

Gender

Southern Appalachian households in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries were, as a general rule, organized along patriarchal lines. That is, the oldest male relative in the household, be it a husband, father, brother, uncle, or grandfather, held the decision-making power for the entire family, particularly as it regarded financial and educational matters. Women were not allowed to vote or hold political office, and in some cases were denied the opportunity to receive even a basic education. As one Pi Beta Phi Settlement School teacher put it, “in the eyes of their fathers girls need no education to bear children, it only fills their heads with nonsense.”

Household tasks were gendered as well. Men performed agricultural labor such as clearing and plowing fields, building and repairing farm buildings, making tools, tending livestock, and harvesting crops. They also cut firewood, hunted wild animals, and worked in lumber camps to supplement the family’s often meager income. Women, on the other hand, performed mostly household chores: cooking meals, washing dishes, making and mending clothing, caring for children and elderly relatives, and tending vegetable gardens. Those who possessed a loom might spend part of their day weaving cloth, although by the early twentieth century, few did so. Store-bought cloth was readily available by that time and most women, eager to be rid of a time consuming chore, had long-since stashed their looms in a barn loft or burned it for firewood.

Still, gender roles were more fluid than one might think, at least when it came to women straddling the line between the “men’s sphere” and the “women’s sphere.” Women and girls regularly assisted their male relatives with agriculture labor, particularly during the harvest season. And in cases where the family patriarch was absent from the home or incapacitated, it

was not uncommon for the matriarch to assume governance of both the home and farm operations. The same, however, could not be said for men. Seldom would one have encountered Southern Appalachian men performing tasks that belonged in the women's or "domestic sphere," such as caring for small children, cooking meals, or mending clothes. A widower with small children might well be forced to engage in domestic activities for a short time, but only until such time as his daughters (if he had any) were old enough to assume responsibility for these tasks, or he succeeded in acquiring a new wife.

If any one factor truly served to blur gender lines in Southern Appalachia, at least in regard to educational opportunities, it was economic status. Valley farm/merchant families were wealthier than their cove and hill farm neighbors, were less likely to engage in purely subsistence agriculture (which required that all family members engage in farm labor, regardless of their age), and so were more likely to seek out educational opportunities for sons and daughters alike. As evidence, one need only examine archival materials, particularly photographs, related to the founding of the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. In the earliest known photos of the settlement school, boys and girls--all of them well dressed--are represented in equal numbers among the student body. These children were, for the most part, the progeny of the Andy Huff, Steve Whaley, Squire Isaac L. Maples, and E. E. Ogle families, all of whom qualified as valley farm/merchant families.

In the end, it would be an exaggeration to assume that Southern Appalachian women were utterly oppressed. Men did not, historian Altina M. Waller insists, "have a license of absolute power over women," despite the fact that wives and daughters were "clearly subordinate" to the men in their families. And yet, it must be acknowledged that mountain

women's social, educational, economic, and political aspirations were limited by the very fact of their gender.