



Folklore and Folklife

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DESCRIBED BY RICHARD DORSON AS “FOLKLORE’S NATURAL HABITAT,” THE APPALACHIAN region has been at the forefront of developments in the field of American folklore throughout the twentieth century. The first folk festival took place in Asheville in 1928; the first graduate folklore program focusing on Appalachian material was established in North Carolina; the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress was founded on Robert Winslow Gordon’s Appalachian collections; and the first studies in occupational folklore took place in the Appalachian coalfields.

The idea of folklore is complicated; it may be cast as antiquarian, antimodern, communitarian, traditional, vernacular, or resistant. These concepts are all linked to the idea of progress but nevertheless exhibit a profound ambivalence toward it. This ambivalence reflects two perspectives on Appalachian culture: a rational perspective that idolizes progress on one hand and a romantic perspective that fears it on the other. Viewed through the romantic lens, Appalachia glimmers as a region uncontaminated by commerce and its excesses, a place where people know their neighbors, value their elders, live close to the land, and preserve old-time craft, music, and stories. Through a rational lens, these views give way to images of inbred, feuding, superstitious, welfare-dependent hillbillies. Both lenses serve to “distress” Appalachia as a region set backward not only in time but also in space (the “hinterlands,” the “backcountry”), separated from the rest of America.

In modernizing countries, *folklore* is a term used to describe culture that is not modern. Because folklore is constantly changing and evolving in the face of modernity, each new technological revolution produces new forms of regional folklore and folklife. Since Appalachia was chronically transformed by the Industrial Revolution, the region has been and remains a good place to examine the dynamics of folklore. Paradoxically, this is not because Appalachia has remained unchanged, but because the pressures of modernization are continually engendering new forms of folklore and new frameworks within which to view the region.

Collection and study of folklore began in Europe in the late eighteenth century in tandem with romantic and nationalist movements sweeping the continent and transforming its politics, art, and culture. During that time, German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder proposed a central role for folklore in the building of nations. He argued that folklore, the language and culture attached to a geopoliti-

Facing page: A young girl wears a necklace of rhododendron leaves believed to ward off disease and ensure good health, Patrick County, Virginia, 1954. Reliance on folk medicine in Appalachia has diminished significantly since World War II due to economic development, improved access to public and private health-care services, and the increased presence of alternative and complementary medicine.

cally bounded territory, provided a common culture with which each nation could uniquely identify and that could aid in the formation of citizens for the nation-state.

In the United States, the use of regional culture to create a national identity, though based on European models, took a distinctly American turn. In the mid-nineteenth century, regional cultural difference provided a way to define an emerging urban middle class. Influenced by social evolutionist theories popular at the time, local color writers imagined Appalachia as a premodern “strange land” inhabited by “a peculiar people.” There, one could learn about the past by studying and interacting with “our contemporary ancestors,” as William Goodell Frost, president of Berea College, famously put it. At the same time, what seemed to some Americans an alarming influx of immigrants from Europe, drawn by the promise of work in factories, mills, and mines, triggered a search by writers and collectors for roots and attributes of “authentic” American identity. It was during this period, for instance, that Theodore Roosevelt and John Lomax saw the American West as a mythological realm for Americans enamored by the frontier. Discerning in cowboy balladry the remnants of Camelot, the Viking spirit, and Homeric poetry, Roosevelt proclaimed Lomax’s cowboy collections to be a national literature based in “our own soil, mental and moral.”

Over the past 150 years, folklore studies have reflected shifting cultural, economic, political, and international trends; therefore, ideas about the ways in which folklore shapes American and Appalachian identity have changed. During the first half of the twentieth century, Appalachian folklore figured prominently in debates over the importance of America’s many ethnic cultures versus the romantic notion of a pure Anglo-Saxon culture as the source of American identity. The legacy of these debates lingers in archives, museums, national parks, and festivals that were created around Appalachian culture during the first half of the twentieth century. Late in the century, such places increasingly turned away from collection of folklore toward initiatives emphasizing cultural planning and cultural expression in contemporary communities. To examine the history of folklore and folklife in Appalachia is to track Appalachia’s emergence as a recognized region in American culture.

