A Description of Isolated Appalachian Culture and the Effects of Contact with Greater American Society.
It is often said by those who keep their fingers on the sociological pulse of America that the United States is becoming an increasingly homogeneous group of individuals. Many see this trend as a dangerous one, leading towards an Orwelian scenario for American society. Indeed, these observations and warnings have substance. It is a task to find an American who does not know about "J.R.", who has not used Crest tooth paste, ridden in a G.M. product or eaten a McDonald's hamburger. Americans are becoming more homogeneous because of mass enculturation through public schools, mass media and an efficient economy able to distribute and advertise products nationwide among many other factors.

However, there have been, and still are, regions of the United States where isolating barriers such as geographic remoteness, poor road access and economic insignificance have allowed distinctly different cultures to thrive. The breakdown of isolation barriers are the most important factors in bringing these remote cultures closer to the American norm.

This paper will first examine through an ethnographic format one isolated American culture; an Appalachian mountain community of 79 households located in the rugged hills of eastern Kentucky. The community, Beech Creek, was studied originally in 1942 by James S. Brown and was markedly different from the mainstream of American culture at that time. Since 1942 many isolation barriers have been lowered. Dr. Brown and
his colleagues Harry K. Schwarzweller and J.J. Mangalam restudied Beech Creek in the 60's. The area's culture still maintained some of its uniqueness but overall was altered considerably. In addition, the local population suffered major declines because of migration. Using 1942 Beech Creek as a standard for the way most isolated Appalachian mountain societies were, this paper will continue on to examine two similar communities where contact with the outside caused different types of changes or affected the areas in different degrees. First John B. Stephenson's study of Shilo, N.C. will be explored. Finally, the paper will examine Paul F. Cresssey's account of the changes experienced by Harlan County, Kentucky when the coal resources of the area were exploited. Any conclusions that may be reached will concern assessments of how cultural changes occurred and to what degree.

Beech Creek Kentucky; 1942

The area studied is situated in an extremely rugged region. Settlement followed a pattern centering around river and creek watershed configurations. The valleys and hollows where rivers and smaller creeks flowed offered the only flat land suitable for agriculture. The earliest settlers would make their homesteads at the mouths of the bigger creeks and later settlers had to continue upstream into smaller hollows until they found unclaimed land that offered less and less flat space for farming. Thus, the geography of steep mountains wrinkled with watershed basins was the main determinant of the location of homesteads.
This pattern had not changed by 1942. The area studied is comprised of 3 such watershed valleys. There are ridges between the areas constituting a barrier responsible for some separation. However, because of the close ties of kinship and the common greater barriers to the outside shared by all 3 neighborhoods, the researcher can consider the whole area as one community.

The first settlers came to Beech Creek around 1800. All were native Americans mostly from the surrounding region of Virginia, the Carolinas and Tennessee. The settlers shared English protestant roots and were agrarians. Thus, the community began with a group of fairly homogeneous individuals who could be best described as hearty pioneers of puritanical, Anglo-Saxon stock. These pioneers were part of a general eastern American culture of small subsistence farmers whose way of life was common throughout poorer farming areas of the new nation. However, Beech Creek was so geographically and economically isolated, that as the nation grew, it left Beech Creek behind. Coal, responsible for development of other isolated areas of Kentucky was present in Beech Creek, but was in formations impossible to mine economically even today. The area was blessed with much virgin timber, and contact with some large companies was made to exploit the supply. This contact was responsible for some important changes, but did not result in major development of the area. Agriculture in the valleys was never more than on a subsistence level and would not draw large investment. Thus, Beech Creek was economically insignificant, furthering its isolation. After all usable land
had been settled, few newcomers were drawn to the area. Exceptions to this were people brought in by marriage or to live with kin and some newcomers related to the timber industry. Beech Creek's most important isolation barriers are therefore its geographic remoteness and economic insignificance.

Up until 1942, the erosion of these barriers had occurred at a very slow rate. The Civil War resulted in some contact with Union troops nearby. Some Beech Creekers joined the Union armies and were marched into neighboring regions that were more modern. They came home with observations of outside developments and also new connections to the outside because they were then eligible for veteran pensions. The lumber industry was responsible for much non-farm employment. By the 30's, New Deal programs like the W.P.A. provided some outside employment as well. All of these contacts were extremely important because they resulted in an inflow of cash money. This caused a slow increase in a taste for store bought goods rather than folk produced goods. The cash and heightened desire for store bought goods meant Beech Creekers were becoming more dependent on the outside.

