, vii).

Although cultural modernization was believed to be key to Appalachia's full participation in mainstream American economic life, modernization--at least in the short run--was also seen as producing disequilibrium among social institutions as well as psychological strain, frustration, and confusion among individuals, especially the poorly educated and those less able to adapt to changing conditions. Under extreme circumstances of frustration such Appalachians could be expected to retreat further into a protective subculture of resistance, i.e., a subculture of poverty.

The idea that traditional Appalachia had once been as separate from the rest of America as a another nation suggests how distinct and isolated scholars in the 1960s imagined rural Appalachia to have been in the not too distant past from urban and industrial America.

Hoping for improvements in mountain socio-economic conditions, social scientists rated the "insular and insulated" social institutions of rural Appalachia--family, religion, government, and education--for how well linked they were to "outside" social forces and thus how likely it was that they

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<sup>1</sup> For a good critical introduction to functionalism and the theory of cultural modernization derived from it, see John G. Taylor, *From Modernization to Modes of Production: A Critique of the Sociologies of Development and Underdevelopment* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979). For a highly accessible and sympathetic introduction to the thought of Talcott Parsons, see Edward D. Devereux, Jr., "Parsons' Sociological Theory" in Max Black, ed., *The Social Theory of Talcott Parsons* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 1-63.

would serve as conduits for the diffusion of modernizing influences (Schwarzeweller and Brown 1970, 131). The rural Appalachian family--though understood sympathetically to be "a very effective and efficient system of social security" in times of risk--was nonetheless a potential "hindrance to social change in the region" because of its "virtual monopoly over the socialization and interest-world of its members," i.e., its ability to insulate its members from mainstream values and orientations (Brown and Schwarzeweller 1970, 92, 89-90). Likewise, religious fundamentalism in Appalachia's rural churches encouraged conservatism and hostility toward government among the region's small middle class and fatalism among its so-called "stationary poor". In either case, religion seemed to provide few elements for waging a struggle to modernize rural society (Gerrard 1970, 99-114). Among all the region's rural social institutions, only education showed promise for linking Appalachia to the wider society and thus serving as a "cultural bridge" between the two systems for "the diffusion of Great Society norms" into the mountains (Schwarzeweller and Brown 1970, 136). For this reason, much of the action-talk at the conference focused on educational strategies such as school reform, literacy and adult education, job training, and university extension services.<sup>2</sup>

### **Rural Appalachia as a Familistic Society**

The belief that speeding the diffusion of modern values into Appalachia was the foremost means by which to improve economic opportunity in the mountain region implied, for most scholars, that traditional Appalachian culture had to be changed. Not all scholars, however, interpreted traditional mountain culture in the same way. Some, influenced primarily by extensive research and involvement in the isolated subsistence farming communities of Appalachia, advanced a model of Appalachia as a "familistic society in transition."<sup>3</sup>

The model of rural Appalachia as a familistic society was articulated most fully by two sociologists at the West Virginia conference, James S. Brown and Harry Schwarzeweller (1970, 85-97). Their observations and recommendations were based on their influential and highly regarded research on the families of "Beech Creek" (a pseudonym), three closely interconnected subsistence-farming neighborhoods in a remote, non-mining section of Eastern Kentucky (Schwarzeweller, Brown, Mangalam 1971). At the conference, they contrasted "the modal form of the rural mountain family" of the recent past with the "contemporary, urban American family" by pointing to the larger family size, high fertility rate, patriarchal (male dominant and less child-centered) structure, and greater emphasis on the importance of extended family relationships in Appalachia.<sup>4</sup> Even more than these structural characteristics of family social organization, however, they stressed the cultural orientation and values of "familism" as the core around which the fabric of Appalachian rural society had been woven in the not too distant past.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, papers by John Photiadis, Roman Verhaalen, Stanley Ikenberry, Robert Miller, and Selz Mayo in the section entitled "Action Programs in a Context of Change," in Photiadis and Schwarzeweller 1970, 167-229.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase "familistic society in transition" is a quote from Photiadis and Schwarzeweller, "Changing Social Institutions in Appalachia," (1970, 82) used to demonstrate Brown and Schwarzeweller's claim that the traditional mountain family was being transformed by the processes of change and modernization and was, therefore, far from a static form.

<sup>4</sup> For Brown's earliest ethnographic study of the area, see James S. Brown, *Beech Creek: A Study of a Kentucky Mountain Neighborhood* (Berea, KY: Berea College Press, [1950] 1988); Brown and Schwarzeweller, "Appalachian Family," 85.

Including both kin-based relations of economic and social life and a psychological sense of affectional ties to kin, familism put kinship cooperation at the center of social life. It defined a traditionalistic and personalistic way of life for rural Appalachians that seemed to contradict the principles of individualism, achievement motivation, and universalism that were said to underlay a modern, urban-industrial American economy.

Industrialization, urbanization, educational attainment, mass media, and migration were each seen as weakening the hold of familism on rural Appalachians in the 1960s. Familism's lingering effects, however, still seemed to pose problems for the region and its people. Since there had been "few organized social groups in the mountains, other than the family," rural communities in the old family-centered world were traditionally weak (Schwarzweiler 1970, 55). From this point of view, the outmigration of massive numbers of Appalachians in the 1950s and 1960s only made matters worse. Remote rural communities, by this account, appeared to lack the resources they needed to respond collectively to the many social problems that faced them (Schwarzweiler 1970, 59).

But to the extent that individuals clung to old, familiar ways, they remained out of synch with the modern world which would demand greater individual and family mobility in the future.<sup>5</sup> One of the principal concerns, then, that most troubled observers in the 1960s and 1970s was how to help individuals adjust to the profound social, economic, and cultural changes that were being thrust upon them by the forces of modernization. Consistent with the theory that the norms and values of rural Appalachia would have to undergo thorough revision before the benefits of economic growth could trickle down to the poor, change agents were advised to promote experiences such as education and migration that would loosen the grip of traditionalism on rural Appalachians (Mayo, 223). At the same time, however, they were also urged to develop programs to ease the cultural tension, social disorganization, and psychological strain that would inevitably accompany culture change among the mountaineers (Photiadis and Schwarzweiler 1970, 2-3).

### **Rural Appalachia as a Culture of Poverty**

Others, apparently drawing upon impressions gained from research in or near the region's coal mining communities, pointed to the existence of a "culture of poverty" among some population segments in rural Appalachia.

Proponents of the familism model recognized the disadvantages that clinging to a family-centered culture would pose for rural Appalachians as they confronted urban and industrial situations but they tended to portray mountaineers' enduring commitment to kin in positive terms nonetheless. In general, they described Appalachians and their families as remarkably resilient and adaptable.<sup>6</sup> Others however, concerned that the changes in Appalachia were so rapid and far-reaching that severe social disequilibrium and personal disorientation were becoming prominent features of rural life, pointed to

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<sup>5</sup> According to Schwarzweiler (1970, 61, 63) mobility demands included "quick shifts of residence, quick adaptation to changes in job situation, quick establishment of neighborhood and community ties, and likewise, quick breaking off of community ties, established friendship relationships, and visiting patterns with kinfolk."

<sup>6</sup> In "Population and Migration Change," Brown writes: "Many areas have been depopulated. . . Under the circumstances, it is remarkable how resilient these mountain communities have been. . . Fortunately, the people are restless and ready for change" (1970, 45). See also Brown and Schwarzweiler's discussion of "The Appalachian Family in The Modern World: Some Advantages" (1970, 91-95).

the existence of manifestations of psychological distress in rural Appalachia that needed direct intervention. Under extreme circumstances of strain, tension, and alienation, a few observers feared that a minority of Appalachians--whether in new urban settings or back home in rural communities--were in danger of retreating into the insular and self-protective world of a culture of poverty (Photiadis and Schwarzweller, "Individual," 1970, 2; Photiadis, "New Aims" 1970, 238).

Re-reading *Change in Rural Appalachia* now almost thirty years after the original conference, it is apparent that most scholars at the time understood that the retreatism and isolationism attributed to the region's hypothetical culture of poverty applied, if at all, to only a small percentage of rural Appalachians. As James Brown, put the matter in regard to the vast majority of Appalachians, "the people [of the region] are restless and ready for a change." Moreover, most scholars also seemed to understand that the conceptualization of traditional Appalachian culture modeled on rural familism was applicable to only a small and diminishing number of the region's most remote communities in the 1960s and further, that familism was not to be confused with a culture of poverty. Policy makers were thus urged to recognize that Appalachia was becoming "a region of great social and cultural diversity" (Photiadis and Schwarzweller, "Changing" 1970, 81).

