William G. Frost

In this document, published in 1896, President Frost describes Southern Appalachia and outlines an educational program to “uplift” the region.

North America has been partitioned off in many ways. First came the divisions by royal charter. There was a grand period of Empire carving when European rulers drew their pens across the map and cut off great slices for their favorites. It takes one’s breath away to hear of the ancient boundaries of Connecticut: “Bounded on the north by Massachusetts, on the south by Narragansett bay, on the east, by the colony of Rhode Island, and on the west by the Pacific Ocean!”

Then came the period of actual colonization, and we have Spanish, Dutch, French, and English America.

Then followed a period of uneven growth, manufactories and democracy springing up in one part of the country, while slavery and its attendant ideas of essential feudalism were retained in other parts, so that a line of cleavage was unconsciously prepared between the North and the South.

And again, succeeding the era of colonies came the era of emigration, which has deposited successive strata of population of varying density and character throughout the North, so that most of our cities have Irish, German, Polish, Scandinavian, and Italian wards. This influence, however, has rarely produced anything like a territorial distinction.

And finally, in a country of magnificent distances somewhat independent forces of civilization have been at work in different quarters, so that we have vague but significant distinctions between the East and the West, and between different sections in each of these grand divisions.

We can scarcely doubt that under the influence of a common flag, a common literature, and the increasing facility of travel, these five kinds of division – division by charter, division by colonization, division by uneven growth, division by immigration, and division by independent development -- will gradually fade into picturesque memories.

As these fade, however, there rise to view distinctions which will be more permanent, as they are older and more fundamental, having been drawn by the finger of the Creator – the divisions of physical or physiographic condition. We shall always have (1) a rugged New England, and (2) a region tributary to the Great Lakes, and (3) a Mississippi valley, and (4) a Gulf region, and (5) a row of Southern Atlantic states.

Now between these five sections, and larger than any of them except the Mississippi valley, lies a sixth grand division, the very heart of the eastern half of North America; a region which has been without a voice and without a name, but which is now finding utterance through gatherings like this, and which Dr. Mayo has appropriately designated as Appalachian America.

We Yankees respect bigness, and here is something at least large. Grouped around West Virginia and east Tennessee are mountainous portions of Maryland, old Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, and nearly half of Kentucky. This region embraces 194 counties, an area as large as the German Empire. It consists of three great strips of territory extending obliquely across the map from northeast to southwest: the Cumberland Plateau, now well cut into by the erosion of streams; the Appalachian valley traversed by the Tennessee River; and the Appalachian mountains proper to the southeast. In climate and surface and in all that makes up the conditions of

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1 Read before the Teachers’ Clubs of Cincinnati and Columbus, O., Jan. 1896.
human life this region is one, and it will continue to have a character of its own until the eastern half of North America is washed into the Atlantic.

We are not now concerned with the material resources of this region except as they affect the present condition and future destiny of the people which inhabit it. A brief survey of these resources, however, will assist us in forecasting its probable history.

First of all is the wealth of lumber which has been the first available wealth in all our Western World. Appalachian America will be overswept by the lumber industry as Ohio and Michigan have been. Already the choicest timber along the water-courses is finding its way to market. But the lumber business is only a passing phase of American life. It supplies labor and income for a few years in each locality, and then passes on to new territory like a prairie fire. It is a means of giving the people a start, but it is not to be relied upon as a stable source of income.

Next come the more permanent resources of the mines, coal, and iron, and we may safely predict that these will eventually attract the capital, erect the smoke-stacks and bring in the railroads which will permanently connect Appalachian America with the outside world.

And finally, there is the stable resource of agriculture The country is rugged, yet the northern slopes of the mountains, as well as numerous valleys, are very productive; the climate is adapted to fruit as well as to the cereals; and the region as a whole may become as good an agricultural section as the rougher parts of Pennsylvania, and better than Vermont or Scotland.

But all this is prophetic. What is the present condition of these people? In a word it is a condition of isolation.