Despite this, Beech Creek in 1942 was still a highly traditional and archaic American culture with a distinctly different and only slightly modern economy, unique social structure, distinct values, and a sometimes unintelligible dialect of standard American spoken English.

In 1942, the area had a population of 399 people in
79 households. The nearest incorporated town had a population of around 500 and a high school that Beech Creekers could attend; the town was more than 5 miles over a ridge traversable only on the back of a mule or on foot. No one in Beech Creek owned a motor vehicle and roads were mere wagon trails, often using creek beds themselves as road surface. There was no electricity or phone service and very few people had radios or subscribed to any publications. The county seat was 17 miles beyond the nearby town, and the closest city, Lexington, Kentucky, was over 100 miles away. Beech Creekers did have a post office, a local and very crude school and a few tiny stores to supply the barest of necessities like dried beans and salt. These remote stores were important gossip centers.

The economy was primarily family centered subsistence farming. The family usually consumed 90% of what it produced. what was not consumed on the farm was sold for a small income. Other supplements to income included small patches of burley tobacco grown for sale, pensions, intermittent employment with lumber companies and employment on various government projects like road improvement programs. There were a few permanent jobs teaching school, running stores and posting mail. By 1942, there was some migration out as U.S. industry's demand for labor boomed when the nation entered World War II.

Average living conditions were abyssmal by modern standards, but tolerable to the backward mountaineers. The average homestead was a small 2 to 3 room shack or log cabin.
within this meager structure would reside a conjugal family, usually with several children. The average household size, (and this average includes widowed older people and other loners) was 5.43 members. This meant a younger family with little children was usually larger.

The Family and Social Structure

Dr. Brown states:

"The family homestead was the focal point in Beech Creek's social organization"

The conjugal family was the most important social unit in this isolated mountain community for the following reasons:

1) It was the primary unit of economic production and consumption. There was less contact with others through trade.

2) Beech Creek's isolation kept most children away from high school and its social mingling.

Thus, throughout personal development, a young person was generally confined to the homestead to work. Almost all enculturation and social behavior was learned within the family group because of the limited access to other social groups.

The Beech Creek conjugal family was typically patriarchal. The male was expected to be dominant and to make all decisions affecting family welfare. The wife was subordinate. However, it was expected she would be treated with kindness and respect and loyalty by the male. Relations between husband and wife ideally were never overly affectionate. Public display of affection were disapproved of by the community. However, kindness, especially from the husband, was widely admired behavior.

Marital fidelity was of highest value.
Children were expected to be subordinate until they were on their own. All children were to be treated with equal respect. There was no regard for birth order or sex. Inheritance was to be divided equally by all children. In behavior towards children, the parents were expected to be kind. Disciplinary measures were the sole domain of the parents and no other members of the community. This made parents responsible for all actions of their children in the community.

Relations between siblings were generally supportive, loyal and affectionate. Sisters were often given maternal qualities by their brothers and younger children. Brothers were looked upon with as loyal and respected role models just as the father was. All in all, relationships toward the mother was affectionate; toward the father respectful feelings were the norm.

Division of labor within the family was determined by sex and age. This resulted in work trained sex roles impressed upon children at an early age. The youngest males were assigned light farm chores as early as possible. As they got older, their responsibilities grew until they worked side by side with the men and even aided in planning big improvement projects. For instance, a younger boy would be in charge of keeping fences mended, while an older boy would be in charge of plowing, hoeing and harvesting certain fields.

Girls, on the other hand, were assigned household type chores. Younger girls would be in charge of small chores such as cleaning a section of the cabin, while older girls were in
charge of larger duties like child care and food preparation. A child generally came to the top of the labor ladder by the age of 15 or 16 and would usually marry soon after.

Each individual was an integral part of the large family unit. Strain and tension among members in close quarters could not be tolerated in large doses. Dr. Brown has hypothesized that this is why hill people have such a proclivity for violence and toughness. He suggests that inter-family frustrations must be vented upon others. Other strains caused by the family oriented situation usually occur as children grow older and marry. First, ties with the old conjugal family must be readjusted. This leaves gaps in the work schedules. Also, often quarrels occur over the compatibility of the new spouse. Because families are so large, it is hard to get the approval of each and every member of the family. This can cause friction especially if the new spouse must live in with the family until a new homestead is developed.