Despite the models of rural familism and the culture of poverty being analytically distinct, however, at least some researchers blurred the traits and implications for socio-economic change derived from each into a unitary image of rural Appalachian culture. The most prominent example at the West Virginia conference was Richard Ball's model (1970, 69-79) of the Southern Appalachian "folk subculture" as a "tension-reducing way of life."<sup>7</sup> Ball claimed that "prominent research attention has been directed toward Appalachia in recent years, and specifications of the content of the Appalachian folk subculture are fairly complete, but most of the authors of these descriptions, and particularly the regional planners, admit to difficulty in understanding and dealing with the values they have described." He added: "The conduct of these people seems to them even more senseless than that of most [other] hard core poverty groups." Articulating questions that resonated at the time with commonly held stereotypes of poor Appalachians, he wrote:

Why, it is asked, are they so little interested in improving their lives? How can they resign themselves to acceptance of minimal welfare payments and then adopt the dole as a permanent way of life? Why aren't they more eager to leave their hopeless environment for urban areas of greater opportunity? What, in short, explains their lack of ambition and their inability to arouse themselves to sustained efforts? Admittedly, their past has been bleak and hopeless, but why should this prevent them from responding to the opportunities of the present (Ball, 72-73)?

The answer, Ball claimed, was that "life conditions" (that is "a history of unremitting physical, economic, and social frustrations") "provide the major key to the origin, development and continued existence of the Southern Appalachian folk subculture" which he defined as characterizing a "sizable contingent" of the regional population. The principle components of that folk subculture were "fixation, regression, aggression, and resignation"--four types of "frustration-instigated behavior" commonly attributed to rats in experimental psychology studies. According to Ball, "The frustration-

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<sup>7</sup> This was a revised version of "A Poverty Case: The Analgesic Subculture of the Southern Appalachians," *American Sociological Review* 33: 6 (1968), 885-895.

instigated behaviors observable in laboratory experiments have become a thorough-going way of life, justified by religious doctrine and sustained by a social order” (Ball 1970, 72-73). In this formulation, the familism of traditional Appalachia and the retreatism of a poverty subculture were thus conceptually merged into a unitary (and pejorative) conception of the way of life for one important segment of Appalachian society.

Together, Familism and the Culture of Poverty models appear to have governed the thinking of social scientists who studied the region in the 1960s and 1970s and who hoped to improve conditions by influencing policy-making, planning, program development and service delivery for rural "mountaineers." Despite their continuing popularity, some conceptualizations, such as the model of Appalachia as a region-wide culture of poverty, have little support in research or theory. Others such as familism, when theoretically reconceptualized and situated historically, still afford insight. More fundamental, however, is the question of whether researchers were justified in their beliefs about Appalachia's cultural distinctiveness.

### A. Appalachian Cultural Values

Because of the importance social scientists formerly attached to cultural orientations and values in ordering society and directing social change, considerable effort was expended by researchers over a number of years to identify Appalachia's central values. Conceived of as the criteria for making judgments of desirability, values were believed to "appear in patterns" marked by "affinities and orderly sequences." Operating altogether as a system of priorities, values were thus believed to define a group's way of life, that is its cultural ethos (Robin Williams 1976, 3).

Given the stress on the importance of attitudes and values in promoting or resisting change, it is surprising that there were so few systematic survey's of attitudes, beliefs and values in the region. The only region-wide survey of Appalachian values, however, was designed by Thomas Ford in 1958 as part of a large, interdisciplinary study of the region.<sup>8</sup> (Ford, 1962) Ford's important survey of attitudes and beliefs not only codified Appalachian values for many subsequent writers, but its sample of 190 counties in West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky became one of the most influential geographical definitions of Appalachia.<sup>9</sup>

It was almost forty years ago when Ford attempted to use a regional opinion survey to answer the question most on the minds of that generation of scholars that was concerned with Appalachia as a social problem area: **"What implications do the current beliefs and values of the Appalachian people hold for those who are actively working to promote social and economic change in the Region"** (Ford 1962, 32. Emphasis in original)? Ford's answer generally affirmed the influence of progressive change in the region, but the overall effects of his study have been contradictory.

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<sup>8</sup> A more impressionistic rendering of findings from the Ford survey is contained in W. D. Weatherford and Earl C. Brewer, *Life and Religion in Southern Appalachia: An Interpretation of Selected Data from The Southern Appalachian Studies* (New York: Friendship Press, 1962).

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent discussion of the various definitions of Appalachia, including the official definition by the Appalachian Regional Commission, and the influential social surveys of John C. Campbell and Thomas Ford, see Karl Raitz and Richard Ulack with Thomas Leinbach, *Appalachia: A Regional Geography* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 9-35.

Operating within the theoretical horizon of cultural modernization theory,<sup>10</sup> Ford designed questions to measure attitudes and beliefs that he supposed would tap four value dimensions commonly attributed to Appalachians: **individualism** and **self-reliance**, **traditionalism**, **fatalism**, and **religious fundamentalism**. Based on Appalachians' responses to questions presumably measuring their strength of commitment to such values, he answered "no" to the question "Have the Appalachian people clung to their frontier-agrarian traditions, resisting the philosophical premises of industrial society?" (Ford, 9).

Ford interpreted his findings as supporting "the passing of provincialism," not the tenacity of a subculture resistant to modernization. The finding that attitudes varied according to respondents' age, socio-economic status, and rural-urban locality confirmed the heterogeneity of the region. Attitudes toward work, education, government, and the future indicated that the region had become "'progressive-minded' and 'achievement oriented' to a surprisingly high degree" (Ford, 32). Ford did not find the rugged, self-reliant individualists he seems to have expected. Respondents' attitudes toward welfare and the efficacy of collective action denied this. Nor did he find them uncommitted to the goals of success and achievement. He did find the people of the region strongly committed to religious values--many of these fundamentalist, some sectarian. But his discussion was most ambiguous in regard to the presence of fatalism among lower-class respondents.

Ford rejected fatalism as a core cultural trait of the region but left open the possibility that fatalism may have existed as an important defense mechanism of the poor. He argued that fatalism and traditionalism were out of place in a culture that values achievement and success. Because he discovered that Appalachian parents held high aspirations for their children's educational and occupational success regardless of their own socio-economic status, Ford concluded that however strong fatalism and traditionalism may have been in the past, such values had been considerably weakened throughout the region. He found, however, that perceptions regarding the causes of economic success varied by social class. Upper socio-economic status respondents attributed success to "hard work" while lower status respondents tended to point toward educational attainments which few of them possessed. Rather than the plausible interpretation that this may have been an accurate assessment by the poor, Ford suggested that such a belief was evidence of a "major adjustment mechanism for many of those less able to cope with their life circumstances" (Ford, 19).

Comparing the responses of young and old age cohorts, but without historical evidence, Ford further concluded that although the frontier spirit probably declined soon after the settlement of Appalachia, fatalism and sectarianism may have followed from the harshness of life in the mountains for some of the population. And, going beyond his own data, he also claimed that a maladaptive "individualism bordering on social irresponsibility" may have prevented the kinds of community development that would have improved the situation in Appalachia. But if such cultural traits still prevailed among the region's poor they were not insuperable: the mountaineer's fatalism, he concluded,

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<sup>10</sup> Articulating the premises of modernization theory that influenced most social science research of that era, Ford wrote: "That the Twentieth Century has come to the people of the Southern Appalachians is unquestionable. But whether the people of the Southern Appalachians have come to the Twentieth Century is, at least in the minds of many observers, a moot question. . . . Most resistant to change are the fundamental sentiments, beliefs, and values of a people, the ways they feel their world is and should be ordered. So it is not implausible to suppose that the value heritage of the Appalachian people may still be rooted in the frontier, even though the base of their economy has shifted from subsistence agriculture to industry and commerce and the people themselves have increasingly concentrated in towns and cities" (1962, 9).



