APPALACHIAN VALUES

by

Loyal Jones

Born in 1928, Loyal Jones grew up on a mountain farm in western North Carolina. He graduated from Berea College in 1954 and received his Master's degree from the University of North Carolina in 1961. He is author of numerous articles on Appalachian culture and is presently director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College. His essay on Appalachian values is a compendium of the best qualities of the Appalachian people.

We mountain people are a product of our history and the beliefs of our forefathers. They came mostly from England, Scotland and Wales, some from Germany, France and Africa, and of course many married Indians who were already here. Most came seeking freedom—freedom from religious and economic restraints and freedom to do much as they pleased. They were unfriendly to the institutions of the day, both religious and secular. The patterns of their settlement show that they were seeking space and solitude. Although considerable numbers of them were literate—as evident in their
signed public documents and personal 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. Perhaps the choice was both their strength and their undoing.

Our origins, our history, and our experience have made us Southern Mountaineers 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.

Religion—Mountain people are religious. This does not necessarily mean that we all go to church regularly, but we are religious in the sense that most of our values and the meaning we see in life spring from religious sources. One must understand the religion of mountaineers before he can begin to understand mountaineers. Formally organized churches that the early settlers were a part of required an educated clergy and centralized organization, impractical requirements in the wilderness, and so locally autonomous sects sprang 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 our local sect churches as something that we must be saved from. Many social reformers also view the local sect churches as a hindrance to social progress. What they fail to see is that this religion has helped to sustain us and made life worth living in grim situations. Religion shaped our lives, but at the same time we shaped our religion, since culture and religion are always intertwined. Life on the frontier did not allow for an optimistic social gospel. Hard work did not always bring a sure reward, and one was lucky if he endured. 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 is a realistic religion, so far as the human condition is concerned. It is based on belief in the Original Sin, that man is fallible, that he will fail, does fail. Someone said that man was made at the end of the week when God was tired. 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 consistently. Not only does he fail, but he is presumptuous, pretending to be what he is not. But in spite of his failings and presumptions, man is still saved if he has accepted Jesus Christ, who has already died for him. This is the Good News!

Individualism, Self-Reliance and Pride—Several years ago there came a great snowfall in western North Carolina, and many people were snowed in for weeks. The Red Cross came to help. Two workers heard of an old lady way back in the mountains, living alone, and they set out to see about her, in a jeep. They finally slipped and skidded down into her covert and knocked on the door. When she appeared at the door one of the men said,

"Hello, we’re from the Red Cross.” But before he could say anything further the old lady replied,

“Well, I don’t believe I’m going to be able to help you this any this year. It’s been a right hard winter.”

Individualism, self-reliance and pride are perhaps the most obvious characteristics of mountain people, as mentioned by John C. Campbell and others. 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. Individualism and self-reliance were 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 the larger society, and it passed him by, but not before it bought up the resources around
him. The industrial system was interested in the mountaineer as long as it needed his muscle to extract the resources. When it no longer needed muscle, it cast him aside. This once-free man became a captive of circumstances beyond his control. But his belief in independence and self-reliance is still strong whether or not he is truly independent and self-reliant. 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 people hire other people to do most of their work and supply their entertainment.

The pride of the mountaineer is mostly a feeling of not wanting to be beholden to other people. We are inclined to try to do everything ourselves, find our own way when we are lost on the road, or suffer through when we are in great need. We don't like to ask others for help. The value of self-reliance is often stronger than the desire to get help.

**Neighborliness and Hospitality**—The mountaineer's independence is tempered somewhat by his basic neighborliness and hospitality. It was necessary to survival for everyone to be hospitable 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," that is that they were hospitable, quick to invite you in and generous with the food. My father told of eating at a neighbor's home where the only food they had was corn bread and sorghum, but the host said hospitably, "Just reach and get anything you want."

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.

**Familism**—Appalachian people are family centered. As Jack Weller has pointed out in *Yesterday's People*, the
mountain person 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 in-laws. Family members gather when there is sickness or death or other disaster. Many supervisors in northern industry have often been perplexed 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 city 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 takes in relatives even though there isn’t enough food for everyone. The mother in desperation 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. Two mountaineers were talking about one of their kinfolks. One said, “You know, he is a real S.O.B.” The other replied, “Yeah, but he’s our S.O.B.”

Personalism—Jack Weller has also pointed out that one of the main aims in life of 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 polite. Of course, this personalism is one of the reasons that those who work for confrontation politics often fail 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 take a
stand. The Widow Combs, Dan Gibson, and Jink Ray confronted and stopped strip miners when they came onto their land. But mountain people place a high value on their relationships with others and it takes something mighty important to cause us to jeopardize these relationships.