From its connections to British culture and civilization, Appalachia offered an American identity with Anglo-Saxon roots, a domesticated counterpart to the untamed West. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the collection of folk songs, ballads, and stories canonized classic forms of Appalachian folklore and defined a core region within which such folklore flourished. Folk song and ballad collections by Lomax, Cecil Sharp, and Maude Karpeles, and writings by Sharp and Olive Dame Campbell, John C. Campbell, Emma Bell Miles, and Horace Kephart helped fix the mountains of Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia in the national imagination as the setting for an authentic folk culture. Their work articulated four key ideas about Appalachian folklore as a resource for nation-building: that folklore harbors and conveys the spirit of a people; that the southern highlanders belong to the nation; that there is a generalized southern highlander; and that the southern mountains form a repository of culture from an earlier period in the history of civilization.

Underlying these principles is the idea that folklore from one region can fill in for culture lost in metropolitan areas to modernization, an idea that enabled Appalachian cultural expression to take on national significance. Sharp, for example, the noted collector of Appalachian folk songs, explained his decision to bypass Maryland by saying, “Owing to the disturbance of rural life by the big coal industry, [songs and ballads] did not lie so ready at hand as in the other states.” Sharp’s comment suggests that, in a time of rapid progress, the key role for folklorists is salvage collecting. In other words, the collection of culture lost or obscured by rapid modernization can help to redeem the nation’s lost connections to nature and to those who live closest

to it. Southern Appalachia is incorporated into national thought in both the romantic and rational guises of its folk culture. As Robert Winslow Gordon, first head of the Archive of American Folk Song (later Archive of Folk Song) at the Library of Congress, put it: "The government recognizes the hill-billy and the American Negro as the basis of American folk-song and music."

The contrast between modern (America) and premodern (Appalachia) helped to define cultural work at state levels as well as nationally. During what is considered the "golden age of collecting" in the Appalachians, local collectors and writers visited the mountain portions of their states and produced a number of collections and publications. Among them were Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren's *South-Mountain Magic* (1882), James Otis Watson's *Marion County in the Making* (1917), Henry W. Shoemaker's *The Music and Musical Instruments of the Pennsylvania Mountaineers* (1923), Arthur Kyle Davis's *Traditional Ballads of Virginia* (1929), Emelyn Elizabeth Gardner's *Folklore from the Schoharie Hills, New York* (1937), and Anne Grimes's *Ballads of Ohio* (1957). Such works led to the creation of folklore repositories at state agencies or academic institutions that later provided impetus for formal programs of folklore research and presentation. Early collecting work was often pursued under the aegis of state folklore societies formed to preserve material salvaged from the past.

Collectors and writers during this period established genres that came to epitomize in public opinion the most authentic Appalachian folklore: lyrics from the types of ballad identified by Francis James Child; märchen, or tales, celebrating the genius and uncanny good fortune of a trickster named Jack; and forms of dance and craft promoted in festivals and settlement schools. What made this lore seem "authentic" was the purity of a lineage uncontaminated by commercial sources. Lomax saw authentic American folklore as grounded in isolated rural communities that were being destroyed by "machine civilization." Folklore, in such a view, could only survive when isolated from modern life, as it was perceived to be in Appalachia.

Paradoxically, the antimodernist idea of Appalachia in the 1930s served the needs of industrial planners in the region, providing a rationale for redistributing Appalachian people and resources. The public could be compensated for destruction of mountains, forests, and rivers by creating state and national parks and forests; folklife museums and festivals at such places could substitute for culture sacrificed for the sake of progress. Reformers working to alleviate backwardness and poverty in Appalachia likewise saw traditional crafts as a means of affirming and preserving mountain ways, turning them into commodities for sale. During the 1930s, Allen H. Eaton argued that this remedial work could compensate for cultural losses created by modernization. American urbanites, detached from their cultural roots, could adopt Appalachian crafts as touchstones of American identity—and provide Appalachians with a means of making a living. By the same token, evicting Appalachians from what would become the Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks was justified as a way to improve the lives of mountain folk. Reformers reasoned that those displaced by the parks could make their living outside the parks by engaging in basketmaking and other crafts.