We must pause to amplify the meaning of the word isolation. Appalachian America has no navigable rivers and no coast lines. No sails come and go between this sylvan kingdom and the great world isolation outside. No steamboat whistle breaks the solitude of the hills—such solitude has befallen no other settler in the western world. The pioneer on the Hudson had an easy access to the sea. The settler in western New York was linked to civilization by the Erie Canal. The backwoodsmen of Michigan and Illinois were soon overtaken by the railroad. But the immigrant to Appalachian America unconsciously stepped aside from all the great avenues of commerce and of thought.

The world outside has been moving. Invention has revolutionized all the arts. New ideas have been originated and spread abroad with the rapidity of electricity. Popular education has become well-nigh universal. The wisdom of our grandfathers has become the property of little children to-day, and the luxuries of the last generation are now a common necessity.

But while the world has moved Appalachian America has lingered. The region contains valleys, and some considerable towns, where modern life and customs have found their way, but for a very large proportion of the people the conditions of progress have been absent. It is the contact of man with his fellow which strikes the sparks of thought but how can there be contact when the families along one little creek, or branch as they call it, are shut up to themselves except on the rare occasions when they get out to a protracted meeting or a lawsuit, or are visited by a disappointed book-agent or some other “foreigner”? Progress comes with enterprise, but these people are unconscious of the advantages which they have never seen or heard of, and so far from markets that there is little motive for producing a surplus. The pioneer condition of life is a phase through which the settlers of every state have passed. It was a kind of heroic epoch which has been properly embalmed in our literature, and which will forever lend a charm of picturesque beauty to our early history. But it was only a passing phase. The whistle of the locomotive ushered in another age, and the children who were born in the log-cabin are to-day living in a very different style and thinking very different thoughts. But in the southern mountain region the pioneer condition has continued for generations.

The early settlers in these hills brought a meager stock of ideas and domestic arts into the wilderness, and have had very little opportunity to add to that stock. They were not only shut off from the world but from each other. People live and die without being acquainted with more than a dozen families. Some have never seen a village. Many become so wonted to this solitude that they shrink from venturing far from the spot where they were born.
Bravely they maintain the civilization of their ancestors. Wool, cotton, and flax are deftly spun, skillfully dyed and woven into butternut and coat-cloth, dress-goods, bed-blankets, and table linen. Baskets are woven, splint bottomed chairs made, sleds, yokes, and plows manufactured at horn and with this transmission of skill in homespun main facture there is an inculcation of manners. Truthfulness honesty and hospitality are the cardinal virtues, together with a wholesome reverence for religion, and a zeal for sectarianism which is quite independent of knowledge.

The speech is that of rural England two centuries ago with some new departures quite in the spirit of the ancient tongue. The people affirm by saying, “I reckon,” and deny by saying, “I don't guess,” and retain, scores of classic but obsolete Saxon terms like feisty for impertinent, gorm for muss, buss for kiss, pack for carry, soon for early, help for helped, drug for dragged, and Saxon plurals like beastes for beasts.

The temper of the people is undemonstrative except in times of great religious excitement. Their songs run on high keys in marked contrast with the prevailing bass in Negro music. Family affection is strong; and shrewd sense as well as the homely poetic faculty of our ancestors shine out in a thousand quaint phrases and proverbs.

Another manifestation of this poetic faculty which can be conveniently shown is the naming of places. We know of a four corners called Standaround, and post-offices named Fair Play, Eighty-eight, Wide Awake, Tip Top, Squabble Creek, Hamtown, Whynot, Barefoot, Doorway, and Nonesuch. “Hell fer Sartin,” which is the scene of one of Mr. Fox's tales, was a veritable name, but was refused recognition by the Post-office Department.

The vices of the mountaineer are survivals also. He drinks whiskey in many places as the early settlers used to drink New England Rum. And he has no more compunction in taking human life, or risking his own. Briton had three or four hundred years ago. For two young men shot each other in our town last Christmas Eve. They were not abandoned characters. They would have scorned to steal or lie. Yet when the aged father of one of them heard of the tragedy his first lament was, “I oughter got the boy a better revolver!”

