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## **Hard Times and Home Crafts: The Economics of Contemporary Appalachian Quilting**

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When Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Appalachian Regional Development Act in 1968, he declared to the fifteen million inhabitants of the coal mining areas that the War on Poverty had begun. In his address, President Johnson acknowledged the irony of the situation:

Appalachia has natural advantages which might normally have been the base for a thriving industrial and commercial complex. Below its surface lie some of the nation's richest mineral deposits, including the seams which have provided almost two-thirds of the nation's coal supply. The region receives an annual rainfall substantially above the national average. More than three-fifths of the land is heavily forested. Its mountains offer some of the most beautiful landscapes in eastern America, readily lending themselves to tourism and recreation.<sup>1</sup>

But although Appalachia is one of the wealthiest regions in the United States in terms of natural resources, its inhabitants are among the poorest citizens in the country. A history of industrial exploitation has enriched coal and timber companies but has devastated the land and inhabitants of the mountain region. The mountain handicraft industry, which consists of individual crafters and small cooperatives, developed as one response to the situation. Crafts, such as quilting, woodcarving, and basketry now provide supplementary income to low-paid part-time jobs, unemployment, and social security checks.

The impact of craft income upon an individual family is demonstrated by this West Virginia example. Chess Shrewsbury and Allie Blackenship were married in 1926 in Basin, West Virginia. Chess worked in the local coal mine at Stevenson, West Virginia, for forty years. They raised eight children; the youngest, Darla was retarded. Allie had learned to quilt from her mother when Allie was eighteen years old. She has been quilting ever since, more as a hobby than as a supplementary income. Today, it takes her two weeks to make a quilt. Between September 1989 and March 1990, she made thirteen quilts. It took less time when Darla, who died in 1965, helped her. Together, Darla, Allie, and Allie's younger sister Ollie made over 400 quilts in twenty-five years. Allie insists that her daughter Darla, despite her handicap, was a better quilter than she.

Allie started selling her quilts twenty-five years ago because she needed the money. (She was no longer receiving her daughter's monthly disability check.) Also, she just couldn't use all the quilts she was making. "I'd already given them away as gifts." In 1963, she charged \$125 for each quilt. Now at age eighty-three, she has lowered her price to \$100. Allie feels her work isn't good enough to sell. "They're just not like the way they used to be. I'm getting up there in age. And it's hard for me to tack them." Her granddaughter Billy mentioned, "It's her quilting that keeps her going. It gives her something to pass time."

Allie has won ribbons in state fairs for her work. "People come here, to Stevenson, to buy my quilts. They know me and my green house. "Once she was offered \$800 for an award-winning quilt, but she refused the offer and wouldn't part with her masterpiece. Allie has lived alone since her husband passed away in 1971. Most of her family has grown and left the state, in search of a better life. But Allie, with her rosy cheeks, smiles fondly as she declares, "I built a home and I will stay here because it is everything I have. I don't want to live nowhere else."

The roots of the Appalachian economic problem date from the late nineteenth century. The growth of industries in the eastern United States created a demand for timber and coal. Between 1880 and 1900, speculators were busy buying and selling timber and minerals rights to companies and other speculators throughout the world.

They saw Appalachia as a source in the United States that could supply raw materials, cheap labor, and more profits for industrial production. The onset of World War I contributed to this market development.<sup>2</sup>

By the early 1920s, there were signs that the boom from World War I was subsiding and that economic hardship was looming on the horizon. The now fluctuating economy saw miners' wages rise as high as ten dollars a day during the wartime in 1915, and then spiral downwards to pre-coal industry wages during the Great Depression in the 1930s. By the end of the seesawing during the Depression, seventy-five percent of the persons living in eastern Kentucky, Southern Virginia, and West Virginia qualified for some type of government aid.<sup>3</sup>

Before the industrialization of the region, local residents relied primarily on local production and bartering to supply their needs. But the coal companies had fostered a change in the traditional agrarian culture making people dependent upon a frail system. When the coal companies no longer provided a living wage, mountain people were left to fend for themselves, without many of the independent skills of their forefathers.

