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### Myths: How a Hunger for Roots Shapes Our Notions about Appalachian English

Not long after I left my home in East Tennessee for graduate school in Florida in 1975 (and then went on to teach at three universities outside the region) I found myself beginning to dissect what I believed about Appalachia. In this process I came to realize how strongly I subscribed to a number of "myths" that claim the traditional culture and speech of the mountains are distinctive (whether they in fact are is not the issue; many people believe they are, and I was one of them).

First of all, I realized that most people even from the region believe that Appalachia is an alien place, that it exists somewhere other than where they are—geographically, socially, and, most especially, culturally. Then there are other myths, including that Appalachia is timeless, Appalachia is Elizabethan, Appalachia is homogeneous, and Appalachia is isolated. These profoundly shape people's perceptions of the region's language.

The word *myth* has a number of senses. I use it not for an idea that is false, but one that continues to be meaningful to a culture, being shared widely and deeply by its members. It has value because it affirms some of a culture's deepest beliefs. For all intents and purposes, a myth cannot be proved or disproved. While one can certainly cite evidence that runs counter to most myths, the fact that they persist only helps us understand their power. All cultures, from ancient and preliterate to post-modern ones, have myths. More than eighty years ago, John C. Campbell, an educator and social worker who was as perceptive a commentator as the region has ever had, stated that Southern Appalachia was a region "about which, perhaps, more things are known that are not true than any other part of the country." It would be hard to argue that this observation doesn't have equal validity today.

When I was growing up in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the 1950s and 1960s, we saw the term Appalachia in geography textbooks or heard it as we studied current events (especially after the advent of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty in 1965), but we never used it ourselves. We had no need for it

because, as Knoxville suburbanites, we might have been surrounded by Appalachia (as I was to realize later), but we were hardly *in* Appalachia. Geographers studying the mental maps people have of the region have substantiated the fact that this same notion is widespread: many living in the region firmly believe that wherever "Appalachia" is, it's someplace else, not where they reside. Researchers have found that when they ask people living in what is geographically Appalachia to circle where they consider Appalachia to be on a map having only state lines drawn on it, responses vary, but in regular ways. Those living outside Central Appalachia often say they reside outside Appalachia altogether. Those who live in Central Appalachia consider the region's core to be elsewhere; for instance, Eastern Kentuckians see it as Southwest Virginia and Northeast Tennessee. In particular, middle-class people in Central and Southern Appalachia often eschew "Appalachia" for themselves but assign it to members of the working class living just down the road.

I can see the causes of this curious phenomenon when I examine my own experience growing up in East Tennessee. For us, Appalachia called up two contrasting pictures: scenic mountains and economic distress, the latter linked with coal mining and "hillbillies." For the mountains we already had perfectly suitable names: the Smokies to the east and the Cumberlands to the west. Since there was no coal mining nearby and, as far as we could see, little poverty and few real hillbillies, we had little use for the word *Appalachia*. It was somewhere to the north of us, maybe starting at the Kentucky state line.

These images of the region were filtered through the media, both print and electronic. As historian Henry Shapiro argued back in 1978 in his splendid book *Appalachia on Our Mind*, this distorted concept of Appalachia began back in the late 19th-century when commentators, fiction writers, and promoters not native to the region described a place populated by people having pre-modern lifestyles. If we doubt that stereotypes about mountain culture are still being perpetuated down to the present day, we need only peruse the titles in local bookshops that present Appalachia as a timeless region. Or we can consider the national news coverage about the search for Eric Rudolph, the fugitive who held up for years in what the media constantly portrayed as a "primitive" corner of North Carolina.

In ways I could not then suspect, journalists conditioned my own perceptions of the mountains,

its people, culture, and speech, by presenting images: exotic, striking ones from those who were not natives, sympathetic ones from those who were. For a long time, I processed information about the region according to such stock ideas and stereotypes, those trusted categories we use for people other than ourselves.

The second myth, one believed by millions of Americans, is that Appalachia is a region suspended in time: You pass through a time warp when you enter the mountains and, as a result, mountain people live in a different era. Which century is a matter of debate. Often people pick the 16th, 17th, or 18th, but a few have even placed Appalachia in the 14th century, Chaucer's time. The precise century is not important, the point being that mountain culture is old, at least three centuries old, a very long time by American standards. Not only is mountain culture viewed as centuries old, but it is believed to have been static since the first English and Scotch-Irish immigrants landed in Atlantic ports in the 1700s and were supposed to have moved directly to the hills.

