

Appalachia, Where Tradition and Technology Thrive

JEAN HASKELL

Music is a tradition that has thrived in this part of the country for generations. Photo by Scott Odell, courtesy J. Scott Odell Collection, Archive Center, National Museum of American History



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Someone once said that more is known that is untrue about Appalachia than about any other region of the country. For many people, Appalachia is the homeland of the bumbling “Beverly Hillbillies,” the crazed *Deliverance* hillbillies, or the cartoon hillbillies of Snuffy Smith and Li'l Abner. It's a strange place with peculiar people who talk funny, in which none-too-smart, lazy men wear battered hats, tote guns, and make and drink moonshine whiskey, and women are either blonde, buxom, and dumb, or gaunt, toothless grannies with lots of home remedies and recipes for cooking roadkill. These images, created by generations of writers, journalists, filmmakers, comedians, and cartoonists, have shaped

popular opinion of Appalachia as home to a culture that is homogeneous, white, poor, ignorant, violent, and unproductive. In truth, Appalachia is not a monolithic culture—and not the one depicted in the stereotypes—but a patchwork quilt of rich traditions that form the vivid patterns of Appalachian experience.

Where and what is Appalachia? Most people would agree that the Appalachian mountain chain that stretches along the eastern quarter of North America forms the core of the region. As one observer says, the mountains are the heart of the region, but the edges get blurry. Definitions of the region have varied over time according to the needs and motives of those doing the defining. Sometimes the region's geographical boundaries have been limited to “the Southern highlands,” the “Upland South,” or the coal fields of the

central part of the mountains; at other times, the definition has been expansive enough to include the mountain chain from Canada through north Georgia and north Alabama. In 1965, when the U.S. Congress created the Appalachian Regional Commission to address economic development and quality-of-life issues in the region, the federal definition of the region came to include the mountainous portions of 13 states, stretching from southern New York to north Mississippi, with 410 counties and a population of over 22 million people.

With so vast an area and so many people, defining the traditional culture of the region becomes as difficult as determining its boundaries. Native Americans, especially the prevalent Cherokee, are indigenous Appalachian people. Their agricultural traditions such as the cultivation of corn and squash, architectural traditions of log construction, and craft traditions such as basketry helped early European settlers adapt to mountain living. Those Anglo-European settlers, largely from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Germany, brought to the mountains a heritage of

subsistence farming, house styles, foods such as pork and potatoes, a knowledge of distilling, and a repertoire of stories, fiddle tunes, and ballads. Africans came to the region initially as an enslaved population, bringing with them the memory of what became the banjo and a taste for foods such as okra and many types of greens. Even on the frontier, Appalachia had a diverse culture in which various groups borrowed traditional knowledge from one another to carve out a shared life in the mountain wilderness.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, industrialization came to the mountains in the form of railroads, coal mining, steel mills, textile plants, and large-scale timbering operations. Each industry developed a work lore of techniques, customs, beliefs, food, stories, and songs that added to the cultural mix. The labor force needed for these industries brought newly arrived immigrants from Italy, Poland, Hungary, and elsewhere in Europe and African Americans from the deep South to mix with white mountaineers, all of them living and working in the same communities and learning from one another's cultures. Advances in mass communication such as phonograph records, radio, photography, and film exposed mountain folk to new cultural influences and brought mountain culture to the attention of a national audience.

Contemporary Appalachian life has been enlivened by an influx of refugees such as the Hmong of Southeast Asia, doctors and other professionals from India, and Hispanic agricultural and manufacturing workers from Mexico

RELIGION IN APPALACHIA

TROY GOWEN

Religion has been one of the strongest cultural forces in the lives of Appalachians. Diverse and pervasive, it influences much of what is considered Appalachian both inside and outside of the region. Cultural traits highly valued by many Appalachians are intimately tied to religious beliefs shaped by the challenges of frontier life—humility, well-defined family structure, self-sufficiency and resourcefulness, and hospitality are all encouraged by the Scriptures, and all were essential for survival in the remote valleys and mountain hollows.

Distrustful of established church hierarchies, the first European settlers of the region were mostly Protestant Christians arriving during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Small, isolated Appalachian communities most often formed self-reliant churches that provided for their particular spiritual and material needs. Spirituality was an integral part of life for many in the mountains. Dependent on the whims of nature for survival, people often believed in real forces of good and evil constantly at work in the world, and many worship practices and forms of service in Appalachian churches arose from this view. As people looked to their own beliefs and experiences for guidance, Protestantism in the mountains became a highly splintered religion in which individual churches often held their own counsel on particular issues of faith, even within a single denomination. In Appalachia there are at least forty major divisions of the Baptist denomination alone.

Music is another defining force in

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Appalachian culture, and there, too, religion has been influential. Archaic forms of religious music, such as shape-note and lined singing, still linger in the region. Gospel and spiritual themes are a major component in recorded country and bluegrass music. Nearly all country and bluegrass performers feature gospel and spiritual numbers in their repertoires, and some have a reputation solely as bluegrass gospel acts.