The economic situation in the coal mining regions of Virginia, West Virginia, and Eastern Kentucky has never recovered from the boom/bust cycle of the early twentieth century. During the 1950s and 1960s, the region experienced severe economic depression; coal mining collapsed as a major employer.<sup>4</sup> By the 1960s over half a trillion dollars of raw wealth—coal, oil, gas, timber, valuable minerals, and cement rock—had been stripped and hauled away to refineries outside the region. This phenomenon left eighty-five percent of the Appalachian people unemployed and many families relying on welfare. Unemployment was three times the national average and the annual income was less than \$3,000.<sup>5</sup>

An early movement to address the needs of mountain people drew from the European model of the settlement school.<sup>6</sup> First developed in London in 1884, the settlement idea spread quickly in the United States. Initially, the movement was very strong in urban renewal projects such as Jane Addam's Hull House in Chicago. In 1899, John P. Gavit proposed the idea of rural social settlements, stating "there

needs to be now an evangelism to the socially and intellectually lost among the hills and valleys and on the prairies of this land."<sup>7</sup> The people who responded to Gavit's call for the most part were women from old, established families who valued public service. Many were academically trained at the prestigious women's colleges of Wellesley, Vassar, or Smith.<sup>8</sup>

In 1899, four women from the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs, feeling the urge to act on their social and moral responsibilities, went to Hazard, Kentucky, and set up Camp Cedar Grove. For six weeks, they ran a kindergarten; distributed magazines, books, and newspapers; and provided lessons in cooking, sewing, carpentry, basket making, and (later) weaving. In the autumn of 1902 with support from the local community, they opened the Log Cabin Settlement School with 190 students in attendance. This school was later renamed the Hindman Settlement School.

The missionaries were sincere and dedicated to educating mountain people, nursing the sick, caring for orphaned children, and assisting families in many ways. Jean Ritchie (a woman in the local community) reported that families moved closer to the settlements to be able to send their children to the schools. The women made a great impression on the people with their stylish clothes, the pretty furniture, and the nice way they talked. Jean Ritchie and her sisters were impressed: "What if I could grow up to be like that. It was like the whole world was opening up like a blossom"<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the self-esteem and community spirit fostered by these creations, settlement women realized that locally made crafts could be sold to contacts in the North, which would channel money back into the mountain region. Frances Goodrich, working in western North Carolina, published articles in mass-market publications such as the 1898 edition of *House Beautiful*.<sup>10</sup> Each article was accompanied by bright illustrations of mountain people busy at their handicraft work. Goodrich's efforts paid off. By 1904, the federal government, realizing the economic significance of handicrafts, got involved with the project. "The plan of supplying the materials and paying for the work on a piecework basis was adopted. For carding and spinning, the women were paid 33.5 cents per pound of wool or 44 cents per pound of cotton."<sup>11</sup> In 1908, Frances Goodrich opened

the Allenstand Shop at the crossroads of the well-established live-stock trading route between Greeneville, Tennessee, and Greenville, South Carolina. In 1917, the shop became Allanstand Industries, Inc. Shares were available at \$25.00 each.<sup>12</sup> This was the beginning of "industries" promoting sales of handicrafts to markets outside the region.

The Industries Movement evolved into the Cooperative Movement during the post-Depression years. Cooperatives in the United States were modeled on the Rochdale Equitable Pioneer's Society founded in 1844 in England. Flannel weavers opened a cooperative store where they sold essential goods to members at a reduced price. The principles that evolved from the Rochdale experiment were open, democratic membership, limited interest on capital, patronage refunds, political nonpartisanship, constant education of members, and cooperation among other cooperatives.<sup>13</sup>

The cooperative movement has become an important part of Appalachian crafts marketing. Statistics from 1977 show that there are one hundred and fifteen craft co-ops in Appalachia, forty-eight of which are in Virginia, West Virginia, and eastern Kentucky. These institutions put great importance on self-help in times when outside resources are limited. For example, in 1977, a woman crafter of the Grassroots Craftsmen of Appalachia in Lost Creek, Kentucky, sold \$2,400 worth of quilts a year, thus supplementing her husband's \$150 a month Social Security check.<sup>14</sup>