"is less now than formerly a deterrent to action but rather serves as a psychological insurance against failure that he half anticipates and half fears will shatter hopes and ambitions raised too high" (Ford, 316). Because it was the only systematic, region-wide survey of attitudes and beliefs ever conducted in Appalachia, Ford's study of Appalachian values was widely influential despite serious problems with the study's methodology.<sup>11</sup>

## B. Studies of Rural Family-Centered Localities

Looking back on research done a generation ago, it is now apparent how little empirical support there was for the existence of distinct cultural beliefs and value orientations in Appalachia. This is surprising given the commonplace assumption back then that Appalachia was characterized by a regionally distinct subculture. There was a great deal more support, however, for the importance of kinship and family-centered ways of life in many the region's more isolated rural communities.

Three classic ethnographic studies of rural communities in central and southern Appalachian communities were especially influential for understanding kinship patterns and relations in those portions of the region. James Brown, as we have already noted, entered the "Beech Creek" neighborhoods of eastern Kentucky in the early 1940s before the first roads were built into the area. He documented the social patterns of an extremely isolated group of subsistence farm families still living a relatively self-sufficient life on the eve of World War II.<sup>12</sup> A decade later, Marion Pearsall entered "Little Smoky Ridge" in eastern Tennessee and preserved a picture of a mountain neighborhood in the process of being reshaped by the marginalization of subsistence farming, the establishment of a surrounding national park, and the demands of an emerging wage labor economy (Pearsall 1959). Another decade later, John Stephenson went to "Shiloh," a Blue Ridge mountain community in North Carolina, to observe the strain and adaptation in a "modernizing" local society where independent subsistence activities were no longer viable.<sup>13</sup> All three localities were outside the industrialized regions of coal extraction and hence had not yet gone through the full convulsions that big employers and wage labor had brought to the coal regions of Appalachia.<sup>14</sup>

All three researchers confirmed the centrality of kinship relations in the localities they studied. Brown wrote: "the family rather than the individual was the unit of the Beech Creek society" (385). Similarly, Pearsall stated: "The family [in Little Smokey Ridge] is the center of the individual's universe. To a remarkable degree, it is his universe" (92). And finally, Stephenson observed: "It is often said that families are closer in the mountains than elsewhere, and informants in Shiloh certainly give verbal

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, see Photiadis's and Ball's utilization on pages 5 and 72 respectively in Photiadis and Schwarzweller (1970). See also David H. Loeff, *Appalachia's Children: The Challenge of Mental Health* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), pp. 157-60, and Jack Weller, *Yesterday's People*, 29-40.

<sup>12</sup> James Brown, *Beech Creek: A Study of a Kentucky Mountain Neighborhood* (Berea, KY: Berea College Press, [1950] 1988). The first seventy pages of Schwarzweller, Brown and Mangalam's *Mountain Families* contains a summary of the Brown's original ethnographic findings.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the same community of "Shiloh" was also studied by two other researchers: George Hicks, *Appalachian Valley* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976) and Berton Kaplan, *Blue Ridge: An Appalachian Community in Transition* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1971).

<sup>14</sup> The following summary of findings from these three studies relies upon Dwight Billings, Kathleen Blee and Louis Swanson's critical commentary in "Culture, Family, and Community in Preindustrial Appalachia," *Appalachian Journal* 13(Winter 1986): 154-170.

testimony to this" (78). In all three communities, kinship relations strongly influenced patterns of residence, recreation and visiting, religion, work, politics, child rearing and education, migration, economic cooperation, and crisis management. Under the rubric of "familism" the ethnographers thus described a wide range of kin-based relations of economic and social life and a psychological sense of shared identity and affectional ties to kin.

Significantly, ethnographic studies of non-industrial rural communities conducted years later in similar localities portrayed at least remnants of the same patterns of kinship organization and interaction. Thus Allen Batteau's research (1978) in an Eastern Kentucky farming community, F. Carlene Bryant's study (1981) of an isolated community in East Tennessee, and Patricia Beavers' examination (1986) of kinship and cooperation in two rural communities in Appalachian North Carolina bear striking similarities to the early findings of Brown, Pearsall, and Stephenson.

Despite the fact that the concept of familism tended to freeze the complexity of family life into a unitary ethos, however, the picture of Appalachian family-centered communities that derives from these studies is definitely **not** one of timeless conditions of never-changing family life nor of undifferentiated communities where all families shared indistinguishable lifestyles.<sup>15</sup> The social organization of rural Appalachian households and families and the activities of their members were undergoing profound changes before the very eyes of the ethnographers that observed them. Further, although these communities were impoverished by national standards, they were nonetheless highly stratified, implying a differentiation locally of life styles, organization, and opportunities.

Ethnographic, eye-witness accounts of rural Appalachian communities contained a wealth of information about Appalachian social life, but scholars have come to question the value of the concept of "familism" as a descriptive device, insisting instead upon unlocking the historical specificity of family interaction by examining the actual practices and relations of Appalachian family life rather than abstracting a normative orientation ("familism") from them.<sup>16</sup> Although sociologists such as James Brown and Harry Schwarzweiler clearly stated that they were describing only the uncharacteristically remote subsistence farming communities found in the Cumberland Plateau of Central Appalachia, popular writers frequently described such communities as typical of rural Appalachia though, in general, they were not. Others writers blurred the characteristics of these subsistence-oriented farming communities with those of mining communities where waged labor predominated to form a distorted composite picture.<sup>17</sup> No studies violated the canons of appropriate scientific generalization more, however, than those that advanced the model of Appalachia as a region-wide culture of poverty.

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<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the changing patterns of household organization among Beech Creek families throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how these varied according to the wealth and land ownership of family units, see Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee, "Family Strategies in a Subsistence Economy: Beech Creek, Kentucky, 1850-1942," *Sociological Perspectives* 33: 1 (1990), 63-88.

<sup>16</sup> See Kathleen Blee and Dwight Billings, "Reconstructing Daily Life in the Past: An Hermeneutic Approach to Ethnographic Data," *The Sociological Quarterly* 27: 4 (1986), 443-462 and our discussion of their critical re-examination of these studies below.

<sup>17</sup> The most obvious case was Jack E. Weller, *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1965).

### C. Appalachia as a Subculture of Poverty

The most popular studies of Appalachia thirty years ago, although the least rigorous or scientific, were undoubtedly those that interpreted Appalachia as a culture of poverty. Reviewing those studies today, however, one is stuck by how little evidence was actually provided at the time to support their credibility. Below we describe how myths about Appalachia--myths that continue to influence research today--were created around the end of the nineteenth century on the basis of very limited knowledge of the history and way of life in the mountains.

Myth-making is not solely an inheritance from the last century. Much writing in the 1960s revived and expanded the mythology about Appalachia by inventing the view of Appalachia as a region-wide culture of poverty. The most widely read of them all was Jack Weller's *Yesterday's People*. After a decade of working as a minister in a southern West Virginia mining community, Weller stepped back to make sense of the so-called Appalachian mountaineers and their culture. Untrained in social research, he organized an impressionistic account of Appalachian culture as consisting of the following traits: individualism, traditionalism, fatalism, action seeking, person orientation, and a psychology of fear.

Weller presented a bleakly negative picture of the mountaineers and their deficiencies. Using value themes he took from Ford, for example, Weller claimed that "independence-turned-individualism" had become a great "stumbling block for [the mountaineer] finding a place in our complex and cooperative society." The reputed "traditionalism" of mountain culture, in words borrowed from early twentieth century travel and adventure writer Horace Kephart, was described as "stubborn, sullen, and perverse." And where "fatalism" had become a way of life, "there [was] no rebellion, little question, little complaining." In a word, according to Weller, "the greatest challenge of Appalachia, and the most difficult, [was] its people" (Weller, 32,33,37,7).

As originally developed by anthropologist Oscar Lewis, the culture of poverty theory was intended to highlight the profound difficulties that living in poverty for generations posed to the poor (Lewis 1966). Critics, however, soon recognized that the theory had the effect of focusing attention almost exclusively upon the poor themselves, rather than their living situations or the political and economic structures that produced and reproduced poverty (Valentine; Ryan). Appalachian scholars thus criticized Weller's application of the theory as "victim-blaming" and they charged, correctly, that his image of Appalachia as a place where time stood still was profoundly misleading (Fisher 1983). Nowhere in his entire book did Weller provide evidence for his characterizations other than to report impressions and judgments based upon his having lived and worked in the region. The authority of his text, and others like it, came not from the power of research but from the potency of stereotypes recycled again and again by writers claiming to understand Appalachia.

