

Storytelling in Appalachia: A Sense of Place

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Southern Appalachia has long been identified in the popular imagination with a deep-rooted sense of place, an antique and authentically distressed region that is somehow “more real” than the industrially processed America that surrounds it. That this imagined Appalachia has some deep kernel of truth only encourages both locals and outsiders to pump it full of entertainment calories for the mass market (see Dollywood, Gatlinburg, and Opryland). But the traditional art of storytelling has been an essential part of that truth—a part that has been only mildly susceptible to refinement into cornpone.

While Appalachia didn't invent the front porch, the country store, the fox- or coon-hunting shack, or the visitors' parlor, it has perhaps perfected them as forums for family yarns, tall tales, local character tales, or sly refinements of gossip. Nor did Appalachia invent the preacher's pulpit, yet the art of the Appalachian preacher has preserved with special fervor the rhythmic cadences of Biblical story-singing, just as his excesses have inspired a prodigious supply of preacher jokes.

The mountain districts, only in the past fifty years or so widely breached by roads, satellite dishes, and ski chalets, have also preserved repertoires of ancient wonder tales and story-songs once widespread among rural folk, but only extant now in a few dwindling pockets of the Western world. The Jack Tales that Richard Chase collected in Wise County, Virginia, and Beech Mountain, North Carolina, in the 1930s and 1940s, like the old English and Scottish ballads that Cecil Sharp found there in the 'teens, are part of a deeply localized but also highly emblematic cultural inheritance. If there were a cultural endangered species act, these pockets would be surrounded by government agents empowered to freeze roads, developments, and tax hikes until the filing of statements of impact on the children of tale-tellers and singers. Since there is not, we have instead had the kaleidoscopic spectacle of folk revivalism riding into Appalachia along the same highways that let the

children of Appalachia out. It is no accident that the foundations of the main national storytelling revival organizations, as well as their preeminent National Storytelling Festival, are based in the little Appalachian town of Jonesborough, Tennessee—just a few miles from where the Bristol Sessions began the movement of mountain music into the mainstream. ■

Ray Hicks was a teller of Jack Tales, handed down through generations in his mountain family. *Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution*

BIL LEPP TOOK the honor of being the Biggest Liar in West Virginia at the 1997 Vandalia Gathering Liar's Contest. Here is an excerpt from his winning lie:

“Well, I sat there a minute and I weighed the pros and cons of both of those ideas and I figured while monster truck driving certainly had a few pros in its corner, if I went into politics, I'd be dealing exclusively with cons. . . .”

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