Contending visions of the role of folklore in national life have shaped the study and uses of Appalachian folklore throughout the twentieth century. In a politically conservative view, Appalachian craft and folklore are seen as resources for defining American tradition; from a more liberal perspective, folklore contains the seeds of political resistance to social and cultural inequity. During the New Deal years of the 1930s, a more progressive strain of nationalism arose, holding common people to be the font of civilization. In line with this philosophy, New Deal programs led to a modern reinvention of folklore not as a remnant of the Old World, but as an expression of the experiences of ordinary people of the New World. The experience of

industrialization, which earlier collectors saw as contaminating folklore, was legitimized as a proper object of folklore study. Folklore collecting initiated during this period under Benjamin Botkin as part of the Federal Writers' Project reflected a move away from the high romanticism of earlier collectors toward a cultural pluralism more suited to the goals of a democratic nation. Repudiating narrowly circumscribed, romantic canons for "authentic" folklore, Botkin encouraged a new generation of collectors and writers to document American expressions crafted from the experience of working to build a nation on the path of progress.

Folklorist George Korson, who collected and published songs and stories from the coal miners of Pennsylvania and West Virginia, typified this shift toward modern folklore. Believing it was important for miners to present their own traditions to the public, Korson invited miners to perform at folk festivals. Their songs, hybrids of tradition and innovation, were not only documents conveying miners' experiences in their own voices, but also critiques of modernization, which replaced laborers with machinery. Transforming their experience into art, miners found a new niche for their culture as objects of scholarly study and public presentation. Korson's pioneering work in the coalfields anticipated the rise of the subfield of occupational folklore in the 1960s and 1970s, exemplified by *Only a Miner*; folklorist Archie Green's study of recorded coal-mining songs.

This kind of fieldwork represented a shift from building a national culture out of regional folklore to using performances of folklore to give a public presence to underrepresented cultural groups. This shift was most clearly realized in the 1960s with inauguration of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall and subsequent academic and community programs in public folklore. Drawing on the New Deal precedent, publicly supported folklife research and presentation was seen as a way to achieve "cultural equity," as ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax put it, by helping to "amplify voices in a democratic polity," a phrase used by Green when lobbying for the American Folklife Preservation Act of 1976 before Congress.

Between World War II and the 1960s, however, folklore scholars argued over the propriety of "popularizing" folklore, or of putting folklore research to any use other than building knowledge by those with academic credentials. As this scholarly debate unfolded, Appalachian migrants were pouring into Detroit, where some of the earliest public folklore efforts took place. As a professor at Wayne University (later Wayne State University) in the mid-1940s, Thelma James promoted folklore research and presentation as ways to resolve cultural conflicts related to the influx of immigrants from the southern states and to help the Appalachian community enhance its public visibility.

Indeed, a trend toward more applied uses of research in the social sciences coincided with the great migration of three million people out of Appalachia to cities in search of jobs, bringing displacement of workers and their culture into the purview of folklore study. During the 1960s and 1970s, Congress contributed to the revitalization of public folklore with a series of laws encouraging protection of cultural and natural resources. Laws creating the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States, and the American Folklife Center institutionalized folklore programs in the Appalachian states, building upon earlier collecting efforts. With new financial and political support from the endowments, connections between folklore and public life were strengthened in succeeding decades, and Appalachian culture was consistently in the national spotlight. Appalachian musicians and artists came to be featured at the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress conducted Appalachian projects. The National Endowment for the Arts provided seed money for professionally run folklife programs in every Appalachian



People stroll by a part of the *Appalachia: Heritage and Harmony* exhibition of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival held on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., 2003. The large picture in the background is a reproduction of a billboard-sized mural located on a building in Bristol, Tennessee. The mural's images commemorate the Bristol sessions of 1927, when record producer Ralph Peer of the Victor Talking Machine Company traveled to the mountains of Appalachia to record traditional music. The success of Peer's recordings marked the beginning of commercial country music.

state and has consistently recognized folk artists from the region through National Heritage Fellowships.

