APPALACHIAN VALUES (1972)

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We mountain people are a product of our history and the beliefs of our forefathers. We are a traditional people, and in the isolated rural setting that was our home, we clung to things of the past. Partly this was because, for so many years, we did not have much truck with the outside world. We became self-reliant. We sought our freedom from entanglements. We gained solitude, one of the things we cherish most of all. All of this was both our strength and our undoing.

Our forefathers for the most part came from England, Wales, and Scotland, a few from Germany and France. In the beginning they were mostly English and Scotch-Irish, however, the latter being Scots who settled in the north of Ireland and whose descendants came to America beginning the first part of the 18th century. Most came seeking freedom – freedom from religious and economic restraints, and freedom to do much as they pleased. The patterns of settlement shows that they were seeking space and solitude. Although considerable numbers of them were literate, as evident from their signing of public documents and their possession of books, they abandoned formal education when they took to the woods. This was a choice of profound significance for mountaineers. They chose freedom and solitude and mainly rejected the accoutrements of civilization.

Life in the wilderness and the continuing isolation of Southern Mountaineers have made us different in many ways from most other Americans. The Appalachian value system that influences attitudes and behavior is different from that which is held by our fellow countrymen, although it seems clear that it is similar to the value system of an earlier America. Let me list some of the values shared by Appalachian people that are still important in our lives:

Religion
Individualism, Self-Reliance and Pride
Neighborliness and Hospitality
Family
Solidarity
Personalism
Love of Place
Modesty and Being One’s Self
Sense of Beauty
Sense of Humor
Patriotism

RELIGION

Mountain people are religious. This does not necessarily mean that they all go to church, but they are religious in the sense of their values, mostly, and the meaning they see in life spring from religious sources. One has to understand the religion of mountaineers before he can begin to understand mountaineers. In the beginning they were Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and other formally organized denominations, but these churches required an educated clergy and centralized organization, impractical requirements in the wilderness, and so locally autonomous sects grew up. These individualistic churches stressed the fundamentals of the faith and depended on local resources and leadership.
The home mission boards of the mainline denominations have usually looked on these local sect churches as inadequate for us mountaineers, something that we must be saved from, and so they sent hundreds of missionaries to do the job. Many social reformers also view the local sect churches as a hindrance to social progress. What they fail to see is that it was the church which helped sustain us and made life worth living in grim situations. Religion shaped our lives, but at the same time we shaped our religion. Culture and religion are intertwined. There is not enough time to say as much as should be said on this subject, but let me make a few points. The life on the frontier did not allow for an optimistic social gospel. One was lucky if he endured. Hard work did not bring a sure reward. Therefore the religion became fatalistic and stressed rewards in another life. The important thing was to get religion—get saved—which meant accepting Jesus as one’s personal savior. It was and is a realistic religion which fitted a realistic people. It is based on belief in the Original Sin, that man is fallible, that he will fail, does fail. We mountaineers readily see that the human tragedy is this, that man sees so clearly what he should be and what he should do and yet he fails so consistently. Not only does man fail, but he is presumptuous, pretending to be what he is not, pretending at times he is God. But in spite of his failings and presumption, man is still saved if he has accepted Jesus Christ. This is the Good News! Thus, we can look forward to a life better than this one, where we as individuals will be different—better—also. There is strong belief in the ethic of the Golden Rule. These beliefs, and variations on them, have sustained us, have given our lives meaning, and have helped us to rationalize our lack of material success. Every group of people must have meaning in their lives, have to believe in themselves. Religion helps to make this belief possible. There are few Appalachian atheists because Appalachians need God. Many of the values and beliefs which follow have religious origins.

INDIVIDUALISM, SELF-RELIANCE AND PRIDE

These are perhaps the most obvious characteristics of mountain people. Our forebears were individualistic from the beginning, else they would not have gone to such trouble and danger to get away from encroachments on their freedom. This led them to take to the wilderness when they got to the New World. Once in the wilderness they had to be self-reliant or else they perished. Thus, individualism and self-reliance became traits to be admired on the frontier. The person who could not look after himself and his family was to be pitied. There is a lesson in the mountaineer’s all-out search for freedom. He worked so hard to gain it, that eventually he lost it. The mountaineer withdrew from the doings of society, and it passed him by. With the changing of the economy, this free man became a captive of circumstances. But the belief in independence and self-reliance is still there, whether or not the mountaineer is truly independent and self-reliant. That is why so many mountaineers are tragic figures now, bypassed by the economy, often wards of the welfare system, but still believing in independence. We value solitude, whether or not we can always find a place to be alone. We want to do things for ourselves, whether or not it is practical—like make a dress, a chair, build a house, repair an automobile, or play the banjo. There is satisfaction in that, in this age when most people hire other people to do most of their work and a great deal of their living.

The pride of the mountaineer is mostly a feeling of not wanting to be beholding to other people. We want to do everything ourselves, find our own way when we are lost on the road, suffer through when we are in great need. We don’t like to ask others for help. Mountain people find it very hard to seek various sources of welfare aid when they are in need. We may pretend to be far better off than we are. I have known Appalachian persons who were in dire economic straits but who pretended that all was well. The value of self-reliance is stronger than the desire to get help.

