Back Talk from Appalachia

Confronting Stereotypes

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Foreword by
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if given time to think about it, come up with a dangerous synthesis of religion, politics, and violence. At the end of the movie, Bowden tries to kill Cady, but fails. Cady goes down, but on his own terms—speaking in tongues and singing “I Am Bound for the Promised Land.” Sam Bowden has finally “learned about loss,” has become more human. I don’t think he’ll be so condescending to “Pentecostal crackers” anymore.

I know how I feel when I hear yet another redneck joke or see yet another tired hillbilly stereotype on a popular television show. I do not know the effect these have on the millions of children in the region who are seeing and hearing the same things, but I worry about it. The stereotypes seem designed to produce confusion, self-doubt, passivity, frustration, anger. This is probably not deliberate. It is probably only thoughtless. Either way, stereotypes are attacks upon the human spirit. They find their mark, and no good comes of it.

Appalachian Images
A Personal History

Denise Giardina

In 1934, English historian Arnold Toynbee wrote in his Study of History,

The Scotch-Irish immigrants who forced their way into these natural fastnesses have come to be isolated from the rest of the World. They have relapsed into illiteracy and witchcraft. The Appalachian “Mountain People” at this day are no better than barbarians... It is possible... that barbarism will disappear in Appalachia likewise. Indeed, the process of assimilation is already at work among a considerable number of Appalachians who have descended from their mountains and changed their way of life in order to earn wages in the North Carolina cotton mills.

My mother’s people came to the mountains from a variety of places. Some, Honakers and Whitts and Pauleys, followed the early westward migration through Virginia to Kentucky after the Revolutionary War. Others came later, Quakers escaping Confederate North Carolina to the Union stronghold of eastern Kentucky.

They were mostly farmers, with at least one rascal, great-grandfather Fred Alexander Smiley, thrown in for fun. One family legend has Papaw Smiley running off to Oklahoma where he obtained and then gambled away a fortune in oil wells. Another has him losing an entire coal-rich hollow near Elkhorn City, Kentucky, in a similar fashion. Whether his exploits are true or not, Papaw Smiley seems to me a mythic figure, fitting for a region of fabulous lost wealth.

There were at least two writers among my mother’s people. Great-great-uncle James Thornbury joined the Union army and was captured by Confederates near the Big Sandy River in eastern Kentucky. He was sent to Libby prison in Richmond, Virginia, then to Macon, Georgia, and after the fall of Atlanta, to Charleston, then Columbia, in South Carolina. There he managed to escape and headed to the mountains of East Tennessee, Union territory and home to
the first abolitionist newspaper in the United States (the *Emancipator*, published when William Lloyd Garrison was still a child). He composed an incompetent but heartfelt poem about his experiences:

My troubles there were great and not very much to eat
In the sun we were kept and nearly died with heat...
The Southern Confederacy, Oh it I left behind
And started up the river a better land to find.
And when I arrived at Knoxville, Tennessee
I was treated like a brother and set at liberty.
And now I have met my friends in communion
Where the Stars and the Stripes are waving for the Union.²

The Thornburys had been Quakers from Ulster, but converted to Methodism in the Kentucky mountains. Upon his return from the war, James Thornbury became a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Pikeville. His daughter, Kizzie, wrote poetry and hymn lyrics. Her poems were mostly of children dying young, religious paens, or comments on community affairs, composed in the sentimental language common to the Victorian age and apparently familiar to the poet:

Don't brighten room or casket
With roses when I'm gone,
The time to scatter flowers
Will be forever flown.
Life is the time for roses,
A smile or kindly deed;
Life is the time for flowers,
The time to sow the seed.³

A family friend, the Reverend Thomas Ashley, sent Kizzie Thornbury's poems to The Abingdon Press. The published volume opens with the lyrics of a hymn, "When the Battle Is Over," written to the tune—appropriate for a rock-ribbed Unionist—of "Marching Through Georgia."

My Reynolds ancestors, like the early Thornburys, were Quakers. It is easy to trace them in meeting records and in *The Quaker Genealogies*. One ancestor, Richard Browne, was involved in radical affairs in Northamptonshire during the ferment of the English seventeenth century, became a Baptist, and "was convinced a Quaker by William Dewsbury," sometime before his death in 1662. Another, William Clayton of Chichester, England, traveled to America on the Kent, a ship carrying men responsible for establishing William Penn's colony. And Henry Reynolds, whose patriarchal last name remains constant through the generations, ran a tavern near the present Chester, Pennsylvania. The family moved to a Quaker stronghold in North Carolina in 1751, then fled the persecution of southern Quakers during the Civil War, probably following the route of the Underground Railroad into the mountains.⁴

In Kentucky my great-grandfather, Orlando Reynolds, lost his Quaker religion and turned to moonshining. He was good at it, produced a popular brew, and proved adept at hiding his stock from federal officials beneath the potatoes in the root cellar and behind jars of preserves. He fathered eight children by Mary Smiley and, after her death, ten more by his second wife.

