
CATHOLICISM AND COMMUNITY: MOUNTAIN MISSIONS AND "NEW" IMMIGRANTS IN APPALACHIA

Margaret Ripley Wolfe
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"Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file," wrote Frederick Jackson Turner, the eminent historian of the eighteenth-century American Trans-Allegheny frontier; "the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer--and the frontier is passed."¹ Even as Turner penned these very words, the region around the famous gap, in rugged mountain terrain where the borders of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia merge, was experiencing a new frontier. "Stand at Cumberland Gap" in the late nineteenth century and again "watch the procession of civilization, marching single file"--surveyors, geologists, railroad men, coal operators, and journalists; "fotched-on" women,² moonshiners, Catholic priests, and Protestant missionaries; southern blacks, the native mountain whites, and the foreign-born--Italians and Hungarians as well as an assortment of other ethnic groups.³ Southern Appalachia at the turn of the twentieth century was not a melting pot, but it was an ethnic smorgasbord. For approximately four decades, this region, historically somewhat irreligious but nonetheless susceptible to evangelical Protestantism, witnessed a significant Catholic presence.

During the 1880s, capitalists, largely from the northeastern United States and sometimes in league with local entrepreneurs, launched systematic exploitation of mineral resources in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, southwest Virginia, eastern Kentucky, and parts of West Virginia.⁴ The marketing of coal from the newly opened mines and coke from the beehive-style ovens required a transportation system to link the Appalachian wilderness with the American Midwest and East Coast. The advent of the mining industry in the region sparked extensive railroad construction, which, without sophisticated earth-moving equipment, made brutal demands on human labor. From the perspective of the capitalists, the grueling, dangerous work of railroad construction, coke-drawing, and mining seemed ready-made for immigrants. Coincidentally and advantageously for developers operating in Southern Appalachia, southern and eastern Europe flooded the United States with millions of newcomers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵

The transformation that began around Cumberland Gap during the late 1880s was much in keeping with development throughout the region. "In 1888, the hamlet of Cumberland Gap . . . was an isolated and lonely spot in the heart of the Cumberland Mountains . . . thirteen miles from a railroad," wrote one observer, Alexander A. Arthur. A Scotch-Canadian and a distant relative of United States President Chester A. Arthur, Alexander Arthur enlisted the support of British investors and organized The American Association, Limited. This company linked the gap to the outside world by rail, built the town of Middlesboro, Kentucky, and established the nearby residential suburb of Harrogate, Tennessee, before suffering major financial setbacks during the depression of the 1890s.⁶

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From the 1880s through the 1910s, thousands of immigrants found their way into the remote mining and construction camps of Southern Appalachia. Just off the boat, unable to speak English, anxious for work, and ignorant of their destination, they often fell easy prey to labor agents--usually of their own ethnic background--who promised them steady employment and regular pay. Once in the Southern Appalachians, they were cut off from the ethnic enclaves of the large northeastern and midwestern cities that have generally been regarded by immigration historians as highly valuable in the assimilation process.⁸ Their numbers were relatively sparse compared to the teeming neighborhoods of large urban areas, and the sense of alienation was exacerbated by the isolation and remoteness of industrial outposts in the southern mountains. Furthermore, the single males or males without their families who comprised a significant proportion of foreign-born workers proved highly transient.⁹

While there were some Protestants among the "new" immigrants in the Appalachian region, for many of them the one familiar institution was the Catholic Church. Mountain missions maintained principally by German priests of the Benedictine order from St. Bernard Abbey at Cullman, Alabama,¹⁰ responded to the immigrants. Catholicism served as a refuge and as a nucleus for some semblance of ethnic community. The formalism that generally characterizes the Catholic faith could not be grafted onto the Appalachian social setting of this era, but the opportunity for these immigrants to practice their religion through infant baptisms, confirmations, marriages, funeral rites, and observances of religious holidays provided them an important remnant of their Old-World heritage. This was important in their adjustment to a new environment.

Although these remote but rapidly-developing industrial enclaves fell within the boundaries of the dioceses of Covington, Kentucky, and Wheeling, West Virginia, the bishops generally had located resident priests in only a very few of the major towns where small congregations had existed for many decades. Periodically the bishops sent priests to minister to scattered Catholics in even more remote locations. Even then, the appearance of large numbers of Catholic laborers in the 1880s placed a strain on the regular dioceses, but the bishops attempted to find the means to serve this new constituency. As early as 1882, The bishop of the Covington diocese had no priest to send to Jellico, a new town that had grown up on both sides of the Kentucky-Tennessee border, but asked a clergyman from Knoxville, Tennessee, to make occasional visits and offer Mass for Catholics there.¹¹

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 12. Ibid., 347, 350, 351, and 355; and James Hayden Siler, "A History of Jellico, Tennessee," [mimeographed copy], 1938, 29, in the possession of the author.
 13. From loose documents and files on the mountain missions of the Wheeling Diocese and correspondence between the Abbot at St. Bernard Abbey and the Bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling, West Virginia, 1902-1932, St. Bernard Abbey, Cullman, Alabama.
 14. Ibid.
 15. Recollections of the Reverend Clarence Meyer O.S.B. [unpublished manuscript], 1974, in the possession of the author.
 16. 29. Recollections of Dr. Hugh W. Clement [unpublished typescript], 1975, in the possession of the author.
 17. Two very popular accounts that have perpetuated this interpretation are Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberland: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963); and Jack E. Weller, *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1965).
 18. "Sacred Heart Church of Stonega and Missions," [typescript], 4, St. Bernard Abbey, Cullman, Alabama.

19. "The Story of St. Anthony's in Norton," [typescript], 1, St. Anthony Catholic Church, Norton, Virginia.

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11. Paul E. Ryan, *History of the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky, on the Occasion of the Centenary of the Diocese* (n.p.: The Diocese of Covington, Kentucky, 1954), 346.

12. Ibid., 347, 350, 351, and 355; and James Hayden Siler, "A History of Jellico, Tennessee," [mimeographed copy], 1938, 29, in the possession of the author.

13. From loose documents and files on the mountain missions of the Wheeling Diocese and correspondence between the Abbot at St. Bernard Abbey and the Bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling, West Virginia, 1902-1932, St. Bernard Abbey, Cullman, Alabama.

14. Ibid.
15. Recollections of the Reverend Clarence Meyer O.S.B. [unpublished manuscript], 1974, in the possession of the author.
16. 29. Recollections of Dr. Hugh W. Clement [unpublished typescript], 1975, in the possession of the author.
17. Two very popular accounts that have perpetuated this interpretation are Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963); and Jack E. Weller, *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press. 1965).
18. "Sacred Heart Church of Stonega and Missions," [typescript], 4, St. Bernard Abbey, Cullman, Alabama.
19. "The Story of St. Anthony's in Norton," [typescript], 1, St. Anthony Catholic Church, Norton, Virginia.

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