

Religion

Religion--Protestant Christianity, to be exact--played an important role in the life of Southern Appalachian mountaineers. Church meetings provided them with the spiritual guidance they needed to survive in a harsh world, as well as a welcome opportunity to cease their labors temporarily and gather together with friends, neighbors, and extended family. Unlike modern Christian churches, however, which tend to rely on a cadre of seminary-trained clergy, those in Southern Appalachia encouraged, or at least allowed, laymen with little or no formal education to assume positions of leadership. It should thus come as no surprise that the region's churches exhibited a rather unique religious culture, one that blended standard theology with folk beliefs.

For the uninitiated, Southern Appalachian church services could be a bit shocking. Attendees often gave vent to a litany of emotions, ranging from the abject grief to charismatic joy. In an August 1919 letter to her family, Pi Beta Phi Settlement School teacher and Tacoma, Washington native Ruth Sturley described her first visit to Gatlinburg, Tennessee's White Oak Flats Baptist Church: "A fierce looking . . . rather elderly man stood on the platform and started [the congregation] to singing. . . . The 'spirit dug under the skin' of some of the older people. . . . They were . . . standing at the front of the church weeping. . . . One woman was very much wrought up and waving her arms--stamping with her feet shouted many times--'Oh I'm so happy--I'm so happy!'" A common feature of Southern Appalachian churches, at least in the Missionary Baptist Churches, was the "mourner's bench," a tradition which dated back to the American religious revivalism of the 1830s. As an element of salvation, would-be Christians were expected to kneel on the bench in front of the congregation, openly exhorting God to forgive them for their transgressions. Sturley witnessed this custom, noting that "four little boys

and three girls towards the last went to the mourner's bench and sat there weeping with their heads bowed on the back of the seats." All told, she "felt perfectly strange and out of place" at the service, "and was truly glad when the affair broke up."

Theologically speaking, Southern Appalachian churches were Calvinistic; that is, preachers and their parishoners believed wholeheartedly in predestination, the theological concept that God foreknows and foreordains those who will become Christians, and so were disinclined to emphasize the role of human will and good works as factors in salvation. Although the degree to which this belief system manifested itself in the mountaineers' day-to-day lives is unclear, historians and first-hand observers have suggested that it fostered in them a tendency to fatalistic inaction. Simply put, during times of illness or poverty, some among the mountaineers did nothing – purposefully -- lest their actions be perceived as taking a stand against the will of God. The key word here is "some," however, for there were more than a few mountaineers who chafed under the stern leadership of local churches. In Gatlinburg, Tennessee, for example, entrepreneur Andy Huff made no secret of his occasionally combative relationship with the local clergy. As it regarded "churches and ministers in the county," Huff once insisted that there were "too many of both altogether."

It would be a mistake to overemphasize such divisive matters, however, for to do so would be to mischaracterize the relationship between Southern Appalachian churches and the communities that they served. For the most part, mountain churches played an overwhelmingly positive role in the lives of their parishoners, providing them with spiritual and social support that they needed to survive in a harsh and unforgiving world. Consider for a moment the frightening, and often bewildering perils that mountaineers in the region's more isolated corners faced on a daily basis: epidemic diseases that struck down infants and small children; farming

accidents that crippled or even killed a family's primary breadwinner; and even natural disasters such as flash-floods and rock-slides that might destroy an entire harvest. Consider also the fact that mountaineers were often ill-equipped to deal with such crises: there was precious little understanding of infectious diseases; precious few trained doctors available to treat ill family members; and precious little chance of predicting the success of a given year's harvest. It is not surprising, then, that mountaineers tended to develop a deep and abiding faith over the course of their lives, or that they tended to view the onset of disaster with a fatalism that, to the outside observer, bordered on serenity. Such, it seems, is often the nature of faith, particularly when it is accompanied by a certain level of isolation and physical helplessness.

And of course, churches served as a social center in the more isolated corners of the region--a place where extended families and friends met to worship, sing, share news, and otherwise enjoy one another's company. Little wonder, then, that the most important events in the life of Southern Appalachian churches were the annual week-long revivals.

In conclusion, it is fitting that we take a moment to consider the words of Gatlinburg, Tennessee native Lucinda Oakley Ogle, who described a Southern Appalachian Church service in her book *Queen of the Smokies*." Here, amid Oakley-Ogle's simple prose, one finds all of the elements that one would expect to find: the social importance of church attendance; the lifelong abiding faith common to the mountain people; and anecdotal evidence of the isolation and poverty which shaped Southern Appalachian religious expression. "Uncle Harvey Oakley and Aunt Sarah Kear Oakley," she wrote, "were two of the best people who ever lived in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. . . . They were both good Missionary Baptists and believed in the Ten Commandments of the Bible. . . . On Sunday morning all their children, grandchildren, and kinfolks would meet and rejoice together at the . . . Church on LeConte Creek, where I was

raised. . . . In this church when I was nine years old . . . I asked God to take me as his child forever. I was baptized in LeConte Creek with my cousin and best playmate, Muade Oakley. . . . On Sundays, Uncle Harvey and Aunt Sarah would have all those who came to worship from other valleys to their house to eat and spend the night if they needed to, including all the visiting preachers who totaled six or more every time. The people ate in relays, about 12 at a time because we only had that many dishes.”