I examine old photographs of these kin, looking for signs of encroaching barbarism. Orlando Reynolds and his first family posed for a formal photograph on Grapevine Creek in Pike County, Kentucky, at the turn of the century. Orlando is seated beside his wife, Mary. They are surrounded by their six oldest children, and they hold the two youngest, an infant and a toddler, in their laps. One daughter, my grandmother Flora, stands in the back beside ghost-like William Harrison, the oldest brother, destined to die in a logging accident soon after the photograph was taken.

The images are soft and faded. Orlando has high cheekbones and a sloping mustache. His wife's head is a blur of motion. She must have ducked her head just as the shutter was snapped, glanced down at the baby in her lap, Andy, who wears a long gown with lace at the collar and white petticoat at the hem. Alec and Miles, around six or seven years old, flank their parents. Their hair is neatly combed, they wear homemade suits, and they are barefoot. Jesse, his hand on Miles's shoulder, is shod, as is his father. The mother wears a long dark skirt and a tailored jacket with full shoulders and dark piping on the lapels and the collar of her blouse. Tabitha, the oldest girl, has a large, lacy collar and a brooch at the throat. Her face is broad, and she wears her hair pulled severely back like her mother's. My grandmother Flora looks eleven or twelve years old. Her hair is also combed back on top but is swept out in wings framing both sides of her face. She wears a jacket and what appears to be a scarf about her neck. No one is smiling, nor are they scowling. They are intent, dignified, aware of their own presence and the record they are making.

I search the photograph for clues. It seems my great-grandmother was an accomplished seamstress. Some small children in the mountains went without shoes some of the time, but perhaps not from necessity. My grandmother was a dainty and stylish child. My great-grandfather was comfortable holding his three-year-old daughter—who is reaching for something off-camera—on his knee. It seems mountain people in 1900 knew what a camera was. It seems mountain people looked normal.

There are other things the camera doesn't show. The Reynolds family did not go to the mills of North Carolina to be civilized, as Toynbee suggested, where people were dying at the looms and presses, were being shot or discharged for
trying to bring in a union. My ancestors lived out their lives in the Kentucky mountains, in a large log house with a massive fireplace in the common room. They had a steady stream of boarders, including most of the young schoolteachers who came to Grapevine. Orlando lived to be ninety-six years old. Mary died young, probably of a ruptured appendix. William Harrison was killed at eighteen when a tree he was felling toppled over on him. (I am not surprised as I study his face. He does not have the aspect of an outdoorsman. He has the lightly bearded face of a college freshman, the musing eyes of a computer scientist or poet. Perhaps he was daydreaming when the tree buckled.)

Tabitha is remembered by the family as strong and feisty. In the photograph she has the strong body and broad shoulders of a basketball player. She married a real estate man from Ashland, Kentucky. Jesse opened a mercantile store in the mountains. Andy, the baby and wildest of the children, fatally hit a man during a drunken poker game and served two years for manslaughter in the state penitentiary. Miles farmed and made liquor like his father before him, honorably if illegally. Alec became a school principal, and Lilly, the mother of a principal.

Flora married my grandfather, Lee Franklin Whitt, a farmer who lost his land during the depression, a storekeeper who gave away the merchandise through loose credit, the manager of a coal company store in West Virginia. They raised a mining engineer, a coal miner, several schoolteachers, a son crippled by polio who lived at home all his life, another son who tried to organize atomic workers at Oak Ridge during World War II and died twenty years later of a virulent form of leukemia, studied by doctors at Johns Hopkins. They raised my mother, a nurse.

It is true my grandmother would not allow her menstruating daughters to help put up pickles for fear the cucumbers and corn and beans would go off. Was this a sign of incipient barbarism?

Arnold Toynbee never visited the place he called "Appalachia." If he had come to the mountains and ended up on Orlando Reynolds's doorstep, he would have been taken in. He would have had a seat beside the hearth on a cold night or a rocker on the porch in the summer, a cup of fiery potion from the still, a plate full of pork and pickled corn and beans and corn bread, and a feather bed when he grew sleepy.