Morris Fork Crafts is a nonprofit Appalachian handicraft cooperative in Booneville, Kentucky. It was formed in 1978 by area residents as a capital improvement project. The co-op's mission is to provide encouragement and support to its 110 community members who wish to make traditional mountain handicrafts and who live in the adjoining counties of Breathitt, Owsley, Lee, Clay, and Perry. Morris Fork Crafts accepts all homemade items on consignment. Liz Alden, a former volunteer-in-mission of the Presbyterian Church who worked at Morris Fork Crafts for nine months in 1989, explained the sale process as follows: "A quilter will bring us her craft complete with a suggested price. The quilt will then go before a quality control board to pass a routine inspection. After the quilt has been approved it is allowed to be sold. Eighty percent of each sale goes

directly back to its maker and the other twenty percent goes to the co-op." This means that if a quilter makes five queen-size quilts per year, each of which sell for \$550 at Morris Fork, she receives \$440 for each quilt, a total of \$2,200. Most crafters use this money to supplement other income.

Morris Fork Crafts participates in craft shows sponsored by Presbyterian churches nationwide as well as shows which are "specifically Appalachian crafts." According to Mary Finlayson, the present volunteer-in-mission at the co-op, "Surprisingly, the center sales are good. We are listed in the Kentucky Travelers Guide and calendar supplements in newspapers statewide. In these supplements we place an advertisement which is half paid for by the state. We also have a brochure in the state parks system, and being near two state parks means tour buses of craft seekers regularly pass through our center." Finlayson cited that it is possible to do \$1,500 worth of sales in two hours when tour buses stop at the center. For the year May 1, 1991 to February 29, 1992, total sales for the co-op amounted to \$79,089. This is broken down as follows: \$13,772 at the store, \$55,606 on the road at shows and churches, and \$9,711 through the mail catalog and special orders. Total quilt sales amounted to \$14,699 (Thirty-eight quilts were sold and four tops were quilted.). But even with such profits, after paying the crafters eighty percent of the selling prices, insufficient funds remain to cover operational costs. This creates a big challenge for Morris Fork Crafts and has left the co-op dependent on volunteer time and donations to keep the organization afloat.

Besides supplying local markets for mountain crafts, many craftworkers have followed the example of Frances Goodrich in seeking markets outside the region. An example of an Appalachian woman who is participating in this type of work is Sandi Garris Fagerty. She was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She attended Pennsylvania State University where she studied speech therapy. Shortly after graduating from college, she married and moved to Centre Hall, Pennsylvania, near State College. After the birth of her second child in 1979, she started working part-time at the local craft co-op, Village Crafts, making Log Cabin potholders and pillows and learning how to quilt. She worked at home so she could

be with her children. When her third child was two in 1981, she was asked to be a designer at Village Crafts. Sandi worked two to three days a week for five years creating the pictures from which patterns for quilts were made. In addition to her design work, she also traveled to wholesale shows representing the co-op.

When her children started school, Sandi left Village Crafts and began her own full-time business at home. Her work includes both contemporary and traditional quilting. Her contemporary patterns are primarily landscape and abstract designs. People call her a "new-age quilter" since her patterns are quite different from traditional patchwork designs. She makes wall hangings, quilts, and table runners. Because she has carpal-tunnel syndrome, a repetitive stress injury to her wrist, she cannot quilt as much as she would like. On average, she quilts for three hours in the morning and three hours in the evening. She pieces by machine and quilts by hand, using a floor frame for larger pieces.

Her business has been extremely profitable compared to most mountain region quilters. She sells her quilts to two wholesale shops and attends approximately twelve craft fairs a year in Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. In 1990, she grossed \$52,000, but netted only \$22,000 after expenses. Her prices range from \$6.50 for a potholder to \$850 for a king-size quilt. It is necessary for her to make one wallhanging a week, which she sells for \$200, in order to meet her budget.