Up on the mountain
When the Lord spoke
Out of His mouth
Came fire and smoke

Every time, time, time,
I feel the spirit (feel the spirit)
Moving in my heart I pray.
—from "Every Time I Feel the Spirit"
as recorded by Charlie Monroe

Upon this foundation of frontier Protestant Christianity, successive waves of immigrants have added to the cultural and religious diversity of Appalachia. Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals in the region are now joined by Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Mormons, Episcopalians, Mennonites, Quakers, Unitarians, and people of other faiths. Many early religious practices such as foot washing, living water baptisms, speaking in tongues, and even serpent and fire handling have been preserved relatively intact in the mountains. However, large urban churches are the predominant places of worship in the region today, and religious practice there is nearly identical to that found elsewhere in America.

Farther along we'll know all about it
Farther along we'll understand why
Cheer up my brother and live in the
sunshine
We'll understand it all by and by.
—from the gospel standard
"Farther Along" ■

and Latin America. They are adding their languages, crafts, customs, musics, and foods to the Appalachian landscape today. At the beginning of the new millennium, electronic communications of all kinds, including the Internet, continue to bring diverse cultures into contact with life in the Appalachian Mountains.

Although Appalachia is not homogeneous, there do seem to be some common traits in the region's expressive culture. Living in hilly and mountainous terrain has led to ingenious resourcefulness, especially in the use of the region's rich natural bounty, reliance on close-knit kin and

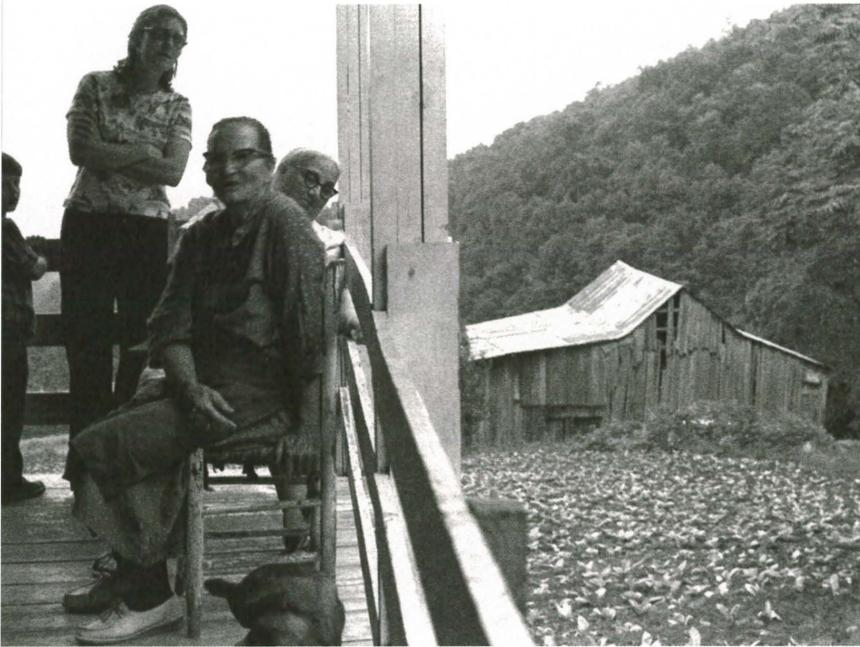
community in a region more rural than urban, powerful and tenacious religious traditions, an ethic of hard work, and an economic history that has produced a fascinating cultural diversity.

While most forms of expressive culture are found throughout the region, some traditions have developed more fully in certain pockets of mountain society. Handmade craft, for example, though widespread in the Appalachian region, has become a hallmark of the western North Carolina mountains. Traditional dance thrives in Cherokee, North Carolina, and in communities of southwest Virginia. Old-time, bluegrass, and traditional country music that are the focus of this Festival program reach all parts of the mountains but seem most vigorous in an area that forms the heart of the Appalachian region in east Tennessee, southwest Virginia, southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky,

western North Carolina, and north Georgia.

Appalachia is a region of cultural contrasts. In its bustling cities such as Pittsburgh, Chattanooga, Asheville, and Charleston, you can listen to the symphony and to an old-time string band; you can watch ballet or flatfoot dancing. Local folks may commute into urban areas to work, but come home to farm a small plot of land. The old, white, family farmhouse may stand empty or be filled with hay beside the modern brick ranch house on the side of the road. Traditional storytellers may gather in a rustic home on the side of a mountain or at the gleaming new International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee. Quilting groups in Appalachia stitch traditional patterns yet also create striking contemporary art pieces. Traditional ballad themes and forms show up in the repertoire of an Appalachian reggae band. Jams and jellies for home use sit side by side with gourmet goodies made from traditional recipes for high-end corporate gifts.

In Appalachia, the region's rich heritage is not something relegated to books about the past or old recordings or museum displays. Tradition informs everyday life, and innovations on tradition keep heritage alive and dynamic. Heritage provides beautiful harmony for the song of everyday life in Appalachia. ■



Dellie Norton's front porch and tobacco field in Sodom Laurel, North Carolina, 1976. Photo by Scott Odell, courtesy J. Scott Odell Collection, Archive Center, National Museum of American History