There is no scientific reason today to pay serious attention to the books like *Yesterday's People* except for the fact that they have been so widely influential. For example, the paperback edition of *Yesterday's People* was endorsed in the front by a distinguished sociologist, Rupert Vance, who succinctly stated the analytic model that underlay the book's often tortured ramblings, and in so doing contributed a signature statement of the thinking of an entire era. Blurring together images of familistic farm communities and fatalistic coal camps, Vance (like Weller) combined modernization theory and culture of poverty theory to portray a world trapped in the confines of physical and cultural isolation:

Thus mountain isolation, which began as physical isolation enforced by rugged topography, became mental and cultural isolation, holding people in disadvantaged areas, resisting those changes that would bring them into contact with the outside world. The effect of conditions thus becomes a new cause of conditions, but the cause is now an attitude, not a mountain.

Additionally, Vance stressed the psychological implications of Weller's cultural analysis: "To change the mountains," he wrote, "[was] to change the mountain personality" (Weller, viii). The way both writers connected culture and psychology was a reasonable application of the Functionalist theory of their day.

According to Functionalism, culture drives society by shaping social roles, which in turn drive the personalities of its members. Within Functionalism, modernization theory and culture of poverty theory--though closely akin--diverged from one another in recommending how best to direct social change. Modernization theory stressed intervention at the top of the chain of command, at the level of culture. In contrast, because of its stress on the psychic harm of poverty and belief in the durability of defense-mechanisms adapted by the poor, culture of poverty theory stressed interventions at a lower level, as therapy for sick personalities. Two examples of the latter approach are David Loeff's *Appalachia's Children* and a particularly notorious article published in the *Southern Medical Review* by Charles E. Goshen, a physician, entitled "Characterological Deterrents of Economic Progress in People of Appalachia."

Inspired by the writings of Ford and Weller, Loeff, a psychiatrist, attempted to generalize from patterns of mental illnesses diagnosed in an Eastern Kentucky clinic to patterns of family life and child-raising in Appalachian society. In sharp contrast to observations by fellow psychiatrist Robert Coles who stressed the resilience of Appalachian children in situations of poverty, Loeff suggested that problems of dependency (families too close), psychological insecurity, and chronic depression (a "poverty syndrome") were endemic to Appalachian culture. Even if one were to accept the validity of Loeff's diagnostic criteria in clinical settings, however, his attributions of pathology to the surrounding culture were meaningless in light of the fact that he provided no epidemiological data on the prevalence of mental illness in rural Appalachia or elsewhere.

Even less credible than Loeff's work was Goshen's "characterological" descriptions of two categories of Appalachians: "cultural primitives," judged to comprise ten to fifteen percent of the population of Appalachia, and a larger group of "traditional farmers." The former were "fundamentally uncivilized people" who "for many generations" had "failed, because of their own or society's lack of initiative, in reaping any except the scantiest of benefits from civilization." "Collectively," Goshen claimed, "they demonstrate the characteristics of a schizophrenic society." By contrast, "traditional farmers" were a little healthier emotionally healthier, demonstrating only the typical pathologies of psychoneurosis:

The self-defeating resistance to change; the compulsive, mechanistic type of conformity; the phobic attitude toward the new and unfamiliar, the use of negative models on which to base self-esteem; the passivity and dependency, and the absence of progressive leadership all add up to psychoneurotic methods.

In either case, Goshen concluded that "as far as economic progress [was] concerned . . . both groups demonstrate[d] massive, self-defeating resistance to change" and both groups would require massive psychotherapy before "programs of improvement" could be effective (Goshen, 1058, 1059, 1061).

Although their writing have been dismissed by more responsible scholars investigating mental health issues in Appalachia, (Keefe 1988) the work of Loeff and Goshen together demonstrate in the extreme how dangerous and misleading facile generalizations about familism, culture of poverty, or traditional culture in the region often were a generation ago. David Cattell-Gordon's relatively recent publication (1990) of a scholarly article that sincerely attempts to describe the whole of Appalachia as suffering from a region-wide "culturally transmitted traumatic stress syndrome" suggests the continuing currency of such approaches in contemporary discussions of the region.<sup>18</sup> Such studies can best be remembered, however, as monuments not only to bad science but, more significantly, to the enduring power of Appalachian stereotypes.

## II. ISOLATION AND THE MYTH OF APPALACHIA

The cultural traits spanning the spectrum of scholarship produced by social scientists from Ford to Weller, Goshen and Loeff, all had cultural roots which they assumed reached deep into the region's historical isolation. Accepting the descriptions of earlier writers, Ford claimed that the mountaineer's much vaunted individualism sprang out of frontier necessity. As his authority, Ford quoted John C. Campbell's observation made in the early 1920s that "remote from ordered law and commerce, the Highlander learned by hard necessity to rely upon himself." Echoing a point made in Frederick Jackson Turner's famous frontier thesis, Campbell observed that "the deep influence of this individualistic way of thinking" persisted in the mountains even though the conditions which produced it had nearly disappeared (Campbell [1921] 1969, 93; Ford, 12; Turner 1893). Even before Campbell wrote, Horace Kephart had observed in 1913 that among North Carolina mountaineers "the very quality that is his strength and charm as a man--his staunch individualism--is proving his weakness and reproach as a neighbor and citizen. The virtue of a time out-worn has become the vice of an age new-born" (Ford, 12; Kephart [1913] 1976, 383).

### Inventing Appalachia

Social scientists of Ford's generation inherited the conception of Appalachia as a "strange land and peculiar people" from the popular writing which dated back to the late nineteenth century. Allen Batteau declares in his study of the "symbolic systems" which have dominated America's conceptualization of the region that "Appalachia is a creature of the urban imagination."

The folk culture, the depressed area, the romantic wilderness, the Appalachia of fiction, journalism, and public policy, have for more than a century been created, forgotten, and rediscovered, primarily by the economic opportunism, political creativity, or passing fancy of urban elites. . . . These images have been artfully constructed by novelists such as John Fox, Jr., by missionaries such as William G. Frost, by literary activists such as

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<sup>18</sup> For a rejoinder, see Karen Tice and Dwight Billings, "Appalachian Culture and Resistance," *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 2:2 (1990), 1-18.

Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos, by journalists such as Charles Kuralt, and most recently by a lawyer from Whitesburg, Harry Caudill. . . . To the extent that billions of public and private dollars have been expended in efforts to help the people and develop the Southern Mountain Region, we are compelled to understand the relationship between its mythical images and historical realities (1990, 1).

The most direct ancestors of modern stereotypes are found in the literary works of the local color writers of the late nineteenth century, but their ancient lineage is traced back to early America and to other American regions. Indeed, a noted authority on colonial American literature, Professor J. A. Leo Lemay (1985, 66), traces the modern "hillbilly" caricature back to "New England's Annoyances," America's first folk song, which was published circa 1643 by a New England Puritan. The poem is a self-deprecation of New England farmers poking fun at Englishmen who regarded the colonists as "rustic hicks" who lived disheveled lives of grinding poverty in shacks under which hogs and dogs took refuge, who distilled and then dissipated themselves on homemade liquor, lazily tilled the corn crop with a hoe, if the animals did not get to it first, and wore ragged, patched clothing (Lemay, 89). According to Lemay, the "hillbilly" is an old American model:

The hardscrabber of "New England's Annoyances" is the ancestor of that dominant twentieth-century self-image of Americans, the hillbilly. One can trace the lineage back from today's Beverly Hillbillies, Louis L'Amour's Sacketts, Al Capp's "Lil Abner," Billy De Beck's "Snuffy Smith," and, of course, the poor-whites of William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell to the humor of the Old South and to James Russell. Lowell's *Bigelow Papers* and before them to the colonial period.<sup>19</sup> Thomas Craddock's transported felons, Robert Bolling's disgusting low-lives, Franklin's rustic personae (e.g., "Homespun"), the yokel persona of "Yankee Doodle," the backwoods barbarians of William Byrd's North Carolina, and the "Indian-like" bumpkins of Sarah Kemble Knight's 1704 journal (who have "as Large a portion of mother witt, and sometimes a Larger, than those who have bin brought up in cities") -- these are among the hillbillies' eighteenth century ancestors.<sup>20</sup> And their progenitor was the seventeenth-century hardscrabber of "New England's Annoyances" (1985, 62).