NEIGHBORLINESS AND HOSPITALITY

The mountaineer’s independence is tempered somewhat by basic neighborliness and hospitality. It was necessary to help each other on the frontier, to help each other build houses and barns and to take people in when night caught them on the road. No greater compliment could be paid a mountain family than that they were
“clever.” As you may know, this did not mean the family was cunning or necessarily superior in intelligence, but that they were hospitable, quick to invite you in and generous with the food. We who were brought up on this value, will always have the urge to invite those who visit to stay for a meal or to spend the night, even though this is not the custom over much of America now, unless a formal invitation is sent out, well in advance.

FAMILY SOLIDARITY

Appalachian people are family centered. As Jack Weller has pointed out in *Yesterday’s People*, the mountain person most wants to please his family, and he is more truly himself when he is within the family circle. Loyalty runs deep between family members, and a sense of responsibility for one another may extend to cousins, nephews, nieces, uncles and aunts and to in-laws. Family members gather when there is sickness or death or other disaster. Many supervisors in northern industry have been furious when employees from Appalachia have been absent from jobs because of funerals of cousins or other distant relatives. Appalachian families often take in relatives for extended visits. For example, one of the biggest problems authorities in the cities think they have is overcrowding as Appalachian migrants take in relatives until they can get jobs and places of their own. In James Still’s beautiful novel, *River of Earth*, the father brings in relatives, even though there isn’t enough food for everyone. The mother finally burns the house down and moves the family into the tiny smokehouse in order to get rid of the relatives whom her husband could not ask to leave. Blood is very thick in Appalachia.

PERSONALISM

One of the main aims in life for Appalachians is to relate well with other persons. We will go to great lengths to keep from offending others, even sometimes appearing to agree with them when we in fact do not. It is more important to us to get along and have a good relationship with other persons than it is to make our true feelings known. Mountaineers will give the appearance of agreeing to attend all sorts of meetings that they have no intention of going to, just because they want to be agreeable. Of course, this personalism is one of the reasons those who work for confrontation politics often fall in Appalachia. We are extremely reluctant to confront anyone and alienate him, if we can get out of it. If, however, the issues are important enough, we will confront him readily enough. The Widow Combs, Dan Gibson, and Jink Ray confronted and stopped strip miners when they came on their land. My point is that mountain people place a high value on their relations with others and it takes something mighty important to cause us to jeopardize these relationships.

Appalachians also respect other persons and are quite tolerant of their differences. James McBride Dabbs, writing about the South, has said that the southerner believes that every man ought to have the right to make a fool of himself. I think that is also a belief here in Appalachia. We let others be themselves, whatever that is. Southern mountaineers have not been saddled with the same prejudices about black people that people from the Deep South have. We have our prejudices, but at least we have not usually made a crusading cause out of them. This is something to be proud of in our history. Indians, whom we fought with bitterly, are accepted in Appalachian society, as contrasted with attitudes in the Southwest. Mountain people tend to accept persons as they are. They may not always like other individuals, but they are able to tolerate them. They tend to judge others on a personal basis rather than on how they look, their credentials or accomplishments.

LOVE OF PLACE

We mountaineers never forget our native place, and we go back as often as possible. Always, we think of going back for good, perhaps to the Nolichucky, the French Broad the Big Sandy, the Kanawha, the Holston, or the Oconoluftee, to Drip Rock, Hanging Dog, Kermit, Sandy Mush, Bean Station, Decoy, Pruden Valley, Grannies Branch or Sweetwater. Our place will always be close on our minds. My place is in a valley on the Hiwassee, under Poorhouse Mountain and in view of Tusquittee Bald. And this place is tied in my mind along with my family, and with the people I knew there in the growing process.
MODESTY AND BEING ONE’S SELF

We mountaineers believe that we are as good as anyone else, but no better. We believe we should not put on airs, not boast nor try to get above our raising. A mountaineer does not usually extol his own virtues; there is little competition among mountaineers, except in basketball or in who has the best dog, maybe. Persons who are really accomplished, such as in playing or singing, will be reluctant to perform and will preface a performance with disparaging words about himself or his musical instrument. The mountain preacher will talk of his unworthiness for the task and hint of many others who are far more able. Of course, when these formalities have been dispensed with, the preacher or musician will probably cut loose with a good deal of vigor. My feeling is that we mountaineers have a pretty realistic view of ourselves. We don’t fantasize a lot. We don’t take ourselves too seriously. As I said before, we were brought up on the Original Sin. We never believed that man could be perfect. We know that he fails, often, and we are not disillusioned when he does. We don’t become as cynical as others may when men fail. When they do not fail we are pleasantly surprised. These beliefs make us somewhat at peace with ourselves. We don’t pretend we are something that we are not. Also we see a lot of humor in life. We can laugh at ourselves pretty readily.

