

The Impact of Tourism Upon Traditional Culture: A Portrait of Berkshire County, Massachusetts by Ellen McHale

Thoughts of Berkshire County evoke the “cottages” of the county’s Gilded Age, the manicured lawns and small boutiques of Lenox and Stockbridge and the artistic offerings presented by Berkshire County institutions, such as Tanglewood and Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival. However, the county has other faces. In the 19th and early 20th centuries many Berkshire County towns supported industrial life, from the great textile mills of Adams, Massachusetts, to smaller family-run businesses like the Turner tannery and whip core factory in Southfield. The county also remains strongly agricultural, with some family farms dating back more than one hundred years.

The traditions of Berkshire County are deeply rooted. Many of its families have resided in the same area for generations and can refer proudly to an 18th century ancestor who originally cleared and farmed the land. Community identification remains strong, although an explosion in second-home ownership has occurred in the last decade. Urban residents of Boston and New York City have discovered the Berkshires, and former agricultural areas are being turned into vacation communities. By 1980, one of every four homes in southern Berkshire County was used only seasonally or on weekends. (One native of North Egremont insisted that at least fifty percent of the current residents of the town are second-home owners.) The ramifications of this have been profound. Land values have skyrocketed, and many older families are being pushed out because of rising taxes and the lack of affordable housing. People who have lived their entire lives in the county are moving elsewhere. Some even become homeless during the summer months; unable to afford the summer rents demanded by their landlords, they store their belongings and live in campgrounds until they can reenter their homes in September.

Rural traditions have felt the impact of this change in population, as the agricultural economy gives way to a tourist economy. For example, existing farms have felt the need to diversify; the large dairy farms have now given way to smaller farms, which may grow and sell products as varied as nursery stock, strawberries, raspberries, sweet corn, hay and maple syrup. Similarly, traditional art forms and community expressions have been forced to change focus for survival.

One illustration of the shift is the church supper.

This event is found throughout Berkshire County, with the season and available harvest dictating its focus, whether a strawberry social in June, a blueberry supper in August or an autumn supper featuring game meat. Drawing both church members and the general public, the church supper is an occasion for socializing among friends and neighbors. In most cases it is presided over by the women of the parish, who make the preliminary arrangements, such as advertising and recruitment of workers to prepare and serve the food. Often a quilt or afghan raffle will accompany the supper as an additional money maker.

In 1935 a resident of Middlefield in Hampshire County suggested that the Ladies Aid Society of the Middlefield Congregational Church host a “coon supper” as a money maker. Raccoon meat was a local specialty – a byproduct of hunting raccoon for its pelt, a fur long prized in the manufacture of coats. The Ladies Aid Society embraced the idea, and thus the Middlefield Coon Supper was born.

Raccoon meat was solicited from area farmers, and one woman took charge of cooking it, leaving the side dishes of squash and potatoes to others in the Society. A casserole of twelve to sixteen raccoons would support one supper. During its heyday the Middlefield Congregational Church supper had as many as three sittings, serving 250 people in one evening.

In 1985, after fifty years of success, the event was ended. With the change in population from a stable, farming community to one dominated by second-home owners and workers commuting to Pittsfield, the coon supper had become an oddity. Attendance was dropping because raccoon did not appeal to the culinary tastes of these new residents, and the membership of the Congregational Church was not sufficiently large to support the supper financially. Fewer farmers remained who still hunted raccoon, so it became increasingly hard to find the necessary ingredient. The Ladies Aid Society decided to change the time and focus of their supper; they would have instead a blueberry supper in August, thereby taking advantage of the increased summer population. In this instance, a long-standing community tradition has been adapted to fit better the seasonal habits of the population and the changing culinary tastes of the area.

On the other hand, certain traditional activities



The Union Church in Tyringham advertises its annual strawberry supper. Photo by Ellen McHale

have in fact been infused with support by the tourist economy. Loggers who have traditionally used oxen or draft horses to clear the land have found advocates in those summer-home owners who wish to clear portions of their timberland without harming the plant cover. "Dowsing" (divining for water) has also been encouraged by the housing boom, with dowsers experiencing a new demand for their talents. Each home under construction needs to have a well drilled, and the dowser takes some of the guesswork out of locating its site. Similarly, the long-standing Berkshire County tradition of stonework has found increased applications, as new residents demand stone fireplaces and other architectural details. Stone carver and cutter Allen Williams of Chester Granite has even found work designing and creating the stone monuments marking new housing developments.

The aesthetic responses that people have to their environments and the artistic ways that they make sense of their experiences are not static. While traditional art forms and patterns of behavior endure, they do not do so

in a vacuum. Instead, folklife interacts dynamically with the demands of the present, changing ever so slightly to fit the circumstance. The church supper remains, but it alters its menu to reach a new audience; the stone carver seeks new architectural work, as housing starts increase, and the logger looks to specialty work rather than high volume lumbering. Berkshire County does not serve as an unchanging backdrop to the performance of traditions. Instead, the land and the life of the people continually act upon each other, discouraging some traditions or creating an environment where folklife may flourish.

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Suggested reading

Cochrane, Timothy. "Place, People and Folklore: An Isle Royale Case Study," in *Western Folklore*, January 1987, pp. 1-20.

Drew, Bernard A. *Berkshire Off the Trail*, Great Barrington, Massachusetts: Attic Revivals Press, 1982.