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The Appalachian Image Reexamined: An Oral History View of Eastern Kentucky

The Appalachian Image Reexamined: An Oral History View of Eastern Kentucky

by Terry L. Birdwhistell and Susan Emily Allen

In the discovery and continuing rediscovery of that part of America referred to as Appalachia, American society has been slow to comprehend the personality of the mountaineer. Whether self-appointed social critics of the nineteenth century or scholarly social scientists of the twentieth, those who attempted to explore the lives and the distinctive characteristics of our hill cousins found the effort laborious and only marginally successful. Historians were vague; the people themselves reticent in their way. Not until the advent of oral history interviewing, in which mountain residents were encouraged to relate their lives and concerns as a matter of interest to themselves as well as historians, did they begin to be documented more accurately. Through their own conversations the actual picture of mountain life and the mountain temperament has begun to surface.

Writers of the post-World War II period were still attempting to generalize about these numerous people, spread over a wide geographical area, with the little information available. Many such generalizations have survived and still form the accepted image of mountain people today. Within this image are the stereotypes so often detrimental to a clear perception of Appalachian culture. Recently, as more research material has been collected, it has been argued that mountaineers are not the simple characters portrayed by early writers or by the modern media. Rather, Appalachians have been revealed as complex individuals who differ as much from each other as do other Americans. Addressing these individual differences among mountaineers, one observer comments, "It is as much an error to say that 'all blacks (or all whites, or all city-dwellers, or all farmers

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or all Americans) are alike.'"¹ Although in many respects mountaineers are not greatly different from the rest of the population, they have often been confronted with social and economic problems somewhat foreign to the average American.

But the mountaineers' willingness to face difficult situations and their ability to survive have impressed contemporary Appalachian scholars. And, as Appalachians themselves have increasingly written and spoken about their native land and people, a more balanced view of the mountain character has begun to replace former stereotypes. Oral history has opened avenues of communication which constantly reveal unsuspected truths about a people who have been generalized about to the point of caricature.

How mountaineers view their own experience comprises a historical resource largely still untapped. Already it is apparent, however, that the uniqueness of mountain life itself goes beyond reminiscences of social life or hard times. As one historian notes, "For a time, there would perhaps remain with some of them a lingering memory of something priceless that had once been theirs before the war came, before the roads came."² The mountaineers' powers of recollection have begun to paint those things formerly intangible — to bring into clearer focus the montage of impressions. These "forgotten people," who have been found and described by others, are now having the opportunity to speak about themselves in their individual voices, not to argue but to recount their life stories; not to prove a thesis but simply to make known their real existence; not to boast or apologize but to take their place in American history and American society.

The technology for recording the mountaineers' own reflections has only recently become widely available. Oral history

¹Robert Paul Sessions, "Appalachians and Non-Appalachians: The Common Bond," in J. W. Williamson, ed., *An Appalachian Symposium: Essays Written in Honor of Cratis D. Williams* (Boone, N.C., 1977), 96.

²Clyde H. Ray, "Images of Southern Appalachians in America from 1920 to 1940," *Appalachian Heritage* 9 (1981): 45-46.

now seeks out people who have been passed over and channels them into the historical record. Because historians have often either ignored or inaccurately represented certain segments of society, the relatively inexpensive tape recorder has opened up an important avenue of historical documentation. Our knowledge of the Appalachians has previously come in about the same way as that about former slaves — through biased secondary sources and through hearsay. The process of legitimizing history begins with obtaining a more accurate picture of people's lives.

One of the earliest and most successful ventures chronicling the mountain experience was the Appalachian Oral History Project, sponsored by four Appalachian colleges. The 1977 publication *Our Appalachia* highlighted edited versions of selected project interviews. The recollections of these mountaineers bring to mind Alex Haley's description of the griots of an African tribe who were in effect "walking archives of oral history."³ Not unlike African griots, mountain people have retained to a remarkable degree the story of their life and culture. Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg, the editors of *Our Appalachia*, argue that these interviews counter the prevailing negative images of Appalachia, a region "plagued by overnight experts who in the words of one mountain person, 'pop in, pop off, and pop out.'"⁴

I

Numerous other oral history projects with Appalachian themes have received attention in recent years, among them the Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project, initiated in 1978. Directed by Dale Deaton, the two-year project attempted to capture the history of a unique health care organization while simultaneously recording the historical background of a specific area of eastern Kentucky. The Frontier Nursing Service was founded in 1925 by Mary Breckinridge to provide midwifery

³Alex Haley, *Roots* (New York, 1976), 577-78.