Batteau (1990, 30-34) argues that the descriptions left by literary travellers in the mountains during the antebellum years, such as James Kirke Paulding (1817), Charles Fenno Hoffman (1833-34), and Charles Lanman (1848), and the gazetteers Joseph Martin (1835) and Richard Edwards (1855),

<sup>19</sup> In "The Appalachian Backgrounds of Billy De Beck's Snuffy Smith," *Appalachian Journal* 4(Summer 1977): 120-32, M. Thomas Inge shows De Beck's familiarity with the local-color realists, including Mary Noailles Murfree, and with the humorists of the Old South, including George Washington Harris [Sut Lovingood]. For twentieth-century literature portraying the type, see Sylvia Jenkins Cook, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976). Note quoted from Lemay, *Annoyances*, 137.

<sup>20</sup> The standard survey is Shields McIlwaine, *The Southern Poor-White from Lubberland to Tobacco Road* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939). For the yokel persona in nineteenth-century American literature, see Mody C. Boatright, *Folk Laughter on the American Frontier* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), esp. chap. 1, "Some Mythology of the Frontier," Lemay's "The Text, Tradition, and Themes of "The Big Bear of Arkansas." David Bertelson, *The Lazy South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), surveys the early literature, but he did not know of the writings of Bolling and Craddock; see Lemay's "Southern Colonial Grotesque: Robert Bolling's 'Neanthe,'" *Mississippi Quarterly* 35 (1982): 97-126. For yokels in colonial New England and the Middle Colonies, see Lemay, "The American Origins of 'Yankee Doodle,'" 435-64; idem., "The Tall Tales," 33-46 (Lemay, *Annoyances*, 137-8 note).

noted little difference between the mountains and other regions of the backcountry. Neither did the writer Philip Pendleton Kennedy, and David Hunter ("Port Crayon") Strother, the famous *Harper's* writer and illustrator, and several other Virginia "gentlemen" explored the western Virginian wilderness of the Canaan Valley during the 1850s.<sup>21</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted's enduring *A Journey in the Back Country* (1860), the last of three books he published on his long journeys through the South during the 1850s, made little distinction between the "poor whites" of the Deep South and the mountain folk -- they were just poor people. Like the other observers who came before him, Olmsted recognized differentiations between economic classes, but what distinguished the mountains as a region was that it was still backcountry, and not particularly unusual (Olmsted, 221-282). Cratis Williams, whose exhaustive 1,500 page doctoral dissertation, "The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction," researched in the 1950s and abridged in several issues of *Appalachian Journal*, (1975-76) assessed every known piece of writing which included the Appalachian mountains. Williams observed that at the beginning of the Civil War the mountaineer "was known to his countrymen as little more than an exemplar of the pioneer type," and sometimes presented in fiction and sketch sometimes as a "heroic Son of Nature with unerring innate republican principles," or as a crude "backwoods bumpkin," but rarely as a specifically identifiable regional type (1976 II:111).

It was not until the "local color movement" in the post-Civil War era that the "mountaineer" actually emerged as a separate and distinct persona from the pioneer and the backwoodsman. The phrase "local color" is used to describe a genre of dialect tales and travel sketches which dominated the "middle brow" literary magazines so popular in the 1870s and 1880s. This enormously popular genre was intended to entertain the reading public with the distinctiveness of the regional cultures which already were rapidly disappearing before a national American culture in the post war years. At its heart, writes Henry Shapiro in *Appalachia on Our Mind*, "is a perception of alternate modes of life, a confrontation between the 'we' readers and the 'them' read about" (1978, 14).

Unlike other locales described by the local colorists, "Appalachia was not in fact separated from America by ethnic, geographic, or chronological distance. The mountaineers were native-born, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant." Appalachia was not just a mountainous place which had been bypassed by on rushing American civilization, to the colorists it was a region settled by the America's first frontiersmen, pioneers on a frontier which long ago had been replaced by civilized society. It was its "otherness" which intrigued the first local colorists. As Shapiro reminds us, "at issue is not simply the history of 'Appalachian fiction,' but the history of the idea of Appalachia itself, for it was through literature that the otherness of the southern mountain region was introduced as a fact in the American consciousness" (Shapiro, 18).

If local color writing with Appalachia as a motif must have a beginning, it would be with the 1869 journey of Will Wallace Harney through the Cumberland Mountains. In 1873, Harney published his impressions of the landscape and the people he encountered on his travels in "A Strange Land and Peculiar People," published by *Lippincott's Magazine*. His description, while not as grossly

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Fenno Hoffman, *Winter in the West* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 2 vols.; Charles Lanman, *Letters from the Allegheny Mountains* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1849); Joseph Martin, ed., *A New and Comprehensive Gazetteer of Virginia and the District of Columbia* (Charlottesville: J. Martin, 1835); Philip Pendleton Kennedy, *The Blackwater Chronicle: A Narrative of an Expedition into the Land of Canaan, in Randolph County, Virginia* (New York: Redfield, 1853); David Hunter Strother, "The Virginian Canaan," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 8:1853, 18-36; idem, "The Mountains," *Harper's Magazine* 44:1872, 659-765.

exaggerated as many others would be, expressed wonder at the strange customs which prevailed among an exotic people. Like most of the local colorists, Harney found even the physical appearance of the people to be distinctive (Harney, 430-31).

Between 1870 and 1900 innumerable articles and books, fiction and non-fiction, established the local colorists' Appalachia as a fact. Harney may have been the first, but through the process of reification, Shapiro writes, "the perception of Appalachian otherness became transformed into a conception of Appalachia as a thing in itself." But this identity developed when it did because of another writer, Mary Noailles Murfree (Shapiro, 18). Writing under the pen name of "Charles Egbert Craddock," she attempted to describe life "among an interesting primitive and little known people in a wild and secluded region" (Parks, 103).

Murfree's stories provided the atmospherics for the genre: an isolated, brooding, melancholy mountain landscape whose people reflected their surroundings. It is ironic, that her descriptions were accepted as "authentic" for their fidelity to real life, for Murfree herself had very little personal experience with the Appalachia. Her greatest popularity as a writer was between 1878 and 1886, a period during which her stories established the Appalachian mountains as a region with distinctive attributes of their own. Subsequent writers would assume Appalachian otherness as a **factual** background for their stories (Murfree, 1884; Shapiro, 19).

In his study, *The Invention of Appalachia*, Alan Batteau demonstrates that her writing is structured "by five oppositions: the sociological opposition of the civil and domestic spheres; the gender opposition of masculine and feminine; the opposition of mainstream and quaint custom; as well as the topographical opposition (lowland versus mountain); and the ontological opposition of civilization and nature" (Batteau 1990, 49-52). Subsequent writers who portrayed industrialization in the mountains, such as John Fox, Jr., assumed the opposition of two different societies, one static and domestic the other dynamic and masculine, which characterized the capitalist hegemony dominant in America during this period. Batteau claims that deciding what was of Appalachia or external to it was determined by whether it was domestic or industrial. Events and patterns within the mountain region that are inconsistent with this categorization, such as the industrialization and urbanization of Charleston and Knoxville, the tourist resorts, the coal boom of the Cumberland Plateau, the ubiquitous presence of the charcoal iron industry, or the aggressive boosterism of the indigenous elites, all are overlooked as not truly Appalachia. So entrenched has this symbolic system become that revisionist scholarship which questions the assumptions implicit within this construct "has come close to abandoning the idea of Appalachia altogether, or at least recognizing the fluid and shifting nature of its social referent." (Batteau, 56; also Batteau 1983, 142-67) As David Whisnant has noted, "it is ironic that a region for so long characterized by a single stereotype is actually almost too diverse to generalize about at all (1980, see also Walls 1977, 56-76).

In the writings of John Fox, Jr., the most popular of all the Appalachian fiction writers, the development of Appalachian otherness reached its apogee at the turn of the 20th century. Fox assumed the otherness as fact and adopted it as a structure for his stories, but he expanded this oppositional mode that utilized Appalachia as a mirror of American society. Fox's "A Mountain Europa" (1892) illustrates how his stories were representative of the confrontation between the "civilization" of America and the barbarism of Appalachia, and firmly planted in the American imagination set the notion that isolation was the essential core of Appalachia's otherness. His



characters reenact it over and again. In the *Trail* (1908) a sage observes: "You see, mountains isolate people and the effect of isolation on human life is to crystallize it." Cut off from the outside world, Kentucky mountaineers presented the spectacle of "an arrested civilization and they are the closest link we have with the Old World." They were Unionists because they were the forgers of the American nation; they live like the pioneers from that era with axe and rifle always at hand; feuds found their origin in the clans of Scotland (Fox 1908, 97). This was historical rubbish, but it made for sterling fiction and the American public loved it.