Naturalist, woodsman and author Horace Kephart did much to promote the view that time moves slowly, if at all, in the mountains in his 1913 account of Smoky Mountain life, *Our Southern Highlanders*, perhaps the most influential book ever written about southern mountain people. His theme, and that of so many others since, was that mountain culture and language differ from the rest of the country because mountain people preserve forms that elsewhere have become archaic or passed away. The persistence of speechways down to the present, along with Child ballads (traditional British ballads collected in the late 19th century by Harvard University's Francis James Child), of numerous tales about Jack (the best known of which had him climbing a very tall beanstalk), and other traditions, would seem to support this view. To the outsider, there must have been some extraordinary reason why these have been preserved primarily in Appalachia, even though to insiders the reason is perfectly natural and obvious: ballads are enjoyable to sing and Jack Tales fun to hear told.

At the University of South Carolina, where I taught for many years and where poet and novelist James Dickey was a colleague of mine, his book *Deliverance* had many admirers. Once when I politely suggested to another colleague that Dickey's portrayal of mountain people might have been a bit slanted

or anachronistic and that presentation of any other group of Americans in such a light in the 1970s would have sparked public objection, my suggestion was met with incomprehension. This man, a South Carolinian who for many years was a highly placed university administrator, responded by saying "I think the portrayal of those hillbillies was accurate. I've seen people like that myself."

My point is not that mountain people are considered fair targets for negative stereotyping when so many other groups no longer are. It is, rather, that many Americans have what may charitably be called a blind spot in their perceptions of Southern mountain people and culture. This condition also results in their having a deaf ear, hearing only archaisms when mountain speech is actually full of novelties—expressions that were apparently created in this country, perhaps even in the mountains, in the 19th century. Despite the tendency to think everything distinctive about mountain speech is old, the fact is one can only trace about twenty percent of terms labeled "Appalachian" in the *Dictionary of American Regional English* to the British Isles. Most of the rest are innovations. Here I refer not only to names of plants or terms for moonshine, for which mountain speech is replete with innumerable, picturesque variations, but to expressions such as *hope how soon* as in "I hope how soon he gets here," which translates to "I hope he gets here soon" in standard American dialect. There are words such as *everwhich* and *everwho*, meaning "whichever" and "whoever" and appearing in sentences such as "Everwho was here left a terrible mess," as well as the words *knee deep* for "bull frog" and, inspired by the plague story in the Old Testament, *ferro* for "locust." Then there is the charming sequence of terms for small children of different ages: *lap baby*, *knee baby*, and *setalong child*, to name a few. So one of the hidden stories about mountain language is, in fact, its inventiveness, not its antiquity.

The third myth, probably the most familiar of all, follows from the second one: that Appalachian speech preserves a strong Elizabethan element. Although the exact period of literary English said to be closest to mountain vernacular is subject to different opinions, most commonly this myth makes a connection to that of Shakespeare or to his Elizabethan contemporaries poet Edmund Spenser and poet and dramatist Ben Jonson. Certainly over the years, as I have met and told people I am a linguist who grew up near the mountains, I have frequently been asked, by highly educated people, "Isn't there

supposed to be some place up there where they still speak Elizabethan English?"

It was apparently William Goodell Frost (President of Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, from 1892 until 1920), who set the mold for this myth in his essay, "Our Contemporary Ancestors," published a century ago in *The Atlantic Monthly*. He wrote,

The rude language of the mountains is far less a degradation than a survival. The [Old English] pronoun `hit' holds its place almost universally. Strong past tenses, `holp' for helped, `drug' for dragged, and the like, are heard constantly; and the syllabic plural is retained in words -st and others. The greeting as we ride up to a cabin is `Howdy, strangers, Light and hitch your beastes.' Quite a vocabulary of Chaucer's words which have been dropped by polite lips, but which linger in these solitudes, has been made out by some of our students.<sup>1</sup>

Frost thus pushed the English spoken by Kentucky mountaineers back to some 200 years before the reign of Elizabeth I. As with so much else about Appalachia, the list of forms cited by Frost (what he called elsewhere "a striking survival of Saxon speech") took on a life of its own and was recycled in the writings of many others. In 1915 writer William Aspenwall Bralockbdley wrote in an essay titled "In Shakespeare's America" that "it is said that when the mountaineer begins to read at all, he displays so marked a preference for Shakespeare that it is invariably the works of that poet that have most frequently to be rebound in any library to which he has access."