⁴Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg, eds., *Our Appalachia: An Oral History* (New York, 1977), 12.

services and primary family health care to people in the area of Leslie County, Kentucky. Among the many reasons Breckinridge chose Leslie County were the area's isolation and its lack of modern medical services. She believed that if the FNS could succeed there, it could then be established anywhere.

Mary Breckinridge was not a mountaineer but the daughter of a wealthy family of high social and political standing. During her FNS career she consciously emphasized certain stereotypes in an effort to garner greater support for the Service from wealthy northerners and other prospective donors. At the same time, under Breckinridge's leadership, the FNS staff, composed primarily of outsiders, and the mountain people developed a mutual respect which enhanced what they were able to do for each other. Toward the end of her career Breckinridge wrote:

The Kentucky mountaineer has been written up and talked about as though he were a special kind of *Homo sapiens*. I have knocked around the world a lot in my time and have never found any people in it but men, women and children — with no two of them alike. This delectable variety is as true of Kentucky mountaineers as of everybody else. But the picture that people from beyond the mountains hold of them is uniform. They see a lean man with a gun tending his moonshine still, while his wife and fifteen children clutter his one-room log cabin by night and plow his hillside by day. If he speaks at all before shooting, it will be in words too archaic for comprehension.²

If Breckinridge's life work exploited certain negative images, it simultaneously countered others. Appropriately, the oral history study of her legacy has further examined images of her Appalachian constituency. A few stereotypes hold up, while most pale into insignificance or absurdity.

Americans have generally assumed that anyone unsuccessful by conventional standards must be either lazy, intellectually inferior, or morally lacking. To many past observers, Appalachians were decidedly not the epitome of success. Mountaineers were pitied and patronized for their alleged poverty and backwardness; their industry and resourcefulness often went unnoticed. From recent interviews, however, they have emerged, on

²Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods: A Story of the Frontier Nursing Service* (New York, 1952), 169.

the whole, as hard workers, though their rewards were often meager. Frank Bowling recalls:

I grew up in a family with fourteen children, seven boys and seven girls, and we had to work as we grew up or starve. But our daddy . . . our daddy and mother grew us up to work and I don't regret it. We all had to work.⁶

Tempie Young reflects upon the same kind of life:

Our parents was good to us, all of us in the family. But we all worked. We had to work 'cause that's the only way people had then of getting anything to live on, was to work and make it.⁷

Assessing the quality of life which could be attained in the mountains has engendered many assumptions. Oral history interviews conducted in the region attest, as have others, that it is not so much absolute standards which vary among people of different regions as their conception of what constitutes living well. For Oscar Howard, retrospect offers an image of better times:

Yeah, I had my own cow. Made my own butter. Had all the milk we ever needed. I raised my own hogs; we had plenty of meat, our own hogs to kill every winter. And it was a lot better than it is now. You had your own stuff.⁸

The Depression of the thirties might be expected to have had an even more drastic effect upon an economically "deprived" region, notwithstanding the traditional self-sufficiency of its people. But Howard offers this revelation:

It wasn't so awful bad on people here. Government, they'd send in meat and stuff for them to live on. Give them a lot of food, you know. That . . . that helped out. People that would really get out and work and try, why, they done pretty well. But you take the ones that just sit down and depended upon the

⁶Interview with Frank Bowling, Leslie County, Kentucky, July 31, 1978, Frontier Nursing Service Oral History Project, Special Collections, University of Kentucky Library, 3 (hereafter FNS-OH Project).

⁷Interview with Tempie Young, Owl's Nest, Kentucky, August 29, 1978, FNS-OH Project, 2.