One result of increasing craft production to accommodate the market of middle- and upper-class people outside the region is that it influences the type of crafts produced by mountain locals. Crafters were forced to change their designs to accommodate the lifestyles of their clients. For example, even though the city folk enjoyed the "old-timey" design motifs, they did not identify with the way of life of the mountaineers, thus forcing a refinement of the crafts' abstract features. The demand was there for well-made home-crafted products, but it was part of a larger reshaping of mountain traditions. Throughout the work of missionaries and social workers, mountain people were indirectly being taught that they were to be one way at home and act another for the "outside." "Cherish your traditions, but mind your manners; affirm what you are, but groom yourself for



social mobility; life in the mountains is wonderful, but its wonders must be shaped according to the vision of the great stereoscopic world beyond."<sup>15</sup> This subordinating system continues to prevail since the crafters are skilled enough to produce such works of art but dependent upon the income derived from sales.

While craft production is far from a perfect solution to Appalachia's economic problems, it is nonetheless an important source of income for many mountain people. Appalachian House is a non-profit organization which provides an outlet for various crafters and co-ops in the mountain region. It was founded in 1975 by John Potter and Father William Sangiovanni. The store, located in Darien, Connecticut, presently is operated by Winnie Dolan and A.C. O'Rourke. Appalachian House sells a variety of crafts, including quilts. The quilts in the store are the least profitable items, since they tend to be the more expensive goods. The quilts at Appalachian House range from \$400 to \$500, while at other stores in New England and in the Middle Atlantic region, prices range from \$800 to \$1,000.

When quilters, such as Emma Reese and Eva Scott of Vanceburg, Kentucky, complete quilts which they would like to sell, they mail the finished products to Appalachian House with a suggested wholesale price. Upon receipt, a check is sent back to them for the amount requested. Appalachian House then marks it up twenty-five percent and uses the mark-up difference to cover costs of operation. Dolan and O'Rourke often make recommendations as to the specifications, designs, and colors of quilts which they know would sell.

David Appalachian Crafts in David, Kentucky, is a non-profit program administered by the St. Vincent Mission. Most of the program's ninety members live in Floyd, McGoffin, Knott, Johnson, and Pike counties in eastern Kentucky. David Crafts designs all their own products and teaches the skills necessary to make the crafts. Consignment crafts are a very small percentage of their total inventory. The Board of Directors for the craft program inspects all products before they go on sale. An hourly labor wage, approximately minimum wage, is paid to all participating members every two weeks for the time they spend producing crafts. Quilts, for example, take one to two months to make, depending on the amount

of time the quilters have each day to sew. They are sold in the store at \$450 for double-size, \$500 for queen-size, and \$670 for king-size. All the prices reflect a thirty to thirty-five percent mark-up to cover overhead. Consignment items, after passing inspection, are placed for sale at the price asked by the crafter. When the item sells, the crafter receives the entire profit. According to Julie Johnson of David Crafts, a typical worker is a 65-year-old widow collecting \$350 per month from social security. She makes eight queen-size quilts each year, receiving \$350 per quilt for a total of \$2,800 per year. Added to the \$4,200 per year she receives in social security, her total gross annual income is \$7,000.

According to Sharon Berger of David Crafts, seventy percent of the program's sales are from their wholesale, catalog, and craft show markets outside the county. Retail sales, which are highest in the summer, due to David Crafts' location near a popular state park and an outdoor theater, account for only thirty percent of sales. Knowledge of the craft program has been spread by the Kentucky Department of Arts and Crafts, various local magazine guides of the area, and a book titled *Handcrafting in Kentucky* by the former first lady of the state, Phyllis George Brown.

In 1965, Title I of the Appalachian Regional Development Act created an agency called the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), a joint federal/state organization designed to examine the economic and social problems plaguing the Appalachian mountain region. In 1973, the commission allocated \$850,000 to examine the possibilities of designing tourist programs within the mountain states.<sup>16</sup> Tourist development is hardly a new concept in the southern mountains. As early as 1748, George Washington visited the White Sulphur healing springs in Berkeley Springs, Virginia (now West Virginia). Twenty-six years later, in 1774, a cabin was built near the springs serving as a rest station for those visiting the springs. The White Top Folk Festival, in southwest Virginia, was organized in 1931. White Top presented mountain artisans, primarily musicians, from their homes to audiences who traveled from eastern cities. In the 1932, the fair arena was enlarged to allow local handicrafts to be exhibited. According to one of the organizers, "Those New York and Richmond people . . . will snap up mountain handi-

craft if it is any good, you know."<sup>17</sup> In 1973 the ARC proposed the development of tourist sites such as Capon Springs and Cass Scenic Railroad, Virginia; Mount Rogers, Virginia; Carter Caves, Kentucky; and Pipestem State Park, West Virginia.