The rhythm of family life is very unrestricted in mountain cultures like Beech Creek's. It is closely tuned to nature. Days activities are determined by weather and seasonal change. Clocks were rare. The people were free to pursue whatever projects they wished, whenever they felt like it. Schools could not enforce attendance because of this free scheduling tradition.
The Extended Family and Kinship

Brown states:

"The kinship system of Beech Creek was an open system; that is, there was no preferential mating on a kinship basis. Ideally, because of the incest tabu, marriage partners in this mountain society were not to be related by blood. Also, the kinship system was multi-lineal--kinship was traced through both mother and father.... It is sufficient to note here that in this relatively stable Appalachian mountain locality, where people had married and intermarried for over 100 years, kin relationships were very extensive."

Indeed, three fourths of all Beech Creek people were related to one another. Here is another tribute to their isolation. 18.8% of all residents were "close kin" or first cousins and closer. Another 24% were first cousins one time removed or second cousins.

The closeness of relations had a large bearing on social interaction. The closer the relations, the more social interactions there would be between people. This is largely due to the pattern families would follow for locating their homesteads. Siblings would usually be neighbors as the estate was subdivided through inheritance. This created locations where a clan would occupy an entire hollow. Also, since social status was largely ascribed, people of the same family would tend to stick together. Because of this tight family group with close proximity between its components extended family neighborhoods were formed.

This very solidary extended family group is a variant from the general structure of kinship relations and its role in greater American society. It was within the extended family
that the vast majority of visiting away from the conjugal family occurred. The most common type of extended family group was comprised of a set of older parents in one homestead, surrounded by the conjugal families of grown children in newer homesteads. Because these neighborhoods were often confined to a specific hollow, visiting outside the area was limited due to the physical barrier.

The social boundaries of the neighborhood group were in continuous change as families grew. Sometimes there was proximity to an unrelated family and they could be included in the extended group. Since there were no institutional preferences, and because a marriage brought two families into relations, the new couple could become part of either extended family group. In most cases, the couple would become part of the husband’s family group. The neighborhoods formed by extended family groups allowed a secure sense of belonging to a group identity and its common culture. Individuals shared values, ideals, affection, security and aid in crises with one another on a regular basis. This created a sense of solidarity that was a significant influence in the lives of mountain people. Their enculturation came from this clan like organization; because of the solidary nature of the extended family group mountaineers were not affected by other enculturating influences found in the rest of American society.

Marriage was one of the most important steps in a Creeker’s life given the emphasis on familism. Marriages were not institutionalized; that is, there were no arranged marriages or dowries. However, there was often strong but subtle pressure
from the extended group to choose a spouse acceptable to the group as opposed to the individual. This is largely because usually the young couple lives in the home of one of their parents for up to a year. Thus, the spouse had to get along with all members of the family living in that homestead or risk severe friction. Oddly, as important a step as marriage was to mountain families, it was usually performed with very little fanfare or ceremony. Most often a preacher or justice of the peace would preside along with just a few witnesses to make it legal. It was as if wedding day was like getting a driver's license.

Kinship was the basis for social interaction, location of settlement, neighborhood solidarity, individual identity and enculturation. Kinship was the most important aspect in the definition of Appalachian mountain culture.

**Class Structure**

The class structure in the isolated mountain community was assigned on an ascribed basis. It was closer to a caste system rather than the more achievement oriented basis for class delineation in modern American society. This meant that cultural level, occupations, and class mobility were stable in Beech Creek. Mobility was generally disruptive to the family and the society. The extended family group would become less solid and stable as bases for identity and interaction if class mobility had been widespread. In Beech Creek society, therefore, an individual inherited the stigma of his or her family's past despite individual achievement.
While the system was strongly ascribed, people tended to deny it in conversation. They would never acknowledge a rigorous class system existed, but could always provide examples of some "low downdest" family groups or a family known to snub others. The system was responsible for interfamily bickering, destabilization of the extended group, and even feuds when individuals would marry out of their class. This seems highly irrational considering the lines delineating classes were often weak and flexible. In fact, almost all people in the area were poor and would have fit into the lower class stratum of greater American society.