⁸Interview with Oscar Howard, Greasy Creek, Kentucky, September 22, 1978, *ibid.*, 4.

government to feed them, why, I guess it [was] pretty hard on them. But if they went on and done their part, too, they got along pretty good. I never did go hungry a day in my life. I always had something to eat.⁹

Pride in their work and independence is reiterated by mountaineers like Ott Bowling:

I'll tell you this much. I never lived on no handouts. And last I was a married man, I worked at everything. I never done nothing dishonest in my life. Used to drink liquor, but I never did make none. And I worked at everything there was any money in that was honest. . . . But I had a family and I had to work. And when you're looking at me, you're sure not looking at a handout man. I never got a food stamp nor a commodity or nothing in my life.¹⁰

The government did — and does — provide assistance in food and services to needy Appalachians. Yet many critics — Harry Caudill among them — have considered such assistance detrimental to the mountain character. In highlander Frank Bowling's opinion, "Too much prosperity and all these government programs has made people sorry."¹¹ And sometimes the image of the lazy mountaineer and welfare cheater is reinforced by the people themselves. According to Jailey Sizemore, people on welfare

. . . will sit up and watch television all night and they won't get up of the morning till way up about ten or eleven o'clock . . . and people on welfare think, "Well, I don't have to work. I can get what I want anyway."¹²

But regardless of assistance programs and the encroachments of modern technology many Appalachian families seem to have preserved traditional American values, as an interview with Tempie Young reveals:

⁹*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰Interview with Ott Bowling, Hurricane Creek, Kentucky, May 24, 1979, FNS-OH Project, 15.

¹¹Frank Bowling interview, 38.

¹²Interview with Jailey Sizemore, Thousand Sticks, Kentucky, July 26, 1978, FNS-OH Project, 19.

We wasn't rich, now, with money, but we always had a home and plenty to eat and what we needed and had to have. And we was teached to work and do right. We did have a good daddy and good mother to teach us right from wrong.¹³

The pride in themselves exhibited by so many Appalachians stems in part, perhaps, from a degree of inherent provincialism and a somewhat existential world view. Mountaineers like Ott Bowling tend to look for possibility within the circumscribed limits of their own personal world:

I think we always try to live about, not ahead of people, but we're always trying to live about the tops of our category; that is, poor people. We always kept clean the best we could. . . . We had, in a way, a whole lot of independence and . . . and pride about it, about our living. Of course, like everybody else we didn't have nothing, but we tried to live at the tops of ours.¹⁴

The fatalism of the mountaineer, which observers of the Appalachian so often have identified, does not seem evident in Bowling's reminiscence. He is expressing not necessarily resignation but simply a matter-of-fact realism about his family's limited income. His account contains too much energy to accommodate the term "resignation."

II

One Appalachian stereotype purports an indifference to education. Even the earliest observers were struck by the lack of attention devoted to schools in the mountains. In a state which trailed the rest of the nation in educational opportunities, the eastern mountain areas lagged even more. Were mountaineers too lazy to learn, were they incapable of learning, or was the answer in fact more complex? Charlie Rice's own experience reveals a great deal about the actual situation for many Appalachians:

¹³Tempie Young interview, 18.

¹⁴Interview with Ott Bowling, Hurricane Creek, Kentucky, May 31, 1979, FNS-OH Project, 19.

No, sir, I never got to go to school. After I got up enough to work my daddy made me and my oldest brother work. He never got no education and I never either.¹⁵

Roe Davidson comments similarly:

No, we didn't have the chance, you know, like people's children's got today. We had to work. We really had to work. We had to work if we lived or eat much, you see.¹⁶

An education was viewed by some as a never-to-be-reached ideal. That many Appalachians did appreciate an education when it was available is obvious from conversation with people like Oscar Howard, who asserts, "Yeah, I went through the eighth grade *twice*. There wasn't no high school or nothing around, you know, at that time."¹⁷ And Felix Sheppard, who "never did get only to the second reader," recalls:

That's the reason that I tried so hard to help my boy get through school, 'cause I never got no education and he's about went the limit. What he could do and me too, why, he got up to where he's the principal now down at the high school.¹⁸