Numerous public events and programs during the last two decades of the twentieth century emphasized the Appalachian diaspora and the importance of mountain culture for communities of displaced Appalachians living well outside the region. A tour of traditional musicians, dancers, and storytellers produced by the National Council for Traditional Arts and called "Mountain Music Homecoming" visited such sites of Appalachian out-migration as Chicago, Cincinnati, and Detroit. The Great Lakes Arts Alliance in Ohio created an archive of materials from Appalachian communities in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan, and the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation sponsored a traveling exhibition, *Appalachian Views*, that focused on historic commonalities of life throughout the Appalachian Mountains from New England to the Deep South.

At the same time, folklorists and anthropologists continued working to understand the dynamic between region and nation that makes Appalachian culture distinctive. In settings where health, education, welfare, and public lands are administered, informal systems and strategies for cultural survival have emerged in the face of widespread negative stereotyping. Anthropologist Rhoda H. Halperin, for example, examined support networks created by Appalachian migrants who share electricity, swap favors, and piece together livelihoods through subsistence hunting and gardening, wage labor, and welfare. Folklorists Michael Ann Williams, Charles Perdue, and Nancy Martin-Perdue studied culture created by descendants of families evicted from their homes for creation of the Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks. Anthropologist Allen W. Batteau analyzed the interaction between social workers and Appalachian clients as a ritual game of "eligibility," where one must denigrate oneself to prove qualification for government assistance. Historian David E. Whisnant scrutinized middle-class promoters of early folk festivals at White Top, Virginia, and in Asheville, North Carolina. Folklorist Mary Hufford studied

West Virginia activists' use of tradition, historic emblems, and songs in contemporary protests against the form of surface mining known as mountaintop removal.

From the mid-1970s through the end of the twentieth century, there was an explosion of interest in the study of place in Appalachia as a means of understanding cultural survival in the face of negative stereotyping. In the twenty-first century, research by folklorists and anthropologists continues to focus on place and on practices such as homecomings that continue to give people in Appalachia a sense of shared history and destiny.

The focus on place brings together categories of doing and thinking usually separated in ways that pit "nature against industry, and culture against commerce," to cite critic Raymond Williams. But while a legislative agenda geared to integrating nature and culture was created during the Great Society, cultural scholars and workers in Appalachia only began to exploit it in the last years of the twentieth century. For example, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 provided a basis for combining culture and nature with politics in urban and regional planning. The principle was also included in the 1977 Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, allowing communities to challenge surface-mining permits on grounds that such mining destroys aesthetic, historic, scientific, and recreational values. Scholarly studies in folklore in the 1980s and 1990s reinforced the legislation by pointing to the difference between bureaucratic categories such as "environment" and "cultural resources" and vernacular categories that resist the separation of culture from ecology.

Increasingly resisting the separation of culture from environment, mountain communities express their struggles against ecological and social crisis in cultural terms. Coal River Mountain Watch, in Whitesville, West Virginia, for example, is dedicated to "Remembering the past, working for the future." Even places for public folklore, which are often educational or festive, now tend to combine aesthetic, traditional, political, and ecological concerns.

In public spaces such as streets and in front of the facades of power such as government or corporate buildings, Appalachian groups transform folklore and tradition into acts of political purpose. Using spirituals as protest songs, ritually uncrowning and dethroning "King Coal" in demonstrations before state capitols, and holding annual reunions at sites of former community life in coal camps, churches, and schools, people continually gather, use, and change Appalachian traditions and keep them dynamic. Appalachian folklore and folklife are not fixed in time; they are evolving practices in which romantic nationalism, cultural pluralism, community and place-based development, and democratic ideas often vie for prominence and sometimes coalesce.

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