

## APPALACHIAN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE CONSCIOUS MANIPULATION OF A REGIONAL STEREOTYPE 1890S TO THE PRESENT

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One of the most potent symbols ever used to describe the culture of the Southern mountains is that of the hillbilly. Not appearing in print until 1900, when the term was first used by the New York Journal ([Cassidy and Hall 1010](#)), the word was attached to a stereotype which had been around since the Civil War. Soon, both word and stereotype were used to characterize "any resident of the southern mountains" ([Wilson and Ferris 504](#)). Dumb, slow, slovenly, and speakers of comically fractured English (as typified by Li'l Abner, Snuffy Smith, Ma and Pa Kettle, the Beverly Hillbillies, and the characters of Hee Haw), hillbillies have become stock characters in the popular media of the twentieth century. Furthermore, according to the Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, the stereotype was not confined just to the media, but "also permeated scholarly thought and writing on the southern mountaineer" ([505](#)). It turns out, in fact, that many people had agendas requiring the presence of hillbillies. Since most fund-raising literature, for example, creates a need before it asks its audience to make a contribution to the cause, it is not surprising that the image of the hillbilly was played for all it was worth as various individuals and organizations solicited funds for educational work in the Southern mountains. In his article "Old Men and New Schools" in Folklife Annual, David H. Whisnant argued that the hillbilly was the central figure of "a complex myth" created by outsiders ([74](#)). In this essay I wish to explore the dimensions of this complex myth as it appears in the literature of the settlement school fund-raising appeals.<sup>1</sup> In the process I will show how the myth has hurt as well as helped the Appalachian's search for self-identity.

The basic argument, as used by the fund-raisers, represented hillbillies in the following way. First, hillbillies are noble because they are ethnically "pure," that is descended from English and Scotch-Irish forbears; but they are savage because they are "degenerate," the result of inbreeding, feuding, illiteracy, and homemade alcohol. These characteristics make it impossible for them to save themselves. Yet outsiders who are products of advanced American civilization are capable of redeeming hillbillies if they are granted the resources which will enable them to bring education and religion into the mountains. The result--donors will discover--will be that hillbillies can become worthy allies in the struggle to resist the influences of the foreign-born and others (including at least implicitly the Negro) who are attempting to subvert and reshape American society.

In support of a school she intended to found, Susan G. Chester described to the Philadelphia Conference of Church Women the status of "three hundred thousand" North Carolinian mountaineers who appeared satisfied to live "the life of animals" ([Whisnant, "Old Men" 77](#)). Yet, when confronted with the possibility of improving their lives through education and religion, the rustics became pathetically eager to do so. Chester spoke to the churchwomen of a "shaggy bearded, loud-voiced almost savage-looking" individual who rode his mule into Asheville carrying a "pale, delicate little girl whose labored breathing and . . . faraway look . . . show that the world's trials are almost at an end." But somehow in his despair the mountaineer has heard that there might be help for his little girl. Fighting his tears, the mountaineer pleads to the clergyman. "O, Mister," he says, "I've rid plumb twenty mile to see

you'uns. They told me as how you knowed a powerful good man who'd make my little 'un well. I 'low his name is Mr. God. Whur d'ye reckon I can find him?" ([Whisnant 78](#)).

Whether this story is true or false is beside the point; what is important is that stories like this find themselves repeated over and over again in the fund-raising literature. Fund-raising literature for the settlement schools was written for urbanized, middle-class, moderately well-educated churchwomen from the Northeast. Therefore, the work to be done in the mountains was likened to a religious crusade. Children are portrayed as innocent, victimized, eager to improve, and irrepressibly cute. Women are also victims, in their case of cruel, alcoholic spouses given to fits of random violence. The saviors of these unfortunates, often themselves women and from the best of homes, have come from the outside to dedicate their lives to helping others. Always the saviors would need to struggle against the Appalachian menfolk, who are usually against any kind of educational reform. The Berea Quarterly reprinted a story about a hillbilly named Eleasar Van Horn, probably to show what the educators were up against. Van Horn reportedly took part in a schoolhouse debate on the rotation of the earth, and was supposed to have said that astronomy was unnecessary in the schools since God would provide "all necessary astronomical information" when people got to heaven ([Barton 25](#)).

Despite the ignorant character of the mountain menfolk, however, even they might be capable of redemption. True, many mountaineers would be portrayed as vicious, moonshining feudists who fought progress and tyrannized their families. But Abisha Johnson and the nameless mountaineer who went looking for "Mr. God" would not be the last males who would see, however dimly, the value of a settlement school education. There was Uncle William Creech, for example, who gave one hundred acres of his land to the "fotched-on" ladies he had implored to build Pine Mountain School. In almost identical ways, the roles Abisha Johnson and Uncle William played at Caney Creek and Pine Mountain would be enacted by Uncle Sol, Uncle Luce, "Moses," and others at the other settlement schools. They validate the arrival of the "furring-women" by demonstrating that the reform is wanted from within the community, not just imposed from without ([Whisnant, "Old Men" 83](#)). The need for education and religion, therefore, is real, not merely assumed by outsiders who may not know what the conditions really are. And thus the pleas of the Uncles justify both the intervention of the outside benefactors and the necessity for contributions to support their good work.