Some, like Tempie Young, lament their decision to quit school early with seemingly the same ambiguous feelings that prevailed in childhood:

And people them days, they just didn't go to school no longer when they got big enough to do any other kind of work. They just quit. They just didn't care whether they went or not. And there wasn't nobody to encourage them to go nor try to keep them to go enough. Of course, my daddy talked to me and wanted me to go longer and talked about sending me away to high school. . . . And I was just seeing then where I ought to have been going to school right on. And then pretty soon I got married and that just fixed going to school. . . . About a year after I married, I'd give anything in the world if I could have got back in school. . . . Many people sure missed it a lot then by not going to school some more. . . . I thought I ought to be . . . ought to go to school instead of just sitting down and working all of the time for nothing — I thought, then, working for nothing. But still, I was working for my family, you see. . . . I didn't have enough, I didn't think, to get by with. But I finally made it.¹⁹

¹⁵Interview with Charlie Rice, Dry Hill, Kentucky, October 30, 1978, *ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶Interview with Roe Davidson, Davidson Fork, Kentucky, July 20, 1978, *ibid.*, 20.

¹⁷Oscar Howard interview, 9.

¹⁸Interview with Felix Sheppard, Rock House Creek, Kentucky, September 11, 1978, FNS-OH Project, 25.

¹⁹Tempie Young interview, 22.

Just getting to school posed difficulties for mountain children, since most had to walk considerable distances to their one-room schoolhouses. Oscar Howard remembers, "Yeah, I would walk to school. I was always lucky enough the schoolhouse was on my side of the river all the time. I didn't never had to cross."²⁰

While concern about education obviously did exist among mountaineers, there has always been a certain amount of anti-intellectualism in the mountains. Frequently, however, it is cloaked in disarming common sense, as in Oscar Howard's commentary; he is not convinced that more money should be spent on education:

Well, now, it would . . . in ways it would help; in ways it wouldn't. Did you know, some of the best-educated people we got is the meanest people we got in the world? If they ain't got no education, they ain't got sense enough to do a lot of those mean things.²¹

Such an oral commentary can thus put various views in needed perspective. It is primarily when such views are abstracted that they have a tendency to perpetuate myths.

III

Violence, guns, and feuds have also become synonymous with life in the eastern Kentucky mountains. For decades the national press has written about "Bloody Breathitt" and gun-toting mountaineers. Even now, in recent films such as "Harlan County, U.S.A.," violence plays a major role in the depiction of Appalachians. Here the image — at least in the early period — had much basis in fact. Violence, or the potential for violence, was a part of everyday life. Caroline Gay maintains that "You had to watch, too, because a lot of these old mountain men, you know, did and still do carry their pistols, and if tempers got going, you'd better look out."²² Charlie Rice recalls

²⁰Oscar Howard interview, 9.

²¹*Ibid.*, 26.

²²Interview with Carolyn Gay, Brutus, Kentucky, January 16, 1979, FNS-OH Project, 20.

the disruption that clan violence caused in his own family's life:

Well, just like a father would, he decided that he'd bring us out of Owsley County on account of the people there was . . . actually wasn't hardly civilized at that time, and you know . . . you have heard of the Clay County feud? The Rices and the Gabbards got into a kind of a feud and there was nine men killed in that . . . before it ended up and my daddy brought us children out of there and left there and never did go back, in order to protect us and hisself, too.²³

The struggles to unionize the mines focused even more attention on violence in Appalachia. Although Charlie Rice had eluded violence as a child in Owsley County, he faced it later as an adult in the union wars of Leslie County. He recalls one instance in particular:

He sent his deputies over there to check and see what was going on. And my boys and another fellow was going to pitch E. P. North off. . . . He was a deputy sheriff and they was going to pitch him off the bridge in that waterhole up there [Middle Fork of the Kentucky River]. Yes, and I stopped them. I said, "Boys, that'll never do". . . . It's sixty feet from the bridge down to the water, and the water is seven or eight feet deep. I made them stop and turn him loose, and so it went on that way.²⁴