The local color novelists, and then the reporters, scholars, policy-makers, and other inventors of "Appalachia" who accepted fictional representation as history, have portrayed the region in similar terms for more than a century. Their characterizations were fixed and then reified into the "Traditional Appalachia Myth," which essentializes Appalachia as a homogeneous region which is physically, culturally, and economically isolated from mainstream America. The creators of the Appalachian myth were not of the people they described, and what the inventors saw was refracted through their own particular set of cultural and class lenses. What the people themselves were actually doing over historical time and space, and what political consciousness motivated and defined their behavior, has remained largely outside of serious scholarly examination until the last two decades. Because of this new scholarship undertaken within many disciplines, the basic tenets of the Appalachian myth have been seriously undermined. Finally, historians have begun to focus their attention on reconstructing a verifiable past to counter the fiction which has served as a substitute for the historical record. That record suggests a much more diverse and dynamic Appalachia than is presumed to have existed, and directly challenges the major assumptions supporting the Myth.

### III. HOMOGENEITY AND DIVERSITY IN APPALACHIA

#### A. Preindustrial Appalachia

But just how isolated was the Appalachia upon which the myth was based? One of the pillars in the Traditional Appalachian Myth is the notion, which popular writers and scholars alike have accepted uncritically, that Appalachia was by-passed by modernization, and that its isolated population remained homogeneous and dependent on a local economy. This view has persisted in part because there is no historical synthesis of pre-industrial Appalachia. Older histories which deal with Appalachia as part of the South, such as Gray and Owsley, treat it as a region inhabited by subsistence farmers who merely eked out an existence on marginal lands in mountain-bound hollows (Gray; Owsley). However, if we examine the region's economic evolution from the perspective of 19th century America, without assuming prior knowledge of the transitions that were to come, Appalachia was not unusually homogeneous either in population or economy--and would increasingly become less so with the approach of the 20th century.<sup>22</sup> Fortunately, there is a growing interest among scholars in preindustrial Appalachia, and their work has already begun to correct our distorted and poorly understood view of

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<sup>22</sup> The line between preindustrial and industrial Appalachia is sharply drawn at the turn of the twentieth century by some scholars. See, for example, Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), and Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978). Others argue that the critical changes were already taking place in the 1850s. See, for example, Kenneth W. Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

this early period when so many of the presumed frontier traits of Appalachians are supposed to have been formed. Already this new scholarship has demonstrated that a much more complex and diversified way of life existed in preindustrial Appalachia, and has fundamentally changed the way we see the region and its people.

### **Economic Diversity In Preindustrial Appalachia**

Recognizing the risk of exaggeration, much recent scholarship either refutes or greatly revises the standard perspective of preindustrial Appalachia as an isolated frontier. This is particularly true if isolation means the absence of commercial or cultural linkages with the larger markets. For one thing, no one generalization holds true for the entire region or over time. Historically, writers have assumed that the conditions they found in the twentieth century were held over from earlier frontier days. In fact, according to geographer Gene Wilhelm, "the Appalachian region has been an admixture of cultural contact and socioeconomic enterprise rather than a bastion of isolated individuals and a slow sequence of economic development" as writers have generally insisted. Wilhelm has argued that "the idea that the Appalachian Mountains acted as a physical barrier, either for the people living within the mountain region, or for those individuals trying to cross them, hardly stands up against the evidence at hand" (Wilhelm 1977, 77-78). For example, the Blue Ridge Mountains between Front Royal and Waynesboro, Virginia, was marked out by a complex series of trails and trade routes, traversed by Indians for hundreds of years, even before the Europeans came. Before roads were built, horse and wagon trails crossed the mountains north and south, east and west. During the nineteenth century, innumerable public roads and private pikes connected the region internally and externally. Wilhelm rejects the notion of early Appalachia as a land without commercial or cultural communications with the world beyond the hollow. He correctly points out that animal drovers were excellent examples of mountaineers who traveled the lines of trade and cultural transmission, which connected the mountains with the local and urban markets. In reverse, lowland culture bearers came into the mountains, including: lawyers, doctors, seasonal teachers, tax collectors, circuit preachers, peddlers, salesmen, and mailmen. One of the first backward linkages settlers fought for were postal roads to connect them with the lowland population centers. The high level of newspaper and periodical subscriptions, and later catalog circulation, in the mountains suggests an on-going desire for knowledge of the broader world. Wilhelm insists that "geographical isolation for the mountain folk is a myth" (1977, 79-80).

Several major works which subsequently dealt with the topic presented variations on Wilhelm's theme. Ronald D. Eller agreed with Wilhelm in general, but concluded that travel was nonetheless always difficult (1982, 100). Steven Hahn's study of upcountry Georgia between 1850-1890 argues against isolation by demonstrating how local farmers participated in the cotton export market (although local networks dominated) by railroad, road, and pole-boats (1983).<sup>23</sup> Although Durwood Dunn generally infers that Cades Cove, which is located in the Tennessee Smokies, was isolated and self-reliant during the early years, he emphasizes that "this isolation was always relative," and shows that during the antebellum years Cove people had relatively ready access to regional markets (1988, 85, 99,

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<sup>23</sup> See also Steven Hahn, "The 'Unmaking' of the Southern Yeomanry: The Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1860-1890," 179-203, in *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds. For the debate over Hahn's thesis see Shawn Everett Kantor and J. Morgan Kousser, "Common Sense or Commonwealth? The Fence Law and Institutional Change in the Postbellum South," 201-42; Steven Hahn, "A Response: Common Cents or Historical Sense?" 243-58; and Kantor and Kousser, "A Rejoinder: Two Visions of History," 259-66, in *The Journal of Southern History* 59 (May 1993).

115, 143, 145).

On the other hand, Altina Waller's Tug Fork, the borderland between Kentucky and West Virginia where the Hatfield-McCoy feud occurred, is portrayed as isolated before the area was opened up in 1889 by the railroad. There were no towns, and county seats were physically isolated from even regional markets. Unlike the Blue Ridge, upcountry Georgia, or Cades Cove, Tennessee, in this section there was little in-migration after 1840, and trade beyond the mountains was "almost non-existent" (Waller, 103, 20-23). Moreover, Dwight Billings, Kathleen Blee, and Louis Swanson found that "Beech Creek" residents of eastern Kentucky remained an isolated people "still living a relatively precapitalist life on the eve of World War II." In Beech Creek, "isolation permitted an independent economy to persist in the Appalachian mountains long after it had vanished elsewhere in the United States," although even here larger market forces were making it difficult to sustain the local economy (1986, 155, 161).

David Hsiung's study of northeastern Tennessee called for a more critical study of isolation, and suggested that focusing on the period between 1780 to 1835 may provide a broader context for measuring Appalachian isolation relative to the rest of backcountry America in the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, he concluded that isolation was a relative temporal as well as spacial concept. In the Revolutionary era residents used the elaborate trail system which fed into the Great Warrior Path and Boone's Trail in northeastern Tennessee. The crude roads made travel and trade difficult, and also sparked the creation of new counties so that residents could be closer to the county seat. Residents in these counties were not cut off from the state capital, but clearly they believed themselves to be isolated by poor access to government and the markets. Hsiung noted that it was the "psychic power of physical separation" which motivated county-building among the people. By 1820, the roads connecting county seats were carrying wagon-loads of goods from Philadelphia and other eastern cities into these counties in a brisk inter-regional trade (1989, 336-349).

Many scholars have now challenged the universal application of physical isolation to Appalachia. Similarly, the idea that Appalachia was the land of subsistence farmers until recent times is under serious reevaluation. John Inscoe takes direct aim at this notion in *Mountain Masters*, a study of slavery in western North Carolina. Inscoe quotes Olive Dame Campbell observation in 1925 that "there is no fundamental reason for separating mountain people from lowland people, nor are mountain problems so different at bottom from those of other rural areas in the United States," an unusual insight for the time. Inscoe suggests that much the same could be said of antebellum society in the Southern Appalachians generally (Inscoe, 11; Campbell 1925, 9). On the eve of the Civil War, Inscoe argues, "western North Carolina was far from the backward, isolated area it was later seen to be." In fact, "the variety of situations and the diversity of its populace equaled if not surpassed those of any other rural section of the antebellum South." Furthermore, although the Carolina mountains retained some of the "crude aspects of its frontier origins," the area "constituted a thriving, productive, and even a progressive society" (1989, 13, 12).