It is hard to say who came to the mountains first, the mine owners or the missionaries. As in Africa and Asia, they seem to have arrived simultaneously, the twin harbingers of empire. They were gentlemen from London and Philadelphia, self-made capitalists from the eastern Pennsylvania coalfields, Pittsburgh robber barons, alongside high-minded New England ladies with impeccable credentials who were veterans of progressive movements for temperance, women's rights, and poor relief. I would also include a third group to form a trinity: a generation of yellow journalists and adventure writers who ventured into the wilds of the southern Appalachians to discover the natives and hold them up to view for the edification and entertainment of the rest of the country.

All those who came—entrepreneur, missionary, and journalist—carried with them the knowledge of the riches that lay beneath the mountains.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the industrial nations of the world had a great need for natural resources—coal, iron, magnesium, tin, rubber, sugar, coffee, tea, fruit, silver, gold, diamonds, platinum. It was the age of imperialism, when these same nations, led by Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, colonized vast territories to obtain these items for themselves and to sell them to their own advantage. Never mind that these resources were found in populated lands. Wealth belonged to the exploiter, not the inhabitant. Never mind that many people were unsettled by colonization, that traditional family and community structures were disrupted, that millions were forced into backbreaking, dangerous work producing these items for their European and American masters. After all, they had been given the benefits of "civilization." The people in the colonies were supposedly childlike, incapable of producing anything of value themselves, and so must be looked after by decent, educated, cultivated, energetic white men.

Mountain people were well aware that coal could be found beneath their land. As early as 1742, settlers had called a West Virginia stream the Coal River, after the deposits visible along its banks. In many other places, outcroppings of the mineral broke the surface, and large black chunks were broken up with picks and carted off to fuel iron stoves and hearth fires. But no one knew how vast the coal deposits were.

Contrary to popular mythology, mountaineers were not totally isolated from the outside world. Through newspapers, visitors, and the U.S. postal service, they kept up with current affairs. Boats traveled up the deep channels of the Tug Fork and Levisa and Guyandotte Rivers, bringing trade. Most people knew someone who had traveled outside the mountains, to visit far-flung relatives, to seek work, to join the army and fight in some conflict or other.

They were a hospitable people. In a land largely bereft of hotels, they took in travelers. Among those in the 1880s who slept in their beds and ate their food were agents scouting out mineral deposits, sometimes posing as traveling salesmen, and the journalists who later dispatched lurid reports of the violence and depravity of mountain people.

The coal men came early to the New River Gorge of West Virginia. A wild tract of river rapids and steep cliffs, the northern reaches of the New River were part of an ancient route from Virginia to the Ohio River blazed by generations of Indians, then explorers and settlers. George Washington passed this way, as did Chief Justice John Marshall, who proposed building a canal through the
most rugged stretch of mountains. Civil War regiments also frequently traveled the road.

Some of the outsiders who passed through the New River Gorge came from old, established families on the eastern seaboard, families with wealth and political connections. These men didn’t forget the mineral-rich area, and passed their knowledge on to sons and grandsons. Even as they sent surveyors to locate mineral deposits, they studied ways to gain ownership of the land. They had little difficulty. Early land surveys had claimed much of the region for absentee owners in eastern Virginia who had no intention of living in the mountains. Many early settlers were squatters who claimed land by living on it and working it for several generations. Others had purchased land from land agents and speculators who misrepresented their own ability to sell. Most farmers had deeds to the land in their county courthouses.

The mineral speculators who descended on West Virginia in the 1880s claimed to be descended from Revolutionary War soldiers from the northeast who had been granted absentee lands in the mountains in return for service to their new country. Or they claimed to have purchased the land from families who were so descended. They called their claims “senior patents,” as opposed to the “junior patents” of mountain farmers. One New Yorker, Henry C. King, claimed five hundred thousand acres of southern West Virginia through Revolutionary War financial wizard Robert Morris of Philadelphia. (Morris himself, who never set foot in western Virginia, ended his days in debtor’s prison. But his grandson, Samuel Fisher Morris, turned up at the turn of the century as a contributor to the building of an Episcopal Church for coal operators on Elkhorn Creek in West Virginia.)

Many of the speculators claimed that mineral deposits should be considered separately from surface land, and that their ownership of the coal gave them the right to the entire tract of land, even though a farmer might prove ownership of the surface.

Or they claimed they would take advantage of the above situation unless farmers signed over mineral rights for a few cents an acre and that such a signature would allow the farmer to remain on the land; and later they evicted him anyway.