Violence seems to have been expected; it was even differentiated into more and less acceptable types. Betty Lester, who immigrated to the area from England as an FNS nurse-midwife and still lives in Leslie County, notes, "Well, we did have . . . it wasn't exactly feuds in the mountains, but I mean if . . . if some man shot somebody else's brother, there was going to be a retaliation."²⁵ The designation of "feud" seems to have depended upon the degree of violence that accompanied the disagreement and how long the argument lasted. Vance Bowling explains the alleged Morgan-Colwell feud:

It was not a feud. They fell out down there. I don't know what it was over, but they just fell out and had a killing there in Hyden. . . . And it was not a feud. Now, . . . those Colwells, a different set of Colwells, I guess, had a feud with the Brocks. Might be called a feud. They fought and killed one another occasionally for several years in this county. But the Morgan thing was not a feud. They just

²³Charlie Rice interview, 1.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 18-19.

²⁵Interview with Betty Lester, Hyden, Kentucky, August 3, 1978, FNS-OH Project, 33.

had a falling out, and one of the Morgans was killed and one or two of the Colwells was killed. There was nothing else, no more trouble, as far as I know.²⁶

Although the distinction is clear to Vance Bowling, who outside of the mountains is going to understand such a situation without an explanation? It is much easier to fall back on a stereotype.

IV

One of the most persistent images of the mountaineer is that of the moonshiner. This single stereotype embodies nearly all of the traditional negative traits — quaintness, laziness, violence, and lawlessness. But mountaineers who admit to having made moonshine often discuss their enterprise in quite practical economic terms. Charlie Rice observes:

I have to tell you the truth when you get me where I ought to. I used to make moonshine whiskey when I couldn't get a job, and I made good moonshine whiskey when I couldn't pass the [medical] examination to work in the mines. And I made good moonshine whiskey and sold to them boys by the book and then they bootlegged it out. And they were just as honest as the day is long.²⁷

Oscar Howard's commentary supports Rice's:

There wasn't much for 'em to do. That was back before that Depression started, you know. There wasn't too much work and they just made moonshine and took it off around the mining camps where there was plenty of work; you know, sold it. They made pretty good at it.²⁸

Many people in the mountains insist that little moonshine whiskey is being made today. Possible reasons for the decline include better economic conditions, easier access to areas where legal liquor is available, and more efficient bootlegging from the outside. But Frank Bowling offers his own theory:

They've always made whiskey up until the last few years. There is very little whiskey that I know of being made around this section. But it used to be an awful bad place for making whiskey, in this county. I guess the reason of it [is] that the

²⁶Interview with Vance Bowling, Hyden, Kentucky, May 24, 1979, *ibid.*, 43.

²⁷Charlie Rice interview, 83.

²⁸Oscar Howard interview, 22.

ones that made it back yonder so much is dead and these young ones is too sorry to make it. Making whiskey, I guess, is a pretty hard job.²⁹

V

Perhaps the greatest advantage mountain people possess is a strong sense of place, a characteristic that appears conspicuously in interviews. Many segments of American society have come to suffer from what Alex Haley has identified as "a sense of rootlessness."³⁰ The mountaineer seems largely to have avoided this feeling as a result of having been nurtured on a sense of closeness to his family and to the land. Jessie Sheppard feels this affinity:

Well, I was born and raised here, and a person that's born and raised in these mountains don't like to leave them. I always like it . . . I don't like a city at all. I never did.³¹

On the other hand, geographical isolation has caused the mountaineer's sense of space to become somewhat disproportional. When asked if he had been born close to where he now lives, Vance Bowling replied, "No, I was born . . . 'bout half a mile up the road."³² Emily Melton was asked about the first time she ever left Leslie County. She responded, "Well, I left . . . where did I go when I left Leslie County? [Laughing] I don't remember. Well, I been in Perry County several times . . . and Laurel County."³³

As these statements indicate, within the mountains families have tended to remain close. While not all the hollows are inhabited by several branches of one family, many of them are, and this lends credence to an image of clannishness. Roe Davidson talks about the number of his relatives who live near him on Davidson Fork:

²⁹Frank Bowling interview, 18.

