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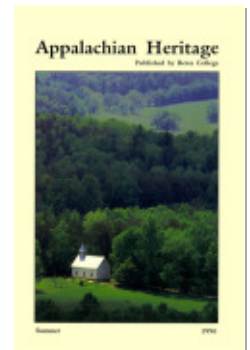
Being of These Hills

Bill Best

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Being of These Hills

Bill Best

As I sit here in early April to write a response to Mr. Richardson's assault on studies Appalachian, I am cognizant of the fact that my neighbors will soon be climbing the mountain behind my house, which the Kentucky Supreme Court has recently verified that I own, in search of that juicy springtime treat, the morel—or dry-land fish. If they are lucky and I am at home, they will stop by my house and give me a bag full as they leave. My wife will fry them shortly afterward, as one fries fish, and I will again eat a delicacy and also pay homage to tradition.

In paying such homage, I would undoubtedly cause discomfort to many of those who in my formative years, including college at Berea, tried to wean me away from such hillbilly carryings on. "You must forget who you are," they would not-so-subtly hint, "and get on with the serious business of becoming a genuine, generic American." This was the highest aspiration anyone in the mountainous backyards of several Southern states should hope for. "Come down off the mountain and out of your garden," they would say. "Buy your food wrapped in cellophane [now Saran wrap] and embrace only the traditions which were canned eons ago by the cultural elites of selected portions of the old world [or now on MTV]."

It puzzles me that he takes comfort in being American Generic. I think in adolescence most of us have a desire to "fit in" with the widest possible group of people our age. For many of us, adolescence lasts a long time as we wait until our early thirties before being ready for the job market, and "fitting in" remains an unspoken goal which our actions belie. Carl Jung's *The Undiscovered Self* would be a good source of guidance for problems brought about by extended adolescence.

That Jesse Stuart is from the mountains does not lessen the stature of his writings and make him merely "regional." All good writing is regional (and universal) and contains solid mythic elements. Moses didn't float down the Mississippi and the Children of Israel didn't walk to the promised land when the Gulf of Mexico parted. Stories happen *somewhere*.

Bill Best is a faculty member at Berea College where he teaches English and water aerobics. For many years he was director of Berea's well-known Upward Bound program. He is the author of several books and numerous articles about Appalachian projects and programs.

Where did he get the idea that one can gain either fame or fortune participating in Appalachian Studies? (Unless, of course, one is from outside the region and writes for Broadway or Hollywood.) Those of us who labor in the Appalachian garden do so in order that children growing up in the region will someday be able to understand the universal by seeing their own experiences legitimized by the public schools. We hope those who have been miseducated by those generic public schools and missionary colleges or equally generic state colleges and universities might finally have the chance to understand and appreciate the heritage they are surrounded by but which is usually omitted from the schoolbooks and teacher training. Mr. Richardson's attitude reminds me very much of some of the attitudes of many of my college freshman classmates. Nothing hurt worse than being "of" the hills. It was bad enough to be "from" but "of" was intolerable. To escape to the "Promised Land," meaning "anywhere outside" but usually somewhere north, as quickly as possible was the goal.

One can go from Lynch to Lexington to Louisville and never leave Appalachia if one chooses. The greatest concentration of Eastern Kentuckians I know about occurs each Saturday morning in Lexington as Eastern Kentuckians who have moved to Lexington over the past sixty years start lining up at 6:00 a.m. to buy the many varieties of "greasy beans" and other "heirloom" vegetables sold at the Lexington Farmers' Market. I can almost tell the county where a buyer originated by the vegetables requested. The buyers might no longer live in Eastern Kentucky but Eastern Kentucky continues to live in them. I also note when I come to know them that, in addition to eating heirloom vegetables, they also tend to adhere to heirloom values.

Much of Mr. Richardson's writing is "formulaic" in that he uses the word "formulaic" enough to make anyone who studies Appalachian writing realize that he hasn't yet read much "Appalachian" writing. There is a lot out there and it stretches back a hundred years or more, with more being discovered every day. His spare time could profitably be spent starting with Emma Belle Miles, going to Paul Doran, then to Don West, then to Burley Creech, then to Gurney Norman's "An 'Other' Consciousness" in the spring 1994 issue of *Now and Then*, then to Jim Wayne Miller's "Brier" series and then out to hundreds of other writers who contribute to several journals or who have written books of their own.

I have no doubt that the majority of people in the mountains, especially those under thirty, think as Mr. Richardson does and are perfectly content to be generic Americans, at least for the time being and until

they are challenged to be themselves. However, I also think that the complexity of modern times demands that we know ourselves as individuals as well as like those with whom we share a cultural identity. Just because most of us have access to the Disney Channel doesn't mean that we all become like Mickey Mouse or even want to become like Mickey. The electronic village is no substitute for flesh-and-blood contacts among generations. Although one can interact with those being portrayed on the screens through the Internet, the more significant portion of communication that takes place without the use of language cannot take place. *The Silent Language* by Edward T. Hall would be a good place for him to study the majority of culture's "primary message systems" that are not part of language and that one learns in one's community.

Growing up in Lynch is decidedly *not* like "growing up anywhere else." James Goode has described a Lynch "growing up" beautifully in his essay: "Taking Stock of Being Appalachian." As Mr. Richardson himself alludes, Lynch was an intentional, cosmopolitan, industrial, community that was unique in many of its aspects. We are all ethnocentric. We are all "God's chosen." Finding out who we really are can help us tolerate, accept, and even cherish differences. We are not all alike, even though we grew up at the same time and in the same country. Nor should we try to be.

Appalachia, Let Me In

Appalachia, let me in.
I've been a-knocking at your door
for better than a decade
and still, your coal-black eye denies;
your ear detects the rhythm
of a full-tilt Yankee gallop.
But can't you see me clogging
to the fiddle? Can't you hear me
slapping these-here spoons to thigh?
I've planted seed and dug in,
hammered stakes for me and mine
suffered ramps, sucked on paw-paw,
swilled blinding, stupefying
purple Jesus, let me in.
My knuckles bleed,
Appalachia.

—Kathleen Hellen