

Appalachian culture

The federal government today defines Appalachia as parts of West Virginia, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. It incorporates 397 counties in 13 states, covers a total of 195,000 square miles, and has a current population of over 20 million.

The Appalachian mountaineers have been discovered and forgotten many times. They first attracted national attention during the Civil War. Their primitive agriculture disrupted by foragers and incessant guerrilla warfare, thousands of them straggled out of the mountains in search of food and shelter. Their plight was brought to the attention of President Lincoln, who promised that after the war, a way would be found to aid the poor mountain people whom the world had bypassed and forgotten for so long. The war ended, President Lincoln was assassinated, and Appalachia was forgotten, yet again.

Appalachian people are considered a separate culture, made up of many unique backgrounds - Native Americans, Irish, English and Scotch, and then a third immigration of Germans and Poles - all blended together across the region. The mountains also figure into the uniqueness of Appalachia. The mountains kept Appalachia isolated from the rest of the country and from other people's involvement in their lives that they developed a distinctive culture.

Appalachians are very independent, they are very contented with the places that they live, they are very close to nature, they have a deep sense of a belief in God, and they have a deep sense of being friendly and kind to one another. Always offering a helping hand, and taking care of others. Appalachians also have a deep mistrust of anyone who is new to the area and anyone who is a stranger. This is due in part to the early missionaries meeting Appalachians and making fun of their dialect, accents, and speech patterns. They were classified as "hillbillies, and uneducated hicks" and a mistrust of outsiders ensued.

Appalachia has a very long history of exploitation. The struggle continues as each new chapter is written. The area is extremely rich in natural resources, one of which might be considered its people. However, though fabulous wealth has been generated in Appalachia, the mountaineer's share in it has been held to a minimum. This beautiful region of steep wooded hills, narrow valleys, and winding streams is a land of contradictions and tragedy. Appalachia has become synonymous with destitution and illiteracy, containing some of the poorest counties in the nation. One county in particular, Buchanan County, in Southwest Virginia is the poorest in the state.

Appalachian culture is a real and functioning culture that is revealed through its arts and crafts, traditional music, traditional foods, its customs, its traditions, and its somewhat common language. Traditional foods such as greens, potatoes, and beans with cornbread and biscuits are the norm.

The Appalachian culture that we witness today is one that has been preserved mostly by the families and the churches. The constant attempts by the "outlanders" to change this culture are testimony to the determination and strength that persists in this culture. This culture is based on subsistence agriculture and hunting, not on industrial class structured ways of existence. The two key factors of the culture of Appalachia are the independence displayed and the constant mutual aid provided to others in the region.

There is a sense of equality that exists between the people; this is of course in sharp contrast to the inequality and elitism that exists in other areas of modern society.

Culturally, there are four distinctive people groups in Appalachia. To fully understand Appalachia, it is important to recognize this diversity. One of the people groups consists of descendants of the original pioneers who settled in the region during the westward movement. These people tend to be landowners, politicians, and business people. The characteristic traits of this group are self-reliance, independence, hard working, stable, and strong family ties.

A second group is composed of the hard working coal miner, logger, or factory workers. The average worker has little education, few skills, a large family, no wealth, and few choices of vocation. While, for example, coal mining continues to be the largest financial contributor to the economy of West Virginia and Southwest Virginia, poverty in the coalfields remains a daily and depressing reality.

The third group is the professional group. These are individuals and their families who have moved to Appalachia due to the profession (i.e. bankers, lawyers, teachers, ministers, etc.). Members of this group are usually not readily accepted by the Appalachians.

The fourth group is the returning Appalachians. This group consists of those who grew up in the mountains, moved away for employment, and are now returning to Appalachia. Many of them find it difficult adjusting to the lifestyle they left as a teenager. Appalachians expect others to respect their freedom. Independence and self-sufficiency are very important characteristics of the people in the region. The friendly greetings and helping hands offered to strangers by the majority of Appalachians will impress the short-term visitor. One should not be misled by their friendliness. Mountain people as a whole are resistant to change, slow to accept outsiders, and are very reluctant to accept authority.

This region called Appalachia stretches from Pennsylvania to Mississippi and encompasses many cultures, all of which have some common values. The cultures are self-sufficient and independent. They have survived influxes of outlanders seeking coal, timber, natural beauty for recreation, and cheap labor. Many barriers exist within this culture when it comes to business support.

Entrepreneurship often suffers because of geography, the learning styles of entrepreneurs from this region, the workforce quality, the perceived negative attitude toward success, the regional insularity, and the general information available about capital.

Some notable elements of our Appalachian culture still survive. Many cultural traditions still survive like group games, homemade objects, storytelling, home and herbal remedies, clogging and flat foot dancing (a form of dance where the rhythm of the music is beaten out with the feet), tool making, basket making, quilting, and traditional music played on handmade instruments such as banjo, fiddle, and dulcimer. Many elements have been lost due to urban influences, changing times, or the mere facts of embarrassment or shame.

Many modern day Appalachians try to distance themselves from the "hillbilly-ness" that is associated by "outlanders" to the inhabitants of this region. Many young people try to forget the traditional ways and notions and adopt the new ways of thinking.

The language spoken in Appalachia is unique also. It is thought to be a blend of Scottish flavored Elizabethan English directly related to the migration patterns of early settlers from these regions. American film and television have done much damage to the image of the Appalachian culture. Displayed by such films as "Deliverance", and such television shows as "The Beverly Hillbillies" and by the comic strip, "Li'l Abner", Appalachian people were viewed as hopeless but proud, desperate but industrious, noble first generation frontier people, yet somehow ignorant and degenerate. This was in strong contrast to the way this region was originally described in the 1890s in terms of romantic wonder.

The word Appalachia is an old Indian word and it has a real definition - "endless mountain range." The Indians thought the Appalachian Mountains went on forever and ever and ever.

Today, Appalachian people are more diverse than ever, both rural and urban. Nevertheless, they share a common pride, common values, and a common heritage. The people in this region have suffered from industries such as oil, coal mining, timber, and others. Having extracted the resources from this region and enjoyed many years of prosperity, many of these industries have left, leaving the landscape scarred, yet beautiful, exploited yet underdeveloped. Even after all this, you will still find a people that are proud of strong family values, self-reliance, and pride.