

Southern Appalachian Culture

by Steve Davis

In the following essays, we will explore Southern Appalachian culture as it existed in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, with a particular focus on the religious beliefs, health care practices, recreational activities, agricultural methods, social/economic class structures, gender relationships, and educational standards common to the region at that time. Before doing so, however, it behooves us to do two things: first, to establish what we mean by “Southern Appalachia”; and second, to indicate which part of this rather vast, rather topographically varied region we will be exploring, in search of Southern Appalachian “cultural norms.”

In *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, writer Horace Kephart provides us with a perfectly adequate definition of Southern Appalachia: “the four western counties of Maryland; the Blue Ridge Valley, and Allegheny Ridge counties of Virginia; all of West Virginia; eastern Tennessee; eastern Kentucky; western North Carolina; the four northwestern counties of South Carolina; northern Georgia; and northeastern Alabama.” He also points out that, of the numerous mountain ranges included in this territory, the Unaka or Great Smoky Mountains form “a single chain that dwarfs all other in the . . . system.” Needless to say, such a vast landmass (Kephart’s Southern Appalachia is roughly equivalent in size to Great Britain, excluding Ireland) defies easy description. For although the region’s terrain is more or less uniform, consisting primarily of steep parallel ridges, fertile intervening valleys, and shallow, rock-infested rivers, it nevertheless exhibits a rather profound variety in terms of soil quality, plant life, mineral resources, weather patterns, and topographical features--and thus in terms of unique human subcultures.

For the sake of clarity, then, we will focus our attention on the residents of one small Southern Appalachian community, Gatlinburg, Tennessee, which was situated in one of the more profoundly isolated corners of the region (the foothills of the aforementioned Unaka or Great Smoky Mountain chain). The essays that follow are in no way intended to be representative of the entire region, although one may certainly discover similarities between the cultural manifestations of Gatlinburg residents and those exhibited by the residents of other, similarly-situated Southern Appalachian communities.

Gender

Southern Appalachian households in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries were, as a general rule, organized along patriarchal lines. That is, the oldest male relative in the household, be it a husband, father, brother, uncle, or grandfather, held the decision-making power for the entire family, particularly as it regarded financial and educational matters. Women were not allowed to vote or hold political office, and in some cases were denied the opportunity to receive even a basic education. As one Pi Beta Phi Settlement School teacher put it, “in the eyes of their fathers girls need no education to bear children, it only fills their heads with nonsense.”

Household tasks were gendered as well. Men performed agricultural labor such as clearing and plowing fields, building and repairing farm buildings, making tools, tending livestock, and harvesting crops. They also cut firewood, hunted wild animals, and worked in lumber camps to supplement the family’s often meager income. Women, on the other hand, performed mostly household chores: cooking meals, washing dishes, making and mending clothing, caring for children and elderly relatives, and tending vegetable gardens. Those who possessed a loom might spend part of their day weaving cloth, although by the early twentieth

century, few did so. Store-bought cloth was readily available by that time and most women, eager to be rid of a time consuming chore, had long-since stashed their looms in a barn loft or burned it for firewood.

Still, gender roles were more fluid than one might think, at least when it came to women straddling the line between the “men’s sphere” and the “women’s sphere.” Women and girls regularly assisted their male relatives with agriculture labor, particularly during the harvest season. And in cases where the family patriarch was absent from the home or incapacitated, it was not uncommon for the matriarch to assume governance of both the home and farm operations. The same, however, could not be said for men. Seldom would one have encountered Southern Appalachian men performing tasks that belonged in the women’s or “domestic sphere,” such as caring for small children, cooking meals, or mending clothes. A widower with small children might well be forced to engage in domestic activities for a short time, but only until such time as his daughters (if he had any) were old enough to assume responsibility for these tasks, or he succeeded in acquiring a new wife.

If any one factor truly served to blur gender lines in Southern Appalachia, at least in regard to educational opportunities, it was economic status. Valley farm/merchant families were wealthier than their cove and hill farm neighbors, were less likely to engage in purely subsistence agriculture (which required that all family members engage in farm labor, regardless of their age), and so were more likely to seek out educational opportunities for sons and daughters alike. As evidence, one need only examine archival materials, particularly photographs, related to the founding of the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. In the earliest known photos of the settlement school, boys and girls--all of them well dressed--are represented in equal numbers among the student body. These children were, for the most part, the progeny of the

Andy Huff, Steve Whaley, Squire Isaac L. Maples, and E. E. Ogle families, all of whom qualified as valley farm/merchant families.

In the end, it would be an exaggeration to assume that Southern Appalachian women were utterly oppressed. Men did not, historian Altina M. Waller insists, “have a license of absolute power over women,” despite the fact that wives and daughters were “clearly subordinate” to the men in their families. And yet, it must be acknowledged that mountain women’s social, educational, economic, and political aspirations were limited by the very fact of their gender.