It is well to understand that the numerous homicides which attract attention in the Kentucky news of our daily papers are not perpetrated for robbery. In most cases the act is performed in the temper of an Homeric or a feudal chieftain, and the cause is some “point of honor.” This fact does not extenuate the crime, but it leaves more hope for the ultimate improvement of the people.

These rugged traits are not only emphasized by pioneer conditions, but also legitimately derived. These people are Americans of many generations, with almost no foreign admixture, and of British origin, largely Scotch-Irish. The names of Buchan, Clay, Montgomery, Burke, Harrison, Morris, Calhoun, Mahaffy, McCone, McCall, McDowell, McCreary, McAfee, and all the other Macs, are abundant testimony.

They brought with them from the old world an intense protestant religious fervor which is, unhappily, much in need of instruction and guidance. There is no protestant population on the globe so destitute of educated religious teachers.

Next to this religious fervor is their spirit of patriotism which has been handed down from father to son directly from the Revolution. It was this spirit which held Appalachian America in the Union during the late war. The story of the two wars with Great Britain was a tradition in every household, and loyalty to the flag had been cemented by service in the Mexican war. The very fact that they had few things to think about made these traditions the Revolution more vivid. Practically they had nothing which had happened since the Revolution. They have no interest in the perpetuation of slavery. I have myself mountain men who served in Mexico under Jefferson Davis and yet when the movement for secession came stood for the Union.

And Appalachian America made itself felt in the war. Neither the Northern nor the Southern leaders gave thought to this region. It was parceled out among nine slave states and no one thought of its essential, unity. The Confederates expected that the line of cleavage would follow the Ohio River and leave the North in the shape of a huge dumbbell of which York and Ohio would be the handle, with New England for one bulb and the West for the other. The natural strategic move was to cut this dumbbell in two by marching a force from Wheeling, W. Va., to Cleveland, O. This the Confederate general Garnett set out to do, and his project seemed so promising that it assisted in the sale of Confederate bonds in London. But no one had taken account of the temper of the mountain folk. As soon as Gen. Garnett struck the mountains he found himself in hostile territory. He never
reached Wheeling, but was out-flanked by McClellan, who had the service of all the mountain guides, and finally fell at Carrick's ford pierced as was believed by a bullet from a mountain rifle. ²

But even the war did not connect Appalachian America with the world. It was only a brief episode. The country was startled by the vindictive eloquence of Parson Brownlow and contributed generously for the starving loyalists of East Tennessee. But the mountain men marched back to their hillsides and valleys and were again forgotten.

Here then is the life of our newly discovered mountain neighbor—a life of survivals. He is using the speech, following the customs, thinking the thoughts, of by-gone generations. He is our contemporary ancestor!

And we are interested in the mountaineer not sake, but for the part which he may play country's future. As this forgotten mountain man assisted us in the crisis of war he is likely Re-enforcement, assist us in two other great and present emergencies. He is an American, and we have discovered him just at the time when Americans are needed to offset tide of undesirable foreign immigrants.

And more than this he is in a position to greatly assist us in solving the Southern problem. Reconstruction gave the political power in the South to the Negro and he naturally abused that power. Then the old slaveholders regained control, and while we are far from approving their methods or spirit in all respects, we are glad to see that they have on the whole used their authority humanely.

Just now, however, the “old colonel” is losing his grip and the uneducated white masses are getting the upper hand. These “poor whites,” degraded by competition with slave labor, totally unenlightened, threaten to undo the progress of the last twenty years. It is these people rather than the former slave-holders who are engaged in lynching, repeal of school laws, etc. Now as an offset to these dangerous “poor whites” of the South we may, with fit training, bring forward the people of the mountains-independent landholders, sturdy yeomen, base of that middle class which is the bone and sinew of a nation. They are to overflow from their present territory and re-enforce the South with a new element.