Or they burned out those who refused to sign.

Or they forged Xs on deeds wholesale, claiming extensive mountain illiteracy.

Or courthouses burned down mysteriously, and new deeds showed up a few months later, proving new ownership.

Or men were jailed on trumped-up charges and ordered to put up their mineral rights as bond.

Or residents who spoke out against signing mineral rights turned up dead.

Local farmers could appeal the seizure of their land. Because those claiming ownership were from out of state, the cases were heard in federal court in northern cities such as Parkersburg and Clarksburg. Most farmers were unable to make the arduous journey to court or afford lawyers. If they did wage a legal battle, they faced federal judges like John J. Jackson. Jackson always ruled in favor of the companies.

The coal men. They praised themselves, and their self-made hagiographies are something between the Lives of the Saints and a high school yearbook.

Captain F.L. Paddock of Pennsylvania: “He has the confidence, esteem and respect of the officers of his company . . . as well as with all of whom he is brought in contact almost daily in business relations. He resides in Bramwell and is recognized as one of its most influential citizens, having been prominently identified with every movement for the improvement and beautifying of the town. He is a member of the Episcopal Church, and was largely instrumental in having erected the beautiful church which adorns the city.”

John Freeman, native of England, lately of Pennsylvania: “One of the little band of pioneers who, with but little in the way of capital, but with an abundant supply of energy and determination, proceeded to transpose the mountain wilderness which they found into a hive of human industry, and mark the way for the world-wide fame which the products of the Field have attained, largely through their efforts.”

Richard Mellon turned down workers’ demands for better housing and wages, but spent fifteen thousand dollars on a Christian missionary effort to his coal camps. Of the machine guns he also installed, he said, “It is necessary. You could not run without them.”

Then there were the overachievers:

John Cooper, English Horatio Alger, child miner in Lancashire, who after great suffering, study, and frugality became a West Virginia entrepreneur and Republican Party leader.

Jenkin Jones, Welsh Horatio Alger, likewise suffering and diligent and frugal, not to mention talented: “He inherits, in a large degree, the characteristic love of the Welsh people for melody, and is the author of a number of poems which show decided merit, though as yet, the general public has had little opportunity to judge of his talents in this direction, his personal friends being the only ones to whom his productions have thus far been accessible.”

John C.C. Mayo, Kentucky Horatio Alger, who helped the coal men grab up several counties of his home state, was noted for refusing to lace his shoes. He built a railroad spur beside his Kentucky mansion to accommodate private train cars. Mayo visited Argentina and came back aglow at the prospects of buying mineral rights there. Fortunately, he immediately dropped dead.
Justin Collins claimed mine explosions were caused by outside agitators and timed to coincide with West Virginia's legislative sessions.

Robert Stearns wrote sentimental books such as *The Ass and the Barnacles* and *Ossawald Crum*. On Christmas Day 1908, he burned down his own Kentucky hotel so union organizers hiding inside could be flushed out and shot.

Others, including Pratts, Guggenheims, Roosevelts, Morgans, and Mellons, employed minions for less pleasant tasks, and stayed away.

The coal men moved from the New River through southern West Virginia to Kentucky and Tennessee. They made a clean sweep. Within a few years, 60 to 80 percent of the surface land and virtually all the minerals were owned by absentee corporations. As of this writing, that has not changed.

The wealth of this State is immense; the development of this wealth will earn vast private fortunes far beyond the dreams even of a modern Croesus; the question is, whether this vast wealth shall belong to persons who live here and who are permanently identified with the future of West Virginia, or whether it shall pass into the hands of persons who do not live here and who care nothing for our State except to pocket the treasures which lie buried in our hills?

If the people of West Virginia can be roused to an appreciation of the situation we ourselves will gather this harvest now ripe on the lands inherited from our ancestors; on the other hand if the people are not roused to an understanding of the situation in less than ten years this vast wealth will have passed from our present population into the hands of non-residents, and West Virginia will be almost like Ireland and her history will be like that of Poland.

The initial workings of mineral agents were accompanied by missionaries and journalists set on reproducing the exploits of their colleagues in "darkest" Africa a little closer to home. Like their peers who took their imperial and racist attitudes to the sub-Sahara, most came with a sublime faith in their own values, and attitudes toward those they encountered ranging from pity and condescension to outright contempt. There is little evidence they considered that they could learn anything from mountain people or that they were themselves not wholly worthy of admiration. According to Loyal Jones, "No group in the country . . . has aroused more suspicion and alarm among mainstream Christians than have Appalachian Christians, and never have so many Christian missionaries been sent to save so many Christians than is the case in this region."