If we smile at Bradley's notion that Kentucky mountain children have a natural affinity for Shakespeare and dismiss it as fanciful, we might consider a more recent statement—more restrained but in the same vein—from Floyd Watkins, formerly professor of American literature at Emory University in Atlanta. In 1949, he wrote in "The Southern Mountaineers' Archaic English," published in *The Georgia Review*, "If a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer or William Shakespeare were suddenly to find himself in the twentieth-century American Appalachian Mountains, he would in many respects feel almost at home."

When people ask me where mountaineers still speak Elizabethan English, I sometimes turn the question around and inquire where it is they have heard this place is. To date, not one has responded to my query with the name of a specific community. That people somewhere in the mountains use Elizabethan speech is something "everybody just knows." Actually, we can trace only a small portion of mountain speech to Shakespeare's time. A considerably larger element, especially when it comes to grammar, can be found in the language of Scotch-Irish immigrants rather than in the writings of the Stratford bard, but even this is fairly small.

Complementing the idea that mountain people have been stalled in time for several centuries is the fourth myth: Everyone in Appalachia has the same culture and speech. Over the past century, there is a massive literature, both popular and scholarly, that uses *Appalachian* as a generic term. Despite the countless complexities and inconsistencies of life confronting the objective observer, outsiders generalize freely about mountain people and view mountain culture as far more uniform, and mountain communities as far more homogeneous, than is true. The result is false or misleading generalizations when people use labels like *Appalachia* or *Southern Highlands* to refer to mountain people or their speech en masse, especially when they base those generalizations on individual communities or a handful of people, as is too often the case.

Again, a classic instance comes from Kephart, whose *Our Southern Highlanders* derived from the former librarian's residence in a small, remote area, an upper branch of Hazel Creek in Swain County, N.C., from 1904 to 1907. On the positive side, Kephart was a keen observer and far more sympathetic to mountain folk than many of his successors. We are much in his debt for the detailed record he left behind. In particular, his chapter "Mountain Dialect" was the first thorough treatment of the subject and the only one for another two decades. Yet his presentation spoke of mountaineers and their speech generically. He almost never qualified or localized his description of mountain terminology, even though some of the ones he cited can't be found in any other study or reference work on American or British English, no matter how comprehensive. There's no way to know, for instance, whether the verb *block*, which he defined as "to blockade or make moonshine," was confined to a small area of North Carolina or

was more widespread in the mountains and simply not noticed by others.

In few other parts of the United States are general labels so routinely applied as in Appalachia. If, for example, linguists studied the speech of two communities in California or New Hampshire, we don't expect their book to be called "Western English" or "New England English." Yet we're hardly surprised when a book based on two communities in West Virginia is called *Appalachian Speech*, a 1976 title by linguists Walt Wolfram and Donna Christian. How can such an enormous region, which takes in parts of eight, ten or thirteen states, depending on the definition, be viewed as uniform? Only, I think, if it exists in the mind as an undifferentiated timeless region inhabited by a single ethnic group, a merger of the English and Scotch-Irish.

However, anyone who scrutinizes the history of Appalachia finds that it has been ethnically diverse since early days, when English, Scotch-Irish, German, and other European groups settled in mixed communities, soon establishing contact with people of African and Native American descent. Logging, mining, and other industries came to many parts of the mountains in the 19th century. These brought thousands of Italian, African, Irish, Polish, and people of other ancestries to Appalachia to work and then to settle with their families, which presumably diversified the speech and culture from one area to another. Moreover, no Appalachian community, however small, is uniform. There are always differences between generations. The social and cultural diversity of Appalachia remains an untold story.