Now the question of the fit training of this robust population is one of the most unique and important educational problems of our day, and one which comes very, near to this association of teachers. It is the last and greatest piece of educational pioneering which America will have to do.

And we must consider that this problem differs from our old problem of the ever shifting “new west” in the greater isolation of the region. The western states had a liberal sprinkling of settlers who knew something of education, and who were connected with the East by family ties. Visits and letters were constantly interchanged and thus the older states were kept informed and interested in regard to the communities which were still in the making. But how many people in the North have relatives or correspondents I Appalachian America? It is like a foreign country, an island, and cannot make its wants known except through some ambassador like myself!

And when we understand the general fact of need, it is still a great problem how to make our aid effective. Little good is done by simply transplanting the school methods of other sections. Education for the children of moonshiner on Bear Knob, children virtually picked out of the sixteenth century, is a different thing from education in Walnut Hills in Cincinnati!

We have, then, to consider the necessity of educational assistance, and its proper method.

And first, the necessity. No such belated population can be speculated to catch up without help. The glorious civilization and prosperity which overspreads our country today is largely due to the fact that people in the older and wealthier states have helped the younger. Ohio owes much to the eastern people who in its pioneer period sent aid to Marietta College and 1 Lane Seminary, and a dozen other schools.

Now as we have helped the West we must help the South. The South is relatively more needy than the West—it has a far larger share of illiteracy, and only one-fifth as much taxable property.

² For fuller account of the services of the mountain people in the war see article by Gen. J. D. Cox in Berea Quarterly for November, 1895.
And it must be said further that the South is less prepared to deal with educational questions, since the traditions of slavery times are ill adapted to the new conditions.

The question sometimes suggests itself whether it is not a pity to disturb the simple lives of the mountain people with all the confusion of the nineteenth century or It will be shown at a later point in this article that it is our purpose to interfere as little as possible with the simplicity of mountain life—not to introduce a foreign civilization, but rather to develop the best elements of life and character already existing. It is one of the most delicate and important parts of our mission thus to guide in a distinctive native movement.

But further it must be remembered that it is not in our power to leave these people undisturbed. The throngs of modern life are knocking at their doors; a great change of some kind is inevitable. Without some educational assistance these people will be debauched by the influx of railroads and all the reckless van-guard of civilization. Here is a population whose morality and religion are not buttressed by intelligence. If they encounter the evils of our civilization before they have access to its saving elements they will be swept away as by a contagion.

We now reach the question of the method of our aid. And I count myself fortunate in presenting my ideas as the program for meeting these conditions to so large and able a body of educators. And I shall not disguise the fact that my program was planned with Berea College as its pivot and center. It was in the library of a German University that I first studied his problem, and I accepted the call to Berea because I then discovered that that school had the largest opening to assist in a great educational uplift for Appalachian America.

In formulating a program for the uplift of this territory I submit for your criticism a few principles which now appeal to me as self-evident, but which are constantly violated in work of this character.

I. The controlling aim should be to bring these people to « condition of intellectual independence—to help them to help themselves.

II. To this end we should cooperate with approved schools already existing, preferring those of native origin and liberal spirit, rather than to found new institutions.

III. We should cooperate with the public school system, may expect the maximum result from the minimum of expense by training native teachers.

IV. We should emphasize industrial training, and, while we are imparting a culture which will give rise to new wants, teach them how to supply those wants by skilled labor.

[Photo caption: Mountain Boys Who Meet the Evils of Our Civilization Before its Saving Elements]

V. This work should be done in a religious spirit but not on a sectarian basis. We cannot in any sense afford to establish independent work for each of the great religious bodies in this sparsely populated district. There must be cooperation.

VI. The work should have many special adaptations to make it take hold of the real situation in the lulls.

Each of these propositions deserves a moment's attention.