It was necessary for the Uncles (and at least some of the other males in the mountains) to show occasional redeeming virtues because of another theme which ran through the appeals from the settlement schools. This was the issue of ethnicity. George Brosi argues rather convincingly that the "do-gooders" who had come south to redeem the Negro after the Civil War had pretty well given up by the 1890s, when the settlement school fund-raising efforts began. Brosi claims the "do-gooders" looked around for other objects of their charity and concluded that the mountaineers would be a much easier cause to champion. After all, if they could be educated and given "religion," they would not be much different from mainstream whites ([Conversation with the author, 30 July 1992](#); see also [Shapiro 47 -52](#)). Furthermore, there was at the turn of the century a vast influx of newcomers from Asia, Italy, and Eastern Europe. If the mixed populations of the mountains could be portrayed as "pure" Anglo-Saxon Protestants, then they could be presented to donors as potential allies who could be enlisted to help combat the pernicious influences of this foreign immigration. Thus President William Frost of Berea College asserted that these "sturdy people" were "God's moral reserve. Uncontaminated with slavery, they are not Catholics, nor aliens, nor infidels. They come of vigorous English and Scotch-Irish stock, and only need the touch of education to make them what the Scotch are to England" ([quoted in Shannon Wilson 390](#)).

Another common appeal in fund-raising was the poverty of the typical Appalachian family. The poverty described in this literature was unrealistic--because it was invariably old-fashioned and quaint. William Frost, in his first trip

to the homes of his new charges, wrote that "there was an Arcadian freshness" about life in the mountains that was "altogether charming." "Just think," he went on,

of stepping out to wash your face in the creek, and using your own jack-knife at table! The colonial arts of spinning and weaving were to be seen on many a veranda, and at meal time the men sat with the guests, discoursing of ginseng root, "fodder-pulling," or local politics and stories of the Civil War, while the women were serving the table or shooing off the flies with green boughs. The attitudes of these flyshooers were sometimes suggestive of the figures on a Greek vase! ([For the Mountains 82](#))

It is also significant that when Frost tried to find a weaving teacher for his school, he did not find her on one of his mountain verandas but at Pratt Institute in New York City. Yet writers would continue to emphasize the old-fashioned way of life that was supposed to exist among our "contemporary ancestors" in the Southern mountains. Later, when photography accompanied the appeals, these "attitudes" noted by Frost would be visually preserved by Doris Ullman and others who posed their subjects in old-fashioned clothing amid relics of a by-gone time. It goes without saying that a poverty which possesses nostalgia and charm is more attractive than poverty which is so wretched that one wishes to avert one's eyes from it.

In any event, after establishing a need, the fund-raising literature had to provide its readers with evidence of the effectiveness of the organization. For example, the Scripture Memory Mountain Mission of Emmalena, Kentucky, reported to its donor list that "the harvest is reaped. Hundreds come to Camp Nathanael where they are brought face to face with the claims of Christ and from here they go back home to godless families and churchless communities with a testimony." The mission, of course, needed more money to carry its message to "the many schools, both white and colored, that are UNreached," the "communities WITHOUT a Sunday School or any Christian witness and teaching," and the "many souls mired in the slough of false teaching and superstition with none to make clear the Way" ([Franklin](#)).

The mission school era in the southern mountains lasted from 1892 to the 1930s--though a number of philanthropic institutions in Appalachia remain. Not surprisingly, they continue to make use of the same fund-raising motifs which have served them in the past. Not the least of these is the image of the hillbilly. This image, I suggest, is not particularly helpful in attacking the region's very real problems. Essentially the symbol infantilizes an entire people. Just as Eastern Native Americans began to dress in Western Plains costumes to conform to the image which mainstream Americans had of them, so "the Briar" in Jim Wayne Miller's poem finds he has to dress and act in certain ways to conform to the perceptions others have of the Appalachian mountaineer. In other words, the stereotype can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This negative stereotyping of the mountaineer naturally existed outside the fund-raising literature of the settlement schools. Cratis Williams, a mountain boy who went on to become a distinguished scholar, once summarized his own experience attending the public schools. "When I came along," he wrote, "I had the impression that it was the first objective of every high school teacher to 'correct' what was provincial. I went to a mountain college, too, and every college teacher I had tried to force me into destroying every vestige in my speech and manners of my mountain culture. In other words, it was almost a missionary zeal of my teachers to make me completely ashamed of my mountain background and to make me over into a nice little middle class boy, according to somebody's standards" ([58](#)). Williams's experience suggests that although the settlement schools were frequently helpful, they may also have worked considerable harm, psychologically and socially, on the region they sought to serve.

Motivated by high ideals, for the most part, the fund-raisers for the settlement schools tried to raise money by characterizing a whole people as benighted, irreligious, amoral, anachronistic, shiftless, and unclean. If we are the sums of the roles we play, enacting negative stereotypes creates the risk of transferring that negativity to our conceptions of self. Thus, while the hillbilly symbol may have been useful in raising money for various philanthropic enterprises, it certainly did not help the region in its quest for self-esteem.

### Notes & Works Cited

I restrict myself purposely to the fund-raising literature, not to the settlement schools themselves. For those interested in the larger cultural ramifications to the hillbilly stereotype, I suggest a recent article of mine in *Appalachian Heritage* and the more extensive treatments of the subject in the books by Shapiro and Whisnant. Two excellent sources for fund-raising material are the education files of the University of Kentucky archives, in Lexington, KY, and the Mountain Collection of Berea College in Berea, KY. The examples in this paper come from these archives.

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