The fifth myth underlies the first four: Long-term physical isolation caused mountain speech and culture to become static and to lag behind other parts of the country. This seemingly self-evident notion has been so routinely invoked to explain the character of the mountains that it might seem unquestionable. Statements about their isolation are numerous and well-known. For example in his 1901 essay, "The Southern Mountaineer," novelist John Fox Jr. provided a classic early example. "In the march of civilization westward, the Southern mountaineer has been left in an isolation almost beyond belief," Fox averred. "He was shut off by mountains that blocked and still block the commerce of a century, and there for a century he has stayed. He has had no navigable rivers, no lakes, no coasts, few wagon roads, and

often no roads at all except the beds of streams. He has lived in the cabin in which his grandfather was born, and in life, habit and thought he has been merely his grandfather born over again."

But a closer look at this idea calls it into question. There are many different ways to be isolated. Certainly people and communities can be physically isolated from other communities, especially from cities. But a community need not be remote to be isolated from its surroundings, as shown by inner-city neighborhoods in major metropolitan areas today. Nor is a remote community really "isolated" if it has frequent contact with outsiders, often by means of access to media (not a new factor by any means; before television, there was radio and newspapers).

The work of Appalachian historians has seriously questioned how much validity of "isolation" has in relation to the region. For instance, visitors today to Cades Cove, the preserved mountain community that is part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, find an enclosed area with log structures preserved by the National Park Service. They imagine they are seeing the remnant of an isolated, self-sufficient community that had a pioneer lifestyle until the 1930s, a view long promoted by the park and to a limited extent an accurate one. However, historian Durwood Dunn, a descendent of cove residents, has shown in his book *Cades Cove: The Life and Death of a Southern Appalachian Community 1818-1937* that its several hundred inhabitants had much commercial interaction with Maryville (the county seat barely a dozen miles away) and the rest of Blount County throughout its century-long existence and that there was constant movement in and out of the community.

The myth of Appalachian isolation shows how little is really understood about mountain life, or at least about how mountain people and outsiders interpret the physical remoteness from cities in very different ways. No doubt life in the mountains is often harsh and demanding, and in wintertime transportation until recently was often difficult. To most mountain folk, however, this has not been too great a price to pay for living there year-round. While they have differed from place to place, many if not most mountain communities have not been isolated so much as detached and independent. What outsiders view as isolation, local people often see as a very desirable condition that grants them freedom. Traditional mountain society has always been aware of the larger society in the valley below. Far from

being passive recipients of outside language and culture, mountain people have actively chosen and negotiated how much and what kind of interaction they want to have. This is true today, and it must have been true over the past two centuries. In short, the strong attachments that mountain people have to a traditional way of life makes them less open to change, more resistant to accommodate to mainstream culture. This explains the conservativeness of mountain culture—and why mountain people hold on to older expressions—much better than the existence of physical isolation and barriers.

Cumulatively, the five myths outlined here imply that Appalachia, wherever it is, is a region whose landscape, lifestyles, sense of time and place, and speech differ from the modern world we know. These myths are very much a part of how Southern mountain culture is viewed in the abstract, and all of us probably rely on them more than we realize. In this essay I have sometimes questioned their validity, but they are indisputably based on a kernel of truth and have great power as cultural beliefs.

To many, mountain culture preserves what the rest of the country has lost. Americans today view Appalachia as one of the nation's quintessential cultural repositories, and traditional mountain culture commands immense respect, especially in the field of music. While it is true that Appalachia has been neglected, marginalized, and exploited, it retains extraordinary significance for countless Americans because of their own lack of cultural bearings and lack of cultural memory. These five myths provide roots and a sense of history that many Americans can claim whenever they wish.

Thus, modern myths about Appalachia, especially in regard to its speech, reveal more about mainstream society—its insecurities, its nostalgia, and its curiosity—than about mountain speech and culture themselves. But these myths—especially the belief that mountain speech is Elizabethan—give roots to mountain people as well, roots that can be used to claim prestige and a heritage. Since Shakespearean English represents what most consider the pinnacle of literary expression in the English language, to be one of the relatively few people allegedly still speaking it gives one automatic status.

When people ask me whether there isn't some place in the mountains where Elizabethan English is still spoken, the question is a sincere query. After they cannot name where this place is supposed to be, I have sometimes observed that "well, no, that's really only a romantic notion. It's not really true." Their

response is often one of visible dismay, so seriously do they want to believe it. All things considered, if Appalachia didn't exist, we might have to invent it.

#### Note

1. William Goodell Frost, "Our Contemporary Ancestors," *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (March 1899), 313.