SENSE OF BEAUTY

We mountaineers have a sense of beauty, and we have many art forms, even though some may seem somewhat crude to others. These expressions are often tied to functional necessities. Great pride was taken in the past in good craftsmanship—in the design, quality and beauty of wood in a chair, the inlay and carving on a rifle, the stitchery, design and variety of color in a quilt, the vegetable dyes in a woven piece. Much time was put into making a household item more attractive. But also there was fine craftsmanship in items which were beyond necessities, such as in the banjos, fiddles, and dulcimers which were made and were played with virtuosity. Appalachian people have perpetuated or created some of the most beautiful songs in the field of folk music. They have preserved some of the great ballads of English literature and passed on old old tales, told with great attention to the dramatic effect. They have also been the masters of the simile and metaphor in song and story and in speech. Such as, “He’d cross hell on a rotten rail to get a drink of likker.” Or, “She’s cold as a kraut crock.” Or, “He looks like the hind wheels of hard times.” Those are statements that you can get involved in.

SENSE OF HUMOR

We have a good sense of humor, although we may appear to others to be somewhat dour. Humor has sustained us in hard times. We tend to laugh at ourselves a good deal, saying self-deprecating things like, “I was hiding behind the door when the looks were passed out.” Our humor is tied up in our concept of man and the human condition. We see humor in man’s pretensions to power and perfection and in his inevitable failures. We may poke a great deal of fun at pompous people and may scheme to get their goat by playing practical jokes on them. We may say, for example, of those who aspire to learning “preachers and lawyers and buzzard eggs—there’s more hatched than ever come to perfection.” Like every other people, when we mountaineers quit laughing, we’re in trouble.

PATRIOTISM

Appalachians have always had a special feeling about the flag of the United States. This is a land that gave them freedom to be themselves, and when this freedom was threatened they led in seeking independence. They took up arms against the British and defeated a British army in the important battle of King’s Mountain. Much of Tennessee and Kentucky was settled by Revolutionary War soldiers who were given land in lieu of money after the war and they and their descendants retained intense feelings for the United States. Great areas of Appalachia were loyal to the Union in the Civil War. West Virginia seceded from Virginia and became a Union State. Kentucky was split, and many mountain counties were behind the Union. Jackson County, next door, for example,
sent all of its able-bodied men to the Union armies. East Tennessee was a hotbed of Union sympathizers as was north Georgia. Camp Dick Robinson near Berea was an induction center where many mountaineers joined the Union army. It is important to emphasize the fact that mountaineers, except for a few, did not own slaves and thus were not tied up economically with the South. Berea College was founded here because of the attitude against slavery in eastern Kentucky.

Mountaineers have turned out with enthusiasm for all wars except perhaps for the Vietnam Conflict. It is a much noted fact that draft quotas in Appalachia have often been filled by volunteers.

We have an abiding interest in politics. Contrary to popular myth we do turn out in significant numbers to vote. We tend to relate personally to politicians who catch our fancy and appear trustworthy. FDR won over great numbers of formerly Republican counties with his personal charisma. Eastern Kentucky, all of Kentucky, has been able to switch very readily from Alben Barkley, a Democrat, to John Sherman Cooper, a Republican, as Favorite Son, quite aside from political parties. We mountaineers are more closely tied to the national government than we are to the South or to our local and state governments and we are generally supportive of national policies.

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I have spoken mainly of the values which I think are good, that I take some pride in knowing are held by my people. Some of these values and beliefs, however, are a disadvantage to us, sometimes keeping us from putting our best foot forward, sometimes keeping us from putting either foot forward. Our fatalistic religious attitudes often cause us to adopt a “what will be will be” approach to social problems. Our Original Sin orientation inhibits us from trying to change the nature or practices of people. Our individualism keeps us from getting involved, from creating a sense of community and cooperation and causes us to shy away from those who want to involve us in social causes. Our love of place, sometimes, keeps us in places where there is no hope of creating decent lives. We have been so involved with persons that we have not taken proper notice of ideas and organizations which are important to us in today’s society. We have been hospitable and neighborly to strangers who have taken us over and over again. We have been modest and retiring, and thus have let others from the outside do the jobs we should have been doing, and then we have usually decided that they have not done what we wanted done. Finally, we have been so close to the frontier with its exploitive mentality, that we have seen our resources squandered, and we have seen our neighbors exploited without our giving these acts much thought. Our sense of freedom has bordered on license, and we have thrown our trash and allowed our neighbors to throw their trash all over the mountains and in our streams. We allowed strip mining and industrial pollution to add to the mess. In our modest Way, we have watched and have not accepted responsibility, and problems have closed in on us. I don’t mean to imply that all of our problems are our fault; we have been the victims of plans made outside the region. Many problems, however, we have made or we have allowed to develop.

There are many strengths in the culture, however, strengths which have been lost in much of America. The strengthening qualities must be preserved and nurtured, as we attempt to change the qualities which diminish the chance for a better life. All work in Appalachia must be based on the genuine needs as expressed by mountain people themselves. Whatever work is done must be done with the recognition that Appalachian culture is real and is a functioning culture. This implies that change will not come easily and will not come at all unless the reasons for change are sound.