³⁰Address by Alex Haley, University of Kentucky, March 1, 1977, Special Collections, University of Kentucky Library.

³¹Interview with Jessie Sheppard, Rock House Creek, Kentucky, August 22, 1978, FNS-OH Project, 13.

³²Vance Bowling interview, 1.

³³Interview with Emily Melton, Hyden, Kentucky, August 9, 1979, FNS-OH Project, 20.

Well, yeah, there're a lot of them is [related]. You take . . . take me here, now. This house right here, my daughter lives in it. The next house above her, my daughter lives in it. This trailer over there, my daughter lives in it. And these houses over here, they are my cousins. This one over here is one, this red trailer, that's my brother's girl. My boy lives down there in that white house on the left. And from on down there, some more of them houses, that's my brother's children. It's got the right name, Davidson Fork.³⁴

VI

Over the years the Frontier Nursing Service brought many outsiders to the Leslie County area. Like those of lowlanders in the past, their reactions to the people and the area were mixed. Many of their recollections reinforce the general view of historical poverty in the area. Allyn Sheppard, who served as a courier for the FNS during the winter of 1942, remembers:

Well, I'll be very frank with you. I guess I had never seen such accepted poverty in my life before. By "accepted" what I mean is that it didn't . . . people lived like this and it was part and parcel of their fabric of life. And it was just . . . I mean I just couldn't imagine living in such dire circumstances.³⁵

Dr. Kenneth Warren visited the FNS in 1960 and recalls a similar picture:

I was absolutely astounded by what we saw. The major things that astounded me were the lifestyles of the people in this area. That is, their homes, the surroundings, the facilities they had were as primitive as virtually anything I'd seen anywhere in the developing world. I couldn't believe it. They had no privies, they had no running water in the houses, they had chickens and animals running all around the yards. The children were half-clothed. It was really a tremendous revelation to me.³⁶

Those who visited only briefly tended to emphasize the rather superficial evidences of deprivation in the mountains. Those who worked in the area for longer periods, however, recognized something more than the apparent poverty and backwardness, as Mary Penton noted:

³⁴Roe Davidson interview, 26.

³⁵Interview with Allyn Sheppard, Cincinnati, Ohio, January 18, 1979, FNS-OH Project, 8.

³⁶Interview with Kenneth Warren, Wendover, Kentucky, September 16, 1979, *ibid.*, 5.

I really feel honored that I . . . that I ever worked with the people. I don't mean just the FNS people; I mean the local people. Many people in this area, I think, feel that they are, well, . . . not as intelligent and stuff like . . . a real backward community. Well, I don't feel that way. I feel they are backward because of other reasons. Maybe some of the inbreeding has affected some, but many of them are highly intelligent people that for one reason or another have not gotten the education that we do get up here or in other parts of the country. You love them in spite of it because you think, well, you're going to teach them something and . . . and yet they are teaching you something. It's quite an experience, working there.³⁷

Elsie Maier, who graduated from the FNS midwifery school and stayed to work as an FNS nurse-midwife, was similarly impressed:

I found that I learned and began to understand a lot more from them than I ever could have given them. So that I feel like I owe a lot to the Kentucky people for what they have done for me personally, in giving me an enriching life and a meaningful attitude towards living that I'm not sure I would have found in New York City.³⁸

VII

One element of the pride mountaineers feel in their way of life stems from a confidence in their own values. Though somewhat habituated to a negative image elsewhere, mountain people still resent disparagement. Carolyn Gay asserts indignantly, "Oh, if you want to make my blood boil, you start talking down Kentuckians and especially this area."³⁹ About the opinions of observers, she adds:

These programs they have on the television or on the radio — my sister lived in California for a while and they did a program about Eastern Kentucky and showed the nursing center and all this stuff, and she said it just burned her up. Acted like we were just pure heathens.⁴⁰

Some mountain residents, however, have taken advantage of an ingenuous public, as she continues:

³⁷Interview with Mary Penton, Arlington, Massachusetts, June 15, 1979, *ibid.*, 41.