The higher class could best be described as a group of families directly related to the original settlers of the area. They thus held the best bottom land, had higher incomes, owned property and kept their homestead in good repair. They were generally more staid and stoic than the rest of Beech Creekers. They were prudent, frugal, steadfast, honest and industrious. Upper classes were never involved in fights, shootings or moonshining; and because they lived at the mouths of creeks, they were closer to the outside. They were more likely to own a radio and take a publication and their education level was higher. Because they had the closest contact with the outside, the upper class people were often the motivating forces for modernization and community improvement. These families had better farms or were merchants. Still, by America's standards, they were poor hillbillies. Strangely, the high class people would never admit to a class system and always held that the "good folks" had achieved their status.
On the other hand, the low class families were more likely to be newcomers to the area or transients with little economic security. They often did not own the land they lived on and were usually located farther up the hollows where flat land for farming was scarce. They had poorer understanding of agricultural techniques and lived in unkept housing. Because of their hopeless position, they were generally less industrious, thrifty, and educated, and showed a greater proclivity for drinking, fighting and marital and family problems.

The middle class was a fuzzy ground between the two. They tended to have high moral values but less pious conduct. They had a little better education than lower class families. This often only meant the difference between 6 or 8 years in school. They lived in ramshackle conditions but were clean and cared for what they had as best they could.

In Beecn Creek the class system broke down as follows: Out of 67 families for which information was sufficient, 17 were high class, 25 were middle, and 25 were considered low.

Class intermarriage was rare, and as noted before, when it did occur was a source of great friction. Despite the tabu on incest, because of the limited population, kin intermarriage did occur frequently. It was especially concentrated in the upper class because they refused to marry below themselves. This further limited the pool of eligible mates. Also, the lower classes tended to have high rates of intermarriage because they could not find partners above them. However, it must be
stressed that intermarriage among kin was not the preferred condition.

Class delineations were also apparent in religious beliefs. Despite the fact all but one resident of the community were Anglo-Saxons and protestant, different churches grew up. Churches were possible centers of social mingling but were still dominated by various extended family groups. Upper class people tended to belong to a traditional style church with institutionalized worship, whereas the lower class people always belonged to a "Holiness" or "Holy-Roller" type of church where the emphasis was on being instantly born again. Services were wildly emotional as people became born again. Dr. Brown supposes this is because the lower class people need an emotional outlet for their frustrations, and because a higher proportion of them have transgressed norms an values and need to relieve their guilt quickly. Thus, they are able to be born again and saved. It should be noted that neither church enjoyed overwhelming support. Services were intermittent depending on the availability of a preacher and a congregation. Many families attended no church.

Value Structures

Beech Creekers held the following values to be most important: familism, puritanism, democracy, individualism and traditionalism.

Familism, as has been noted was the dominant feature of mountain society. It was held as such because as Brown puts it: "the Beech Creeker experienced very little active engagement with the greater society other than through his family group. As an integrated part of a close
knit family network, he had a place in the scheme of things—a haven of safety."

The family was everything; it provided a mechanism for almost all individual support and social interaction. It was the base for enculturation and socialization of the young. Divorce was rare. The family's preservation for this culture to survive was essential.

Puritanism provided a basic belief system for the Beech Creekers. Their economic situation was so poor that puritanism, with its doctrines of self denial, made the hardships of mountain life seem ordained. Mountain people tended to interpret events in terms of right and wrong. There was never an grey area of compromise. There were never any elaborate rituals, fanfare, ceremonies, or artistic expressions. There was often preoccupation with evil and general guilt about indulgence in physical pleasure. Because of the hard life the mountaineers led, and the need to work very hard constantly to keep food on the mouths of the family, puritanism was a value that made work morally right and not just a torturous means of survival.

The values of democracy and individualism fit neatly together. Despite the class separations, all Beech Creekers professed egalitarian beliefs. One man was as good as another. The self made man held the high esteem of others in the community. Because of the rarity of being employed by others, the individual was used to conducting his affairs by his own priorities. He was free to do as he pleased. There was a notable void of strong institutional arrangements in mountain society such as churches and schools. While they existed, they took a back seat to the schedule of the individual. The mountaineer felt he or she
had his or her own personal relationship with an omnipotent, just and stern god. Once again, this is another value that supports an attitude that would aid in facing the harsh challenges of isolated eastern Kentucky life.

Finally, traditionalism served as sort of a "standard of standards". Tradition underlay all decisions made, from who to marry to what type of corn to plant. The value protected the integrity of the system and would ward off destabilizing modernization.