Appalachians respect others and are quite tolerant of their differences. We allow others to be themselves, whatever that is, as long as they are not infringing on our right to be ourselves. Mountaineers, even as far south as northern Alabama and Georgia, were anti-slavery in sentiment and fought for the Union in the Civil War, and although Reconstruction Legislatures imposed anti-Negro laws, thus training us in segregation, Appalachians have not been saddled with the same prejudices about black people that people of the Deep South have. We have our prejudices, but we have not made a crusading cause out of them. My great-grandparents took in a black orphan to rear in North Carolina in the late eighteen hundreds, and all of the children slept in the same bed. Indians, whom we fought bitterly, are accepted in Appalachian culture, as contrasted with attitudes in the Southwest. Mountain people tend to accept persons as they are. We may not always like other persons, but we are able to tolerate them. We usually judge others on a personal basis rather than on how they look or what their credentials or accomplishments are.

Love of Place—One of the first questions a stranger is asked in the mountains is, “Where you from?” We are oriented around places. We never forget our native places, and we go back as often as possible. A lot of us think of going back for good, perhaps to the Nolichucky, Big Sandy, Kanawha, or Oconoluftee, or to Drip Rock, Hanging Dog, Shooting Creek, Decoy, Stinking Creek, Sweetwater, or Sandy Mush. Our place is always close on our minds. One fellow said that he came from so far back in the mountains the sun set between his house and the road. Our folksongs tell of our regard for the land where we were born. It is one
of the unifying values of mountain people, this attachment to one's place, and it is a great problem to those who urge mountaineers to find their destiny outside the mountains.

Modesty—Several years ago my phone rang and when I answered it a rather brusk voice demanded, "Whozis?" Somewhat offended, I answered stiffly, "With whom did you wish to speak?" There was a long pause, and finally the voice came back softly but with great reproach, "Well, I c'n tell by the way your a talkin' you're not who I'uz a wantin'." That should have taught me a good lesson, but it didn't. A few weeks later the phone rang again. I answered. A voice said, "Who's this?" I answered, "With whom did you wish to speak?" The voice came back, "You, you stuffy bastard." It was a college friend who came from my part of the mountains.

We mountaineers believe that we are as good as anybody 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 extoll his own virtues; there is little competition among mountaineers, except perhaps in basketball or in who has the best dog. 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 themselves or their musical instruments. The mountain preacher will talk of his unworthiness for the task at hand 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 great deal of vigor.

My feeling is that we mountaineers have a pretty realistic view of ourselves, and we don't take ourselves too seriously. We never believed that man could be perfect. 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.

Sense of Beauty—We mountaineers have a sense of beauty,
and we have many art forms, even though some may seem somewhat crude to those outside the culture. These artistic 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 household utensils attractive. There was fine exceptional craftsmanship in items which were beyond necessities, such as in the banjos, fiddles, and dulcimers which were played with great skill. Appalachian people have perpetuated or created some of the most beautiful songs in the field of folk music. We have preserved some of the great ballads of English literature and passed on old old tales, with great attention to the dramatic effect. We have also been the masters of the simile and metaphor in song 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 involve the imagination.

Sense of Humor—We have a good sense of humor, although we may sometimes 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 a “rusty” 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.”

Sometimes the humor reflects hard times, like when the woman went to the governor to ask him to pardon her husband who was in the penitentiary. “What’s he in for?” the
Governor asked. "For stealing a ham." "Is he a good man?"
"No, he's a mean old man." "Is he a hard worker?" "No, he
won't hardly work at all." "Well, why would you want a man
like that pardoned?" "Well, Governor, we're out of ham."

Patriotism—Appalachians have held 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 threat-
ened they led in seeking independence. It was mountaineers
who defeated a British army in the important battle of King's
Mountain. Many areas of the mountains were 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 U.S. Great areas of Appalachia
remained 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. East Tennessee was a hotbed of Union sympathizers.
North Georgia and Northern Alabama had pro-Union coun-
ties.

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

We have an abiding interest in politics. Contrary to popu-
lar myth we do turn out in significant numbers to vote. In
fact it has been a problem in some counties to keep people
from voting several times. We tend to relate personally to
politicians who catch our fancy and appear trustworthy.
FDR won over great numbers of formerly Republican coun-
ties with his personal charm. Eastern Kentucky, all of Ken-
tucky, was 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 moun-
taineers are more closely tied to the national government
than we are to the South or to our local and state govern-
ments, and we are generally supportive of national policies,
even though these policies have often been fickle, so far as the mountains are concerned.

I have written 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 maintaining 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 deceived 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 ourselves, only to find that usually 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 into our streams, adding to the pollution from strip mining and industrial waste. In our modest way, we have watched, have not accepted responsibility, and problems have closed in on us.

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 functioning. This implies that change will not come easily and will not come at all unless the reasons for change are sound and are desired by mountain people. (1973)