³⁸Interview with Elsie Maier, Hyden, Kentucky, December 5, 1978, *ibid.*, 24.

³⁹Carolyn Gay interview, 55.

But I'll tell you, too, a lot of people take advantage of it. Like one family I know, they had this national magazine come in to take pictures of 'em and so on to send away for people to send 'em money and food and so on. So they did; they came in to take the pictures. They piled up old chicken bones and so on on the table with an old hound dog sitting there so they could take pictures of it and show them. Oh, they put on the raggedest clothes they could find. They took pictures of all this and put it in a national magazine. But after it was published these people decided they were going to come in here and save these poor old people. They built them a house. They brought in truckloads of furniture, truckloads of clothes. They got money, oh, every day. The mail truck was loaded down. So they had a high ole time. Those dumb old city people want to send them something in here; that was fine, sure.⁴⁰

The articulate assessment of how they feel they are presented itself contradicts much of what has been said and filmed of Appalachians. Vance Bowling, another interviewee, concurs that the media, with or without premeditation, have misrepresented the mountaineer and his culture:

Well, I wondered why they didn't take pictures and so forth of the best, the fine homes, you know. We've got as fine a homes and things in Eastern Kentucky as they have anywhere in the United States. And it made me mad that they would do that instead of use the finer homes. Somebody wants to take a picture, you know, they take a picture of the dirtiest, nastiest, worst house and family in the county and then let on like the entire area is like that. I never did like that.⁴¹

Carrie Parker, a native of Leslie County who now lives in Washington, D.C., suggests the past neglect of oral history:

I have an uncle who wears bib overalls, who sits on the front porch laying back in a cane chair. He is one of the greatest philosophers that I know of. He stomped all over Europe in World War II, and if NBC News came through, he would be your typical hillbilly, not interviewed, just photographed. No one would ever ask him what he thought. No one would ever ask him about his philosophy of life, marriage, death, children, [about] which he has terrific ideas, I mean, on all of them. So you get the picture, but you don't get the thoughts of these people.⁴²

Not getting "the thoughts of these people" has led to such assumptions about Appalachians as the idea that they are unsophisticated. Parker, who has experienced both mountain and lowland cultures, ponders the quality of life offered by each:

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 56-57.

⁴¹Vance Bowling interview, 25.

⁴²Interview with Carrie M. Parker, Great Falls, Virginia, October 29, 1979, FNS-OH Project, 36.

I think Eastern Kentuckians are adaptable. You move them out to another place, they are going to get along. But I don't know if those other places where they get along actually is an improvement or a better way of life than sitting in a hollow. I mean, that's what it boils down to. Is sitting here, you know, thirty minutes from downtown Washington in the — quote — 'rat race' better than sitting in my bib overalls up on Jack's Creek?"¹¹

Misconceptions and exaggerations of mountain life will inevitably persist. With backgrounds so diverse, Americans may find it ultimately impossible to know and understand one another completely. The Frontier Nursing Service and the FNS Oral History Project have helped to bring mountaineers and lowlanders somewhat closer together, but in some respects a psychological distance remains. A woman who grew up in Louisville but spent most of her later life in the northeast has been a longtime member of the FNS City Committees and an FNS supporter. But she has never actually visited the mountains and confesses:

I know nothing about them except that when I lived in Louisville, there were these wonderful-looking men, big, tall men, white . . . snow-white hair, who were moonshiners and who had been brought down by the revenue people. And I never knew anything about them. And I also know when my family, coming from Virginia, went over the mountains into Kentucky, to Mt. Sterling and somewhere, there were so many of those people lost. And they, as I remember, my mother told me they were isolated and there are all sorts of things written about those Kentucky mountain people. I wonder if it's really true?"¹²

Perhaps as oral history becomes more widely accepted and integrated into the mainstream of historical research, what is "really true" will replace the Appalachian stereotypes which unfortunately still cloud the image of one of our most complex and intriguing peoples.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 37.

¹²Interview with Frances M. Carter, Washington, D.C., April 26, 1979, FNS-OH Project, 26.