I. It is a fundamental principle that in extending aid to a people as to an individual the aim should be not to bring the recipient into-a condition of dependence, but to help him to help himself. To give a man money or bread, except in an emergency, is to make him a pauper; but to give him education, if it be education of the right kind, is to make him independent. These principles should be strictly followed in giving educational aid to Appalachian America. We do not expect to give this aid perpetually, but to expend it so wisely that it will put the mountain people on the same footing with the rest of us. We are not intending to brace them up from outside, but to develop them from within.

II. And it is worthwhile to pause before adding to the list of schools and colleges. We have too many of a certain kind already. Almost any hamlet is ready to donate land for starting a new university!
The South is conservative, and years must elapse before a new institution can command the confidence of the people. It is but recently that I was canvassing various locations in this region, and selected Berea as the most promising from its origin, its history, and its location.

The fact that this school was founded by Kentucky men is of vast significance in the South. Berea represents some radical ideas, but they are the radical ideas of Kentuckians and not a northern importation. It is a monument of the progressive sentiment of Kentucky—not the Kentucky of the Bourbons, but the Kentucky of Clay, the Kentuckians that stood for the union, the Kentucky that gave birth to Abraham Lincoln. Every mountain boy can take a pride in Berea which he could not take if it were an imported institution.

And the opportunity of contact with northern students is of incalculable value. We have seen that the great difficulty of mountain life is its isolation. A hundred mountain boys gathered in the heart of the mountains by themselves may learn some Geography and History, but they will learn some things of far greater importance if they can be drawn to the edge of their mountains and mingled with young people from a dozen states, and from both sides of the old slavery divide.

III. A plan of educational assistance which is to render tin-mountain peoples ultimately independent must contemplate a re-enforcement of the public schools. The public school is young and weak in the southern states, but it has come to stay, and if it can be properly administered it will be a perpetual force for the uplift of the people.

The public schools of the South have to contend with illiteracy, poverty, and sparseness of population. New England has 71 people to the square mile; the Middle states 121; while the Southern states have but 22. We have already spoken of the disparity in wealth between the two sections. The result is that while paying equally heavy school taxes the South is only able to keep its rural schools open from three to five months in the year.

The Southern states support some normal schools, but not a single state has anything like an adequate provision for the training of teachers, and there is not a single educator of note who is devoting himself to the educational needs of Appalachian America. The fact is that each of the states which embrace a portion of this mountainous area regards the mountain portion as a burden, an unpromising corner to be neglected, avoided, and forgotten, so that there is some lack of intelligent interest as well as lack of means on the part of the Southern states for providing for the mountain district. Now here is our opportunity. It is too much to undertake to assist the mountain people to lengthen the school term seven or eight months. But one thing of far-reaching beneficence can be done. A well-equipped Normal Department can be established at Berea. We can put in Instructors who shall study the special needs and conditions of the great Cumberland Plateau, and we can thus train an army of native teachers each of whom shall be a shining light in the remote valley where his school may lie. The man or the group of people who will make this wise gift of a Normal School to lighten all the western slope of Appalachian America will write a proud name on the map of our country.

IV. Another great feature in any work projected for the South should be Manual Training, and productive industry. The whole South was under the pall of slavery, which disparaged labor and encouraged no man to take pride in his work. The result was a dearth of inventions, and a decline of thrift. This influence was less in the mountains, but it was there re-enforced by the isolation which prevented industrial development. The time has come to put skill and will into the hands of the yeoman. As Appalachian America is made more like to other parts of our country let her own sons have some share in the work, and not be turned into loafers and roustabouts while skilled labor from abroad is brought in to effect the transformation.

We would place this close beside the Normal School, first, in order that every teacher might catch something of the industrial idea; and second, that many who are not awakened to their best endeavors by books might find no less real a future in tools.

We have already a “model house” for instruction in domestic arts, and a three-story workshop which we call the “cradle” because in it we are rocking the twin infants, Manual Training and Productive Industry. Our BEREA QUARTERLY is a product of this shop. May we not hope to find some public spirited and sagacious man who will adopt these infants and bring them up?
V. Again, as it appears to me, this work ought to be distinctly religious and non-sectarian. The mountain people are religious, and naturally approached from that side, and religion is the proper propelling force for an educational movement. At the same time denominational feeling is so intense at the South that a school which wears a denominational aspect is effectually cut off from pupils whose parents belong to other denominations.