A wide variety of economic activities have been documented in Appalachia, taking us far beyond the marginalized hill farm stereotyped in the Myth. By far the most significant of these, both economically and historically, was the livestock business. During the ante bellum era, Appalachia was the livestock-raising center of the eastern United States. Most recently, Richard MacMaster examined the early cattle industry in western Virginia and found that from the colonial era forward backcountry

stock raisers were "remarkable" in their receptivity to new methods, improved breeding stock, and scientific agriculture in a way that most planters were not. They originated the feeder-lot system, were among the first to import pedigreed cattle, and played a major role in the diffusion of the beef cattle industry beyond the Appalachians into Kentucky and Ohio (MacMaster, 130, 132-149; see also Henlein 1959, Stealey 1966, Wilhelm 1967).

At the southern end of the Valley in North Carolina, John Inscoe has demonstrated that "livestock production was the most substantial form of commercial agriculture practiced in the mountains and the primary means of exchange used by merchants and those they dealt with locally and out-of-state." As early as 1800 cattle and hogs were being driven from the Carolina mountains to markets in Charleston, Savannah, Norfolk, and Philadelphia. Although hogs were by far the preferred livestock, cattle, sheep, ducks, and turkeys also were driven over the roads to market. Asheville, located on the Buncombe Turnpike, was the regional center for the stock trade, but the traffic significantly increased related economic activity. Hog drives stimulated corn production among local farmers who also sold their stock to drovers passing on the road. Merchants, innkeepers, and feeding station operators also set up businesses along the pikes to rest and feed the herds and serve the drovers. Inscoe concludes that "most western North Carolinians were involved in this complex trade network," and that "dependence on southern markets was pervasive throughout the mountain counties" (Inscoe, 45-52, quotations 45, 52).

Prominent Appalachian cattlemen were the elites in their world, but most mountain farmers, however, engaged in mixed farming and a range of diverse economic activities in addition to agriculture. Nineteenth century mountain farmers in eastern Kentucky, for example, spent considerable time hunting and trapping for food and pelts for sale in the market or to pay taxes. Tyrel Moore found that farm exports from the region included small quantities of ginseng, furs, deer hams, chestnuts, honey, and beeswax. These items were exchanged locally but also exported downstream to the Ohio River valley. Roads hindered commercial farming, and many hard to get items were produced for home consumption, such as butter, wool, flax, beeswax, and honey. Cattle and hogs were the preferred livestock, and corn the principal grain (Moore, 223, 227).

### **Non-Agricultural Economic Development**

Also, it is easy to forget that manufactures related to agriculture served a vital function in the local mountain economy, particularly gristmills, wool-carding mills, sawmills, and tanyards which grew in relationship to the density of settlement and social complexity over time. Natural resource industries, although secondary to farming as a means of securing a livelihood, also employed a growing number of people throughout the nineteenth century. It was natural for mountaineers to harvest the forest around them for profit. From the earliest settlement they had utilized the timber to construct dwellings, barns and out buildings, mills, and other necessary structures. As demand for wood products increased with the population, both in the mountains and beyond, more and more timber became a commodity for the market. From the ante bellum era to the end of the nineteenth century, mountain rivers were choked in the spring with rafts of logs cut during the winter heading downstream to the mills. They sent more than raw sawlogs to downstream markets, however, which is illustrated in the Report of the Chief Engineer regarding the quantity and variety of products backcountrymen produced and transported by river through just one lock and dam on the Little Kanawha River in West Virginia during a one year period between 1876 and 1877: 388 rafts of logs; 1,162,900 feet of sawed

lumber; 3,406,200 oil-barrel staves; 57,749 railroad ties; 343,000 hoop-poles; 45,050 cu. ft. ship-timber. Except for the staves, these products were exported to Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and England (1878, 664).<sup>24</sup>

Salt and iron were among the first infant industries to develop in the mountains, and both contributed to the development of a nascent coal industry in Central Appalachia. The Kanawha Valley of western Virginia became a major supplier of salt for the Ohio River cities, and even further downstream to New Orleans for export. For a half-century after its founding in the early nineteenth century, the salt industry grew and stimulated local development of coal to fire the salt brine boilers, and after the Civil War when the salt industry declined a vital coal industry took its place as a major employer (Stealey 1993). Throughout the mountains local blacksmiths plied their trade, but in areas where suitable iron ores were found, the iron industry thrived. During the earliest period charcoal provided the primary fuel for iron furnaces, and a plentiful supply of wood was readily available in the mountains. The charcoal iron industry grew to major proportions in western Maryland, western Virginia, and eastern Tennessee, but charcoal furnaces smelted iron for local markets throughout Appalachian. By the mid-nineteenth century technology permitted the use of coal to fire iron furnaces. Consequently, the proximity of coal and iron deposits provided the points of concentration for the industry in the mountains, especially in the Cumberland River basin of Tennessee, southeastern Pennsylvania, and northern West Virginia (Moore, 230; Lewis 1979; May 1945; Cappon, 331-348; Temin 1964).

Van Beck Hall's study of politics in Appalachian Virginia between 1790 and 1830 shows just how early, vigorous, and universal the push for economic development was within the region. Most rural settlements had their own grain mills, tanneries, and industries such as salt and iron manufacture. Along with the settlements, numerous small towns and resorts along the Allegheny Front provided local markets for farmers, grain millers, and tanneries throughout the nineteenth century. Larger towns also dotted the western landscape. In fact, Wheeling, Martinsburg, Harpers Ferry, and Wellsburg in present West Virginia were among the fifteen largest towns in the state, and represented an evolving urban-commercializing process which increased the political influence of merchants and professionals, and the growth of social institutions associated with urban life (Hall, 166, 169). Hofstra and Mitchell (1993) came to similar conclusions for an earlier period when the Shenandoah Valley was in the Virginia backcountry.

"The growth of these towns created two Appalachias," Hall contends, those counties with growing centers, and counties without sizable towns. The counties with towns spearheaded the economic diversification of the Appalachian Virginia, while the counties without growth centers failed to develop much commercialization or diversity, according to Hall. Significant differences existed within the western counties, of course, with the residents of towns and more developed counties leading the campaign for economic development and political reform. Westerners stood as one in demands for economic development measures, especially bank charters. But it was the battle over internal improvements which indicates most clearly the economic orientation of western Virginians. Westerners, both rural and urban, almost unanimously supported improvements in transportation, such as river and canal improvements, and constructing bridge; support for the improvement and

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<sup>24</sup> For logging generally in West Virginia see Roy B. Clarkson, *Tumult on the Mountains: Lumbering in West Virginia, 1770-1920* (Parson, WV: McClain Printing Company, 1964).

construction of roads and turnpikes was nearly unanimous (Hall, 172-173; Ambler 1910).

Hall concludes that historians have been aware of the differences between eastern and western Virginians on these issues, but they have failed to recognize that supposedly backward Appalachian residents "actually backed democratization, the involvement of more individuals in the political process, banks, internal improvements, the protection of the flow of capital and credit, and education and occasionally challenged the institution of slavery." In fact, even the subsistence farmers of the underdeveloped counties voted for programs that many historians associate with progress and modernization. "These actions simply cannot be fitted into the usual portrayal of an Appalachia trapped in a sort of late-eighteenth or early nineteenth-century 'time warp' or of a culture and society that was easily manipulated by powerful outside interests," Hall argues. What popular and scholarly writers alike have failed to appreciate, Hall concludes, is that in western Virginia,

Two Appalachias existed side by side [in western VA.]. The one with towns, newspapers, banks, and early industries already differed from the more rural, isolated, farming counties. These counties, much easier to identify with the traditional picture of Appalachia, were less interested in many of the programs backed by their more urbanized colleagues, but even those who lived in the second Appalachia worked much harder for reform and development than did the supposedly more commercial, involved, and aware residents of eastern Virginia. The traditional picture of isolated mountain folk uninterested or uninvolved in outside political questions did not yet exist by 1830 (186).