The missionaries left the most ambiguous legacy. Some of them did genuine good, especially in eastern Kentucky. West Virginia had the good fortune to separate itself from the neglectful authorities in Richmond during the Civil War and to create its own institutions. West Virginia was thus spared the worst missionary onslaught.

But the Kentucky mountains were ignored by the state government in Frankfort, and tax money from local residents went for schools and hospitals outside the region. The missionaries who chose Kentucky found a need for medical facilities and secondary schools. So they founded boarding schools and colleges and clinics. One group of independent and refreshingly down-to-earth feminists from Boston started the Frontier Nursing Service, which sent midwife nurses on horses and mules to distant hollow farms for home deliveries and postnatal care. The nursing service continues to this day, with jeeps replacing animals as transportation, a valuable asset in a rural community still underserved by physicians.

Institutions like the Hindman and Pine Mountain Settlement Schools later passed into the hands of mountain people instead of outsiders bent on charity. These institutions continue today as vibrant and innovative community centers that supplement the offerings of local schools and host grassroots political gatherings, writing workshops, and festivals for music, folklore, and other arts. But even the best-intentioned early missionaries came laden with prejudices. The founders of settlement schools raised money back east by touting Appalachia as a repository of "old English" language and culture untouched by American civilization. They lovingly cherished the dulcimers and seventeenth-century ballads they encountered but scorned indigenous banjo and fiddle music, and in some cases, forbade their students to play it. And their fund-raising efforts were more successful if predicated upon making the objects of their charity seem as pathetic as possible.

Typical of the missionaries was Alice Spencer Geddes Lloyd, Bostonian, graduate of Radcliffe, founder of the Caney Creek School, now Alice Lloyd College in Kentucky. For decades, Alice Lloyd ruled her domain with an iron hand. Strict dress code: coat and tie for boys, long white(!) skirts for girls, no makeup or jewelry or heeled shoes. No tobacco, alcohol, dancing, or playing cards, no contact with the opposite sex, separate seating by sex in the classroom and dining hall, separate hours by sex in the library.

Mrs. Lloyd told a Lexington newspaperman, "No more than 25 percent of the local people have the mental capacity for more than the most elementary education. Intermarriage—oh, terrible intermarriage—has resulted in the development of racial weaknesses—low intelligence, bad eyes, epilepsy, and so on."

She continued, "The mountaineer is suspicious, independent, and uncooperative. . . . I had a man fixing one of the porches. I looked it over and said, 'That board there isn't straight. Don't you think you'd better take it up and straighten it?' He glared at me, dropped his hammer, and said, 'Do it yourself if you don't like it.'"

Her conclusion? "The mountain people are not good workmen to hire. They have to be circumvented like children."
Here I begin to apply what I call the Mamaw and Papaw Test. I recall my own people. I compare them with the judgments of Alice Lloyd. Alice Lloyd fails the Mamaw and Papaw Test.

What motivated the frenzy of missionary activity in the turn-of-the-century mountains? Many Appalachian scholars think the region offered an outlet after the closing of the western frontier. Others believe the nation needed to justify its imminent rape of the mountains by seeking to denigrate and transform that which it would soon destroy. In any case, the journalists who interpreted this newly “discovered” place approached it with the same prejudices as the missionaries.

One of the best known and most sympathetic journalists was Horace Kephart, whose Our Southern Highlanders is still read today. Even Kephart, more balanced and less sensational than most, helped foist ridiculous stereotypes of Appalachia on the larger public that have persisted to the present day. “The mountain farmer’s wife is not only a household drudge, but a field-hand as well. She helps to plant, hoes corn, gathers fodder, sometimes even plows or splits rails. It is the commonest of sights for a woman to be awkwardly hacking up firewood. . . . [Such treatment shows] an indifference to woman’s weakness, a disregard for her finer nature, a denial of her proper rank.”

Kephart’s observations about women led him to the logical conclusion that women must be forced into such work because mountain men were “shiftless” and “afflicted with that malady which Barrie calls ‘acute disinclination to work.’” Thus the twin stereotypes of the lazy mountaineer and his hag of a wife, grown out of an ignorance of the physical labor required by all parties to maintain a mountain farm, and sexist assumptions of his time and place about the “nature” of women and the work that suited them.

