Recreation in Southern Appalachia

Among the first thing that visitors noticed on traveling to Southern Appalachia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, aside from the mountaineers' meager material culture, was their stoic, unemotional disposition. Seldom did mountaineers laugh or engage in frivolity, or at least did not do so in the presence of strangers. This led to a common assumption among outsiders: namely, that the mountaineers' difficult lives proved overly burdensome, and thereby rendered them incapable of experiencing (much less expressing) joy. As the *New York Christian Advocate* put it in December 1915, "millions of these people are shut in by the mountains from the currents of modern life; from their cultural, inspirational and uplifting influences, from a broad, sane and true vision of life. They live the narrow, hard and discouraged life and die before their allotted time." There was, of course, some truth to this statement; life in the Southern Appalachians was difficult by any standard, requiring that men, women, and children labor for long hours in an attempt to ensure the family's survival and well-being. And yet, the assertion that mountaineers lived dismal lives, utterly devoid of mirth and merriment, was at best an exaggeration.

Although they lacked the money to purchase toys, and were more often than not engaged in hard agricultural labor, Southern Appalachian children were more than capable of entertaining themselves. For example, a pig's bladder, once cleaned, dried, and inflated, made for a crude but wonderful "play pretty." It was, in the words of historian and former Cades Cove resident A. Randolph Shields, "the nearest thing [mountain children] had to a balloon in those days," and one that "would last for many hours of play." And yet, such "toys" were available only during hog-killing time (early winter), leaving mountain children to devise their own games and amusements--using whatever materials were available to them--during the rest of the year.

According to Gatlinburg, Tennessee resident Lucinda Oakley Ogle, who attended the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School in the early twentieth century, she and her siblings devised a game called "rotten egg" that involved skipping stones down a rock-strewn mountain road. The object of the game was simple: to hurl one's stone down the road, skipping it from rock to rock without touching the ground. The first to fail was, of course, deemed the "rotten egg," and the game started over. Most play activities were, however, far less organized. Children climbed trees, swam in the numerous creeks, fished, and hunted small animals.

Adults were given to recreation as well. Among the chief leisure activities enjoyed by mountain adults were reading newspapers (or, if illiterate, hearing the newspaper read aloud), visiting neighbors and/or family members in nearby communities, hunting and fishing (primarily male activities), and attending "Harp singings." Men were particularly fond of gathering at the nearest "general store," where they received haircuts, told tall tales (and occasionally even a true story or two), traded tools, livestock, and other items with one another, and caught up on the latest news. For the most part, however, adults were left to amuse themselves in the isolation of their own homes. Many an evening in the mountaineer's life was spent seated on his or her front porch, engaged in quiet contemplation and perhaps smoking a pipe. Those who possessed musical ability might play a banjo, fiddle, or dulcimer to wile away the hours while the religiously inclined would often read the Bible aloud to family members.

There were, of course, moments when large numbers of mountaineers gathered together for community events. The harvest season, in particular, provided numerous social opportunities, for mountain families tended to assist one another in the task of bringing in crops. Most popular (and perhaps most familiar to modern readers) were the corn husking bees, which saw farm families and their neighbors gather to husk and shell corn. But there were also apples

to peel, beans to shell and string, and molasses to make, all of which required a certain degree of communal action. It was not uncommon, despite their staunch Baptist backgrounds (and hence tendency to frown on the consumption of alcohol), for mountaineers to imbibe a bit of whiskey, cider, or some other intoxicating liquor at such events. And of course, harvest-season gatherings provided the young and unwed with an opportunity to leave their isolated farms, gather together under adult supervision, and mingle with one another. According to historian A. Randolph Shields, who spent the first thirteen years of his life in Cades Cove, the young man fortunate enough to find a red ear of corn in the husking pile was a fortunate indeed; for the discovery earned him the right to "kiss the lady of his choice."

Weddings too provided mountain families with a welcome excuse to suspend farm work, and for the young, an opportunity for good-natured mischief. Following a wedding--mountain weddings tended to be very informal in those days, and were almost always staged in either the bride's or groom's home--friends of the newlyweds were known to celebrate the nuptials by staging a "shivaree" (a custom dating back to sixteenth-century France) in their honor. Pi Beta Phi Settlement School teacher and Tacoma, Washington native Ruth Sturley participated in a shivaree in September 1919, and described the event in a letter to her family: "one of my girls Flora Reagan has a sister who was married . . . and the young people got up the affair in their honor. Abbie [Runyan], Evelyn [Bishop] and I went with three of the school girls and a dozen more youths. Lillard Maples took us girls in his Ford three miles up to the Forks of the river [to the newlyweds' home]. . . . We stopped and assembling our forces proceeded to march round and round shouting--blowing ox horns--ring cow bells--sheep bells and I know not what. My noise was produced by clapping together two tin pan covers--then some sticks of dynamite were set off--by this time strange to say the cabin was astir."

With the coming of industry (and hence, the decline of subsistence agriculture), improved roads (which served to reduce mountaineers' physical isolation), and schools (many of which were founded by outsiders and encouraged children to participate in organized team sports) to the region, Southern Appalachian mountaineers' recreational habits fell gradually into line with those of their contemporaries living in other regions of the countries. Still, it is likely (although difficult to substantiate) that some of the old entertainments lingered on in the region's more isolated corners until at least the mid-1960s.