Recreation

Among the first thing that visitors noticed on traveling to Southern Appalachia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, aside from the mountaineers’ meager material culture, was their stoic, unemotional disposition. Seldom did mountaineers laugh or engage in frivolity, or at least did not do so in the presence of strangers. This led to a common assumption among outsiders: namely, that the mountaineers’ difficult lives proved overly burdensome, and thereby rendered them incapable of experiencing (much less expressing) joy. As the *New York Christian Advocate* put it in December 1915, “millions of these people are shut in by the mountains from the currents of modern life; from their cultural, inspirational and uplifting influences, from a broad, sane and true vision of life. They live the narrow, hard and discouraged life and die before their allotted time.” There was, of course, some truth to this statement; life in the Southern Appalachians was difficult by any standard, requiring that men, women, and children labor for long hours in an attempt to ensure the family’s survival and well-being. And yet, the assertion that mountaineers lived dismal lives, utterly devoid of mirth and merriment, was at best an exaggeration.

Although they lacked the money to purchase toys, and were more often than not engaged in hard agricultural labor, Southern Appalachian children were more than capable of entertaining themselves. For example, a pig's bladder, once cleaned, dried, and inflated, made for a crude but wonderful "play pretty." It was, in the words of historian and former Cades Cove resident A. Randolph Shields, "the nearest thing [mountain children] had to a balloon in those days," and one that "would last for many hours of play." And yet, such "toys" were available only during hog-killing time (early winter), leaving mountain children to devise their own games and amusements--using whatever materials were available to them--during the rest of the year. According to Gatlinburg, Tennessee resident Lucinda Oakley Ogle, who attended the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School in the early twentieth century, she and her siblings devised a game called "rotten egg" that involved skipping stones down a rock-strewn mountain road. The object of the game was simple: to hurl one's stone down the road, skipping it from rock to rock without touching the ground. The first to fail was, of course, deemed the "rotten egg," and the game started over. Most play activities were, however, far less organized. Children climbed trees, swam in the numerous creeks, fished, and hunted small animals.

Adults were given to recreation as well. Among the chief leisure activities enjoyed by mountain adults were reading newspapers (or, if illiterate, hearing the newspaper read aloud), visiting neighbors and/or family members in nearby communities, hunting and fishing (primarily male activities), and attending "Harp singings." Men were particularly fond of gathering at the nearest "general store," where they received haircuts, told tall tales (and occasionally even a true story or two), traded tools, livestock, and other items with one another, and caught up on the latest news. For the most part, however, adults were left to amuse themselves in the isolation of their own homes. Many an evening in the mountaineer's life was spent seated on his or her front

porch, engaged in quiet contemplation and perhaps smoking a pipe. Those who possessed musical ability might play a banjo, fiddle, or dulcimer to wile away the hours while the religiously inclined would often read the Bible aloud to family members.

There were, of course, moments when large numbers of mountaineers gathered together for community events. The harvest season, in particular, provided numerous social opportunities, for mountain families tended to assist one another in the task of bringing in crops. Most popular (and perhaps most familiar to modern readers) were the corn husking bees, which saw farm families and their neighbors gather to husk and shell corn. But there were also apples to peel, beans to shell and string, and molasses to make, all of which required a certain degree of communal action. It was not uncommon, despite their staunch Baptist backgrounds (and hence tendency to frown on the consumption of alcohol), for mountaineers to imbibe a bit of whiskey, cider, or some other intoxicating liquor at such events. And of course, harvest-season gatherings provided the young and unwed with an opportunity to leave their isolated farms, gather together under adult supervision, and mingle with one another. According to historian A. Randolph Shields, who spent the first thirteen years of his life in Cades Cove, the young man fortunate enough to find a red ear of corn in the husking pile was a fortunate indeed; for the discovery earned him the right to “kiss the lady of his choice.”

Weddings too provided mountain families with a welcome excuse to suspend farm work, and for the young, an opportunity for good-natured mischief. Following a wedding--mountain weddings tended to be very informal in those days, and were almost always staged in either the bride's or groom's home--friends of the newlyweds were known to celebrate the nuptials by staging a “shivaree” (a custom dating back to sixteenth-century France) in their honor. Pi Beta Phi Settlement School teacher and Tacoma, Washington native Ruth Sturley participated in a

shivaree in September 1919, and described the event in a letter to her family: “one of my girls Flora Reagan has a sister who was married . . . and the young people got up the affair in their honor. Abbie [Runyan], Evelyn [Bishop] and I went with three of the school girls and a dozen more youths. Lillard Maples took us girls in his Ford three miles up to the Forks of the river [to the newlyweds’ home]. . . . We stopped and assembling our forces proceeded to march round and round shouting--blowing ox horns--ring cow bells--sheep bells and I know not what. My noise was produced by clapping together two tin pan covers--then some sticks of dynamite were set off--by this time strange to say the cabin was astir.”

With the coming of industry (and hence, the decline of subsistence agriculture), improved roads (which served to reduce mountaineers’ physical isolation), and schools (many of which were founded by outsiders and encouraged children to participate in organized team sports) to the region, Southern Appalachian mountaineers’ recreational habits fell gradually into line with those of their contemporaries living in other regions of the country. Still, it is likely (although difficult to substantiate) that some of the old entertainments lingered on in the region’s more isolated corners until at least the mid-1960s.