Another caricature, with a direct lineage from Victorian journalists through Jethro Bodine to Deliverance, is the mountaineer as mentally and physically defective. Again Kephart is more illuminating than he knows:

Every stranger in Appalachia is quick to note the high percentage of defectives among the people. However, we should bear in mind that in the mountains proper there are few, if any, public refuges for this class, and that home ties are so powerful the mountaineers never send their “fitfied folks” or “half-wits,” or other unfortunates, to any institution in the lowlands, so long as it is bearable to have them around. Such poor creatures as would be segregated in more advanced communities, far from the public eye, here go at large and reproduce their kind.

Modern readers are more likely to approve of mountain behavior here than that of Kephart’s “more advanced communities.”

Other writers were not so gentle as Kephart: “The buying up of the mountain lands has unsettled a large part of these strange people. . . . [They may move] at the approach of civilization to remoter regions, where they may live without criticism or observation of their hereditary, squalid, unambitious, stationary life.”

The earliest white settlers of my native McDowell County, West Virginia, were Harmons, Cartwrights, Milams, Dillons, Murphys. In the late 1700s they fought a battle against the Shawnee led by a chief named Black Wolf. Black Wolf and his family were forced to flee. The Dillons and Murphys and Harmons farmed the land and raised sheep for wool. Their descendants encountered Col. I.A. Welch, who had been hired to survey a half-million-acre expanse, the “Wilson-Cary-Nicholas grant,” which supposedly had been given to his clients by the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1795. The area covered most of southeastern and south-central West Virginia, including part of McDowell County and stretching to the New River, and was now claimed by the Flat-Top and Crozer Land Associations.

Colonel Welch wrote an account of his exploration. He called the area a “jungle.” Ignoring all previous habitation and settlement, he claimed, “The Grahams of Philadelphia were the first to penetrate the wilds of McDowell, Mercer and Wyoming [Counties] and after a careful examination of the field determined to construct a narrow gauge railway.” A map of the “grant” accompanying Welch’s account shows vast territory cut into rectangular sections. The legend says, “All Lands Not Marked ‘Crozer Land Association’ are the Property of the Flat-Top Land Association.” Publications trumpet the valuable nature of the land “consolidated” by these intrepid land companies. The previous owners are never mentioned.

When Welch arrived in McDowell County, the hamlet of English served as county seat. In 1885 he engineered the purchase of land for a new town. He spent forty dollars. The new county seat bore his name, and the new courthouse held new deeds. Farther north, the first coal had already been mined and shipped from the New River coal camp of Quinimont.

Advertisement:
Castner and Curran are the general agents for the sale of Pocahontas Flat-Top Smokeless Semi-Bituminous Coal. Their Main Office is located at No. 328 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, Pa. [with agents in New York, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, London, and Bluefield, West Virginia] The only coal in the world that has been officially endorsed by the Governments of Great Britain and the United States. It is always used in testing the speed of Government cruisers built on the Atlantic Seaboard, the Secretary of the Navy having
issued an order to this effect several years ago. The Cunard and White Star Steamship Companies use it exclusively. Endorsement of Pocahontas Coal by the United States War Department: Quartermaster General’s Office, War Department, February 4th, 1896 . . . the tests made by this Department show the Pocahontas to have an equivalence superior to any other coal tested by this office since 1880. 14

With the coming of the coal industry, the population of the Appalachian Mountains changed. Native mountain families were joined by immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, especially Italy, Poland, Hungary, and Slavic nations. Large numbers of African Americans also sought to escape the southern backlash against Reconstruction by moving to the coalfields. All these groups were victims of prejudices and stereotypes. When they joined other miners throughout the region in rebellion, they were met with violence by the coal industry, which employed armed guards and secret police. Miners fought back. A U.S. government commission, which sought to explain the violence to the American people in 1922, reported: “Local traditions still exert a dominating influence and account very largely for the outbreaks of violence. Much of the violence had nothing to do with the coal industry but had to do with the nature and racial characteristics of the people.” 15

The misunderstandings continue to this day. “There is another America hidden in Appalachia’s hills—a disturbing journey to a separate world. Back in the hills of Floyd County, Kentucky, you’ll find some of the poorest places in America. This is where Washington waged a war on poverty and lost. But that’s not tonight’s story. The people here know they are poor, they know there’s almost no work, but most of them say they want to stay here, get married here, grow old here. What is it that keeps them tied to a place that seems like something out of another century?” 16

Notes

2. James Thornbury, poem, author’s collection.
5. Public relations documents, author’s collection.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
11. Horace Kephart, Our Southern Highlanders (Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1913).
12. Kephart, Our Southern Highlanders.