### **Railroads and the Industrial Transition**

It is ironic that at the height of local color writing, and the reification of the Traditional Appalachian Myth, the region had been in the throes of a dramatic industrial transformation for decades. No section of the mountains was affected more dramatically by industrialization than Central Appalachia. Industrial society advanced into the mountains behind armies of laborers who laid the tracks for three major railroad systems. The first to cut its way through the plateau was the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, fulfilling a dream dating back to the eighteenth century, when planners of the C&O Canal hoped to connect Virginia tidewater ports with the Ohio River. Thousands of laborers invaded the formerly inaccessible New River Gorge country in 1868 laying the ties that would bind Richmond and Huntington WV 1873 (Lewis 1987, 122; Bias).

The Pocahontas and Flat Top coal fields of West Virginia, to the southwest of the C&O line, were connected to the national markets by the Norfolk and Western Railroad. It was organized in 1881 specifically to serve as a coal carrier linking the southern West Virginia and southwestern Virginia coal country with the port of Norfolk and eventually the Great Lakes. The N&W offered financial assistance to investors for the construction of mines and towns along its right of way, and in 1883 when the railroad reached Pocahontas, Virginia, on the West Virginia line, the town was already in full operation, with large stockpiles of coal ready for immediate shipment. Eventually, the N&W built a major branch line to Big Stone Gap in Wise County, Virginia, and forged ahead with the main line along the Guyandot River Valley to the Ohio River, and on to the Great Lakes (Lewis 1987, 123; Lambie, chapters 1-2).

While the C&O and the N&W were developing central Appalachia from the east, the Louisville and Nashville Railroad began constructing lines into the Kentucky coal fields from the west. The main line passed along the edge of the plateau running from Louisville to Knoxville. Determined to dominate the eastern Kentucky fields, the L&N constructed a branch line from Corbin, Kentucky, to the Cumberland Gap in the 1880s, but the Kentucky river highlands were not reached by rail until the eve of World War I, when the L&N branch line was completed into Harlan, Letcher, and Perry counties (Eller, 140-53; Klein, 23). Eventually, the entire region was integrated into an elaborate network of main lines, branch lines, feeder lines, and spurs for transporting natural resources extracted from the Central Appalachian countryside.

In the southern Appalachians the boom came to the western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee region with the arrival of the Western North Carolina Railroad at Asheville in 1880 and the Tennessee state line in 1882. Asheville became a boomtown, and the pioneer developers soon gave way to the large companies, often with operations in several states as the industry was consolidated during the first decade of the twentieth century (Eller, 101-104; see also Noppen 1973). Because of its strategic location within the southern mountain region, Knoxville had been an evolving commercial and transportation hub for nearly a century when the convergence of railroads and Cumberland coal and iron elevated the city to the status of regional development hub. From this growth center commercial and modernizing influences reached out into the surrounding mountains. Because Knoxville's coal and iron became locked into a supporting role to the Birmingham coal-steel complex by United States Steel Corporation, and because the city was a major railroad hub, Knoxville's primary industry became light manufacturing which drew on the surrounding mountain population for its labor force, rather than the black "industrial reserve" of the Black Belt (Stanfield, 133).

The tri-cities of Elizabethtown, Bristol, and Johnson City, Tennessee, held a similar strategic position on the emerging railroad system in the mountains and they, too, went through a period of development. The tri-cities' industrial expansion attracted immigrants and blacks, but most of them worked in construction and extractive industries. The subsequent development of the tri-cities as textile manufacturing center provided work primarily for white people in the surrounding countryside, following the southern pattern of a "dual economy" whereby blacks worked in the cotton fields and poor whites worked in the mills (Wolfe, chapters 2, 4; Phillips, chapters 10, 12).

Often there is a tinge of nostalgia for the preindustrial period among those who interpret industrialization as a process by which the frontier freedoms of an early day were dissolved by capitalist development financed by Wall Street. However, there are cases where, even in the absence of capital, indigenous people themselves initiated modernization. Folklorist Lynwood Montell's study of the upper Cumberland offers one such case. Montell examined a section of the Cumberland Plateau which was not penetrated by the railroad. Therefore, coal extraction played no role in the local economy's relationship to the external markets. Land remained under local control, and farming remained a way of life well into the twentieth century. Nevertheless, modernization did come, and people abandoned the traditional life for a modern one. Unlike other scholars who argue that the demise of premodern life was the result of outside forces, Montell claims that these mountain people demanded the commercial goods and services that modernizing America could supply. Like other Americans, Montell's mountaineers shared the same desire for "progress," and shed their old ways for the new without a backward glance; isolation and self-sufficiency were deemed less desirable than were wage-paying jobs. Modernization in upper Cumberland, Montell maintains, was initiated by guerrilla fighting

which accompanied the Civil War, and carried forward by connections to the outside world through the timber business and steamboat trade. In fact, Montell found no nostalgia for the premodern era at all; riverboat captains and log raftsmen were the local heroes and loom large in upper Cumberland folklore. The Great Depression and World War II finished the process of transformation in the region. People were forced off the land by the TVA during the 1930s, and others went off to World War II, or to the cities to work in war industries, and did not return. Nevertheless, in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Montell interviewed those who could remember the old days, "80 percent of them have no desire to go back to the days when life was simpler. . . . in the main, old-timers are present-and future-oriented" (Montell, 191; McKinney, 257-258).

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Thirty years ago, researchers assumed that because of geographical isolation, rural Appalachia had functioned in the past as a subculture that was essentially autonomous from mainstream society. Accordingly, its culture was judged to be different from "mainstream" America. Rural Appalachia was regulated by traditional values such as traditionalism, individualism, familism, and fundamentalism. Such values once served the region well, the argument went, especially in isolated localities where frontier conditions prevailed, but they were no longer appropriate for the modern society being diffused throughout the region by urbanization and industrialization. The demands of rapid change were causing serious problems of adaptation among traditional Appalachians. Traditional values were in conflict with economic development, which required social and economic mobility rather than traditionalism, an achievement orientation, interdependency rather than individualism, and large-scale rational organization rather than personalism. Despite being out of step with American progress, however, Appalachia's traditional values were believed to be insulated from change by geographic isolation, and a psychological isolationism which included a retreat into the protective space of a "culture of poverty."

The belief in a distinct, region-wide Appalachian subculture resistant to economic development was shaped by a large body of social science and historical literature which uncritically accepted the fictional Appalachia invented by "local color" writers before the turn of the 20th century. A review of subsequent scholarship based on the stereotypes of this invented Appalachia reveals remarkably little empirical evidence for the proposition that Appalachian culture was the product of continuing frontier isolation and now discredited social science assumptions about the primacy of values in social change. The new historical research challenges stereotypes about the isolation and lack of economic diversity in preindustrial Appalachia, and demonstrates that early Appalachia was not much different from other regions of rural 19th century America. Therefore, a new historical foundation, and a new understanding of culture itself, must inform economic development policy if it is to succeed.



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Appalachia is a cultural region in the Eastern United States that stretches from the Southern Tier of New York to northern Alabama and Georgia. While the Appalachian Mountains stretch from Belle Isle in Canada to Cheaha Mountain in Alabama, the cultural region of Appalachia typically refers only to the central and southern portions of the range, from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, southwesterly to the Great Smoky Mountains. Appalachia is particularly interesting in the context of social and economic divisions within and between the region's socioeconomic communities. In addition, outsiders' often incorrect and over-generalized external perspectives, and their relationship to culture and folklore of this near-isolated area, are important to the region's future development. [1]. Appalachian Economic Development Fund, LLC (AppEcoDev) is a diverse consortium of professionals with wide range of experience encompassing careers in the entrepreneurial private sector, government and military. AppEcoDev's mission is to expand prosperity within the Appalachian Region by leveraging a thoughtful combination of growth equity financing, capital, business strategy advisory, and state and federal economic development programs, to incentivize the creation and relocation of new and existing business in and to the Appalachian Region, while growing what businesses are already here! Economic development is people making choices, working day by day to make things better. It's a nub of land on the Ohio River where an industrial park has emerged from a remediated Superfund site. It's a New York-style loft in a tiny Appalachian town where a half-dozen creative-class professionals run a custom furniture company. It's a high-growth, high-tech startup in a nondescript building in the rural outskirts of a university town. Attraction. Like wallpaper, economic development done right makes things nicer—but most people would be hard pressed to say how. And if it's done wrong, nothing