Health and Family (Pre-Pi Phi)

Like every thing else in Southern Appalachia during the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, health care standards varied from place to place. Those who lived in or near one of the region’s larger towns enjoyed reasonably good (if not excellent) health care. Those who lived in one of the region’s more isolated corners, however, often did not. In this essay, we will explore the health care standards of the latter communities--those that seldom benefited from the presence of trained medical professionals, and who thus relied primarily on folk remedies when

attempting to treat disease. Such communities were, contrary to popular belief, a rarity in Southern Appalachia; and yet they did exist. Gatlinburg, Tennessee, the locus of the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School, was just such a community.

Let us, then, begin our explanation of Southern Appalachian health care standards with a discussion of maternity. Pre- and post-natal care was virtually unknown to the Southern Appalachian mountaineers. Mothers carried on with life as usual right up until the moment of delivery, gave birth in their own homes with the assistance of a “granny women” (midwife), and then returned to house and farm work as soon as they were well enough to stand and walk about. Babies made do without immunizations, regular checkups, or a special diet (malnutrition was a common problem among mountain children), and birth defects such as clubbed feet and poor eyesight went mostly untreated. As Pi Beta Phi Settlement School nurse Marjorie Chalmers put it years later, “where money was scarce and trips into town almost never undertaken, [and] where doctors were called only as a last resort,” birth defects were often viewed as “the ‘will of God’.” “Many who were deeply religious,” she continued, “considered it almost a sacrilege to question that will. . . . It would be, in effect, a doubting of God’s judgment and kindness.” Needless to say, infant mortality rates were excessively high in the region’s more isolated corners.

For those who survived infancy, childhood posed its own perils. Burns were an all-too-common occurrence among toddlers, for nearly every home featured an open fireplace crowded with cast iron (and very hot) skillets, cauldrons, and other utensils. Farm labor contributed to numerous injuries among older children--“those little rascals,” Chalmers wrote, “handle axes as long as themselves”--as did rough-and-tumble play. Because of their tendency to roam the fields and woodlots and wade in the creeks surrounding their homes, mountain children were prone to

encounter a host of wild animals and parasitic organisms. Black bears, for example, were powerful and unpredictable, and could easily maul or kill a small child. And poisonous snakes were known to curl up in the dark corners of henhouses, barns, and even homes, delivering a (potentially) lethal dose of venom to the small hand unfortunate enough to disturb its slumber. More serious, however, was hookworm--an intestinal parasite known to lurk in the damp soils adjacent to creeks and outhouses. As their name suggests, hookworms burrow into the exposed skin of humans and other animals--usually the soles of the feet--and attach themselves to the intestinal wall of their host. There, they feed on blood, and if enough of them are present, may cause anemia (and hence a host of developmental problems such as low weight, impaired cognitive ability, and in extreme cases, mental retardation).

Adult life was, of course, no less hazardous. Routine chores such as cutting firewood and plowing fields carried with them considerable risk, for the falling tree and the kicking mule were capable of inflicting serious, and sometimes fatal, injuries. Of course, in the septic world of the Southern Appalachian mountaineer, an injury need not be serious to be fatal. Sanitation and personal hygiene standards were abysmal by any standard, so much so that a serious infection might arise from contact with everyday objects. Nurse Chalmers learned this herself in the 1940s, acquiring a gangrenous infection from one of her Gatlinburg patients that necessitated the amputation of her left thumb.

Detrimental as accidents, poor nutrition, animals, and parasitic organisms were to the health of the Southern Appalachian mountaineers, however, they all paled in comparison to infectious disease. Among the very young, childhood diseases such as measles, mumps, diphtheria, whooping cough, and scarlet fever, among others, took a grim yearly toll. As late as December 1916, Pi Beta Pi representative Elizabeth A. Helmick noted sadly that diphtheria had

“caused a large number of deaths among the children [living in the vicinity of Gatlinburg, Tennessee], especially at the [isolated] Sugar Lands” community. Adults and the elderly were by no means immune to infections. Influenza was a constant visitor to the isolated homesteads of Southern Appalachia, as were trachoma, a bacterial illness that caused blindness, and pneumonia. Of course, few diseases were more feared than smallpox, a viral infection that, if it did not kill the patient outright, left him or her horribly disfigured for life. Unfortunately, there were too few doctors available to immunize the healthy and treat the sick, leaving medical care in the hands of “herb doctors” or “granny women.” These pseudo-doctors--mostly elderly women who had been trained by their mothers--were well-intentioned, and even did some good for their patients; and yet for the most part, their “cures” were little more than superstition put to practice, and had the potential to harm as well as help.

Residents of the isolated corners of Southern Appalachia needed local clinics staffed by trained medical professionals, but were unlikely to acquire them on their own. After all, with a few notable exceptions, doctors were unwilling to establish practices in communities where the majority of residents were unable to pay for services. And so, the mountain people were left to fend for themselves, trusting in God and folk remedies to see them through periods of poor health and uncertainty. Fortunately, at least for the residents of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, help would soon arrive in the form of the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School.