Now a picture of Appalachian mountain culture as it existed in Beech Creek, Kentucky in 1942, and as it tenuously exists today in a very few of the most remote areas of eastern Kentucky and Tennessee as well as western North Carolina, has been painted. In most places like Beech Creek, modernity has caught up and altered mountain culture. It seems astounding that these people lived a backward and subsistence lifestyle in the recent history of the United States. Their economy was based on home production and barter more than on cash. The conjugal family and wider kinship played a much greater role in enculturation and social interaction. People did not have, nor generally care for, education, money, cars or any of the other entrapments of modern American culture. Beech Creek, and places like it, were so isolated that people were riding mules and making home-made soap from animal lard and lye according to 200 year old recipes, while only a few hundred miles away in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, men were months away from developing the weapon that would put the world
Mountain Folks Culture Since the Breech of Isolation Barriers

What has happened to mountain folk culture since the postwar boom period in the United States? To answer this question one can look at two studies done in the 1960s and another made in the 1940s. First, Dr. Brown and his colleagues went back to Beech Creek to study the outmigration of many of its residents. Second, John B. Stephanson studied a similar community called Snilo, North Carolina. Finally, another researcher, Paul F. Cressey studied Harlan County, Kentucky in the 1940s after the full development of the coal industry there. In each case different aspects of modernity have changed the area in different ways. The key to the various changes is the extent to which barriers of isolation have been broken down and which barriers have fallen.

Beech Creek in the 60's

Beech Creek is markedly changed from the area as it was in the 40's. This is primarily because of a mass exodus from the area during World War II. This was primed by slowly growing contacts with the outside economy. Throughout the early part of the century, Beech Creekers were becoming less self-subsisting and more tuned to cash money as an economic medium. Cash became available because of war pensions, social security and intermittent employment outside the community in the timber industry. Also, Beech Creekers began to raise burley tobacco as a cash crop.
monopolistic labor market and the subsequent power the mining companies held over their livelihoods. Periods of unemployment left people helpless. By Cressey's account, "The mountain man had to surrender the freedom and timelessness which he enjoyed on his isolated farm for the routine of mine whistles and fixed hours of work." The miner was also trapped in company slums and forced to shop at company stores. His freedom had been robbed from him on a short period of time and he could not turn back.

The frustration involved with the clash of traditional values, especially familism and individualism, and the modern industrial demands, made Harlan County one of the most violent areas in the nation for nearly a half a century.

The swift invasion of industrial culture caused an almost complete cultural disorganization and instability for the mountain folk. Old traditions of visiting, family size and extended structure, folk crafts, right on down to dietary habits were disrupted quickly and violently. This left a people with no secure culture or stable organization of values and morals, and led to extremes of deviant behavior. These were truly exploited people.

Only recently has Harlan begun to readjust to the industrial world. In the early 70's their organization efforts led to better contracts with the mines and thus, a better standard of living. They still suffer from structural unemployment related to national economic trends of which they have no control.
Concluding Remarks

The areas studied are interesting testimonies to the changes that occur when isolation barriers that separate cultures are broken down. From the three examples presented here, it can be concluded that culture is an extremely strong force in peoples lives, and not something that can be altered or changed quickly. People cling desperately to their old ways and conflicts result when they are exposed to new values and methods.

Sleich Creekers found the culture on the outside formidable enough that they were compelled to live in urban slums called "little Kentuckys" where they could continue living with the all important structure of kinship relativly intact. The old community in the hills became all but deserted. Shilo acheived a compromise. It remained isolated enough to keep traditional culture altered but alive, yet was near enough to employment centers that modernism could greatly affect the pace of life and many residents values. The area was lucky enough to remain more stable because kinship was not so badly disrupted by the changes caused by migration or invasion. Harlan was a victim of invasion by the outside. It completely disrupted culture. Violence and lawlessness resulted because of the disorganized value structure.

What is most amazing about the ethnographic study of the traditional mountain cultures is that they existed intact in times of advanced technology. They were descended from the same culture that moved ahead into the industrial, electronic and atomic age. Isolation was the key to the evolution of the two cultures.
All information on the Beech Creek community was derived from the following sources:


All information on the Shilo community was derived from:


The section on Harlan County was derived from:


My presentation of Beech Creek society was completely distilled from the three above sources and should be considered as a report on the work done by Brown and his colleagues. The descriptions of Shilo and Harlan should be recognized as the same.

I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this paper.

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