Resort and tourist development did not bring economic prosperity to the local people, as anticipated. For example, at Carter Caves, Kentucky, the average annual income for all jobs was \$2,206 in 1966, and only eleven of the thirty-nine jobs created were permanent. At Greenbo Lake State Resort Park in Kentucky, only twelve out of one hundred jobs were permanent.<sup>18</sup> Similar statistics represent employment at the Breaks Interstate Park in Virginia and Kentucky, the Cass Scenic Railroad in Virginia, and the Pipestem State Park in West Virginia.

Environmentally, the programs were failures. Developers, with few restrictions placed on them, created severe environmental problems of erosion, siltation, and inadequate sewage treatment; strained the local water supply; and disturbed existing drainage patterns.

But perhaps the worst result of the tourist development was the image it perpetuated of the local people; the notion that the local folks are in such a sorry way that they just will not make it if they don't get our help. Outsiders to the region called the mountain people "mountain white," "ridge-runner," "hillbilly."<sup>19</sup> Richard Jackson, a resident of Banner Elk, in North Carolina, recalls two ladies from Florida complaining that mountain towns had some dirty and undesirable people in them.<sup>20</sup> Visitors are drawn to the mountains by stereotyped and idealized notions of mountain life and mountain people and frequently express dismay that reality does not meet their expectations. According to one folklorist living in the region, "People come here looking for log cabins, quilts, and banjos, and they are shocked to discover people here living in trailers, buying blankets, and listening to the radio."<sup>21</sup> The Appalachian craft industry depends upon the promotion of this stereotyped and inaccurate view. Moreover, because Appalachia is perceived as a rustic place, visitors expect to purchase craft items at bargain prices, so that mountain crafters often make less than their counterparts elsewhere.

Cora Vest is a quilter who depends upon her craft income. She

was born on August 13, 1915, in Ezel, Kentucky, the only girl in a family of six boys. After she married, she and her husband moved to a hundred-acre tobacco farm. They raised six children, three girls and three boys, in addition to sixty-seven foster children. Cora has been quilting all her life. "I've been a'quiltin' since I've been seventeen." She learned to quilt from her mother by piecing on a nine patch. "I was to quilt the way she liked it and if not then she'd take it out and I'd have to try it again." It was only in 1972 that she began to sell her quilts consistently. The timing was significant: her husband had died eight years before, her savings were depleted, and she feared she would lose her small tobacco farm. So now Cora's quilting had a different meaning. The income from her baby quilts made it possible for her to keep her home. "It's the only way I got carpet put in my house." An average day would consist of quilting two hours in the early morning, working on the farm all day, and quilting up to five hours in the evening.

Thirteen years later, she still relies on quilt sales to supplement her \$311 per month Social Security check. She must quilt one baby quilt a month, for which she charges \$100. She is unable to farm the land anymore, so she has a renter tend the tobacco crop.

Although she used to quilt on a frame, she now pieces by hand and quilts on a hoop. Lately, due to her failing eyesight, she takes the top to a quilting machine where it will be quilted. "It bothers me that I can't quilt like I used to."

Today, twenty-five years after Johnson's proclamation, the problems of unemployment, inflation, and the unavailability of retail stores and services in poor, rural areas still persist. Appalachia is decisively one of the most economically depressed areas in the United States. The long tradition of disenfranchisement—abundant natural resources and wealth controlled by outside interests—have placed this region and its people in a situation still dependent on government assistance. Very little of the wealth from Appalachia's vast mineral resources has been returned to the people who inhabit this land. It is a no-win situation. Crafters need the extra income derived from their work since there are few other steady employers in these economically depressed areas. However, by selling their wares to those living outside the mountains they help perpetuate mythic

images of Appalachia and images of themselves as an unchangeable people. Despite efforts to free themselves of this dysfunctional system, they are still struggling to be independent. Mountain quilt-makers and other craftworkers both depend upon and suffer from their role as the producers of "Appalachian crafts."

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