It is quite the common thing to find a mountain community of twenty families divided into four or five churches. The preachers are unpaid, and a church seldom expects to have services more than once a month. This is another queer survival from the time when preachers were scarce. We shall find the school-house occupied by the “Missionary Baptist” preacher the first Sunday of the month, the “Hardshell Baptist” preacher the second Sunday, the “Disciple” preacher the third Sunday, and the “Methodist South” preacher the fourth Sunday, and each man expanding his main efforts in upsetting the work of the other three!

There is too much of this sort of thing in all our church work and I am glad to be called to lead in a movement for practical cooperation.

If Berea should perish, probably five denominational schools would be planned in its immediate vicinity. It is good economy to have one strong school in place of five weak ones!

VI. We have still to consider the fact that that educational method must be adapted in many special ways to the people of Appalachian America. Only a few of these special adaptations need be mentioned here. The successful educator must be fully conscious of the mental processes and fixed ideas of those whom he would instruct.

Here is a population similar to that for which Benjamin Franklin wrote his Poor Richard's almanac, and Franklin was a good teacher for them, although to their children of the third generation he seems old-fashioned. The fact is the certain things which he taught have been handed down from mother to child so that young people in these families do not need to learn them from books. But the people of the mountains, like large populations in our cities, have never come in contact with Franklin's teachings, and with them we must begin with these elements.

The mountain folk are pathetically out of touch and hearing of the modern world. The books and papers which penetrate the mountain districts are largely unsuited to the needs of the people. They speak a different language, appeal to different motives, assume a different set of fixed ideas from those of the hills, and so find their highest, and sometimes their only usefulness, in covering the walk of their cabins!

The Institution which is to give guidance to these people must provide to some extent a literature suited to their condition, and mediate the transition to modern thought. And it must have fit men to go out as “University extension lecturers,” or general missionaries of education, instructing the people upon such elementary subjects as the history of our own country, the duties of school trustees, the avoidance of lawsuits, the meaning of education, the value of music, and the possibility of dispensing with whiskey and revolvers!

And here again it may be well to pause and explain that illiteracy in Appalachian America does not mean what it means at the North. In the one case it means lack of will-in the other lack of opportunity.

I should misrepresent my clients if I allowed them to be called ignorant, for that term implies some moral delinquency. The true statement would be that, like the patriarchs they are unaware of the distinctive features of modern life! In mental capacity they must be ranked high, and they have the unjaded nerves which will re-enforce the thought well as the muscle of the nation.

Nor can we refrain from calling attention to the fact that such a population is much more hopeful than any equally unlettered class in our great cities. In fact it is the promise of the mountain people, rather than their needs, which appeals to us. The problem of city and country are really one. The city will always be fed-its markets, streets, prisons, and palaces-from the country. Think what Scotland is to Great Britain, what rugged New England is to America and read there what this Appalachian region may become.

And as our mountain neighbor becomes more of a producer he will adorn his home life, visit the metropolis, and become more of a consumer also, and thus our patriotic benevolence may have a direct material reward.
Three million Americans thus “annexed” to our commercial life may be worth more to the nation even from a business standpoint than a frozen peninsula or a tropical island!

Wise and sympathetic aid thus extended will not efface, but rather transform and glorify the characteristics of the country and the people. We do not wish to grind all our countrymen down to one level of uniformity. The mountain people educated will be themselves still. Their sturdy religion, divested of superstition and bigotry, will burn more brightly. Their rugged courage, chastened by more humane feelings, will adorn their patriotism. And their very log cabins-let us hope they will not be supplanted by uniform frame houses with a “made-to-order” look, but rather expanded into something distinctive, comfortable, and hospitable, like the homes of the Swiss or Scottish Highlanders.