

# Confronting the Stereotypes of Appalachia

Kay A. Chick

I GREW UP IN THE 1960S in the hills of West Virginia, in the town of Philippi (originally named Anglin's Ford), which my great, great, great, great grandfather founded. It was a place filled with Civil War history. I thought there was nothing unusual about my circumstances. I supposed that everyone had parents who crafted oak and reed baskets, tapped maple trees to make syrup, invited friends over for day-long apple butter making, ate buckwheat cakes for breakfast, and fed their family by gardening and canning. I thought that everyone knew an old lady who lived in a school bus. I imagined that everyone had a father who was an avid storyteller, who could enchant both children and adults for hours. I assumed that everyone knew "local characters" that sold furs and hunted for ginseng. I supposed that everyone swung from grapevines, crumbled cornbread into their milk, and discovered whole litters of new puppies up in the barn.

As I got older I learned that our way of life was not typical for America in the late twentieth century. I began to realize that life in Appalachia was not viewed favorably by "the outside world." It was then, and still is perhaps, the most disparaged region of the United States. I discovered that Mountaineers were a marginalized people who were often portrayed in the media as hillbillies and "comic fools."<sup>1</sup> The stereotyping of groups such as Native Americans, African Americans, or Hispanics is intolerable in our society. For some reason, this does not hold true for Appalachians. According to one ethnograph, "Mountain people are the last group in America it is acceptable to ridicule."<sup>2</sup>

## The Effects of Stereotypes

In my teens, it became more and more difficult for me to be proud of my upbringing, and I began to question my own self-worth. Stereotypes and bad jokes—from television shows, magazines, and somewhat later, even graduate school professors—caught me off guard. If I became angry at references to "barefoot and pregnant," incest, hillbillies, or "one leg shorter than the other," I was told that I had no sense of humor. So, I learned that it was easier just to remain quietly embarrassed. The difference between the love that I had for my heritage and home state and the views of others created a dissonance, a confusion that I carry to this day. And if it is difficult for an adult to deal with such discord, imagine what it must be like for children. It is hard to say exactly what effect the stereotypes of Appalachia have on the children of that region, but stereotypes often "produce confusion, self-doubt, passivity, frustration, and anger."<sup>3</sup> They are an attack on the human dignity of the children who live there and are seldom challenged. What, then, might social studies teachers do that could help children develop a positive view of Appalachia and challenge the stereotypes of that region?

## Social Inquiry through Picture Books

Elementary grade teachers must present social studies so that it is relevant to the social reality of the children whom they teach.<sup>4</sup> For the children of Appalachia, that reality may include discrimination and prejudice that are perpetuated by the media and even by political leaders. Teachers who promote social inquiry, defined as "an active investigation of society," can help children to evaluate the social realities of stereotyping and discrimination, while encouraging them

to learn about their own heritage and the history of Appalachia.

Picture books are an excellent resource for teachers who wish to foster an appreciation for Appalachia and its culture. The colorful illustrations, intriguing characters, and interesting perspectives presented through picture books allow children to understand the human side of social studies that is so often lacking in textbooks. Children's authors—such as George Ella Lyon, Cynthia Rylant, and Gloria Houston—who grew up in Appalachia bring a unique understanding to the stories they tell. In addition to stories by noted authors, the tales and poems that are passed down through oral history can foster a sense of pride in Appalachian heritage. In this article, I will present picture books and classroom activities that could be incorporated into a unit of study on Appalachia or used as part of a lesson about history, families, or rural life. I have also included verses from my childhood. These selections are but a sample of the resources available for teachers who wish to share positive perspectives of Appalachia and help all children learn to confront the stereotypes of this region.

## An Appalachian Sampler

*Mist Over the Mountains: Appalachia and Its People*, is an informational picture book with vivid photographs of the region.<sup>5</sup> The author begins by discussing the word "Appalachia" and what it means as a place and a culture. The history of the area is presented, along with discussions of farming, religion, arts, crafts, coal mining, and poverty. This book is useful in helping children to develop a factual knowledge base about the Appalachian culture so that misconceptions are not perpetuated. An Anticipation/Reaction Guide (Sidebar A) could be completed by the class, work-

## Sidebar A

### Anticipation/Reaction Guide about Appalachia

Pass out these questions. Read them aloud, one at a time, pausing to ask the class if they think each statement is true or false. Encourage discussion. After reading *Mist Over the Mountains: Appalachia and Its People*, review the questions, and see if the class' answer to any of them had changed from true to false or vice versa.

BEFORE AFTER

- |       |       |   |
|-------|-------|---|
| _____ | _____ | 1. Appalachia is a chain of mountain ranges that runs through the states of Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland.              |
| _____ | _____ | 2. Everyone in Appalachia has outhouses and goes bare-foot.   |
| _____ | _____ | 3. The first Appalachians were European settlers from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Germany.  |
| _____ | _____ | 4. Mountain music, storytelling, folk arts and crafts, basket making, and woodworking are important to the Appalachian culture.   |
| _____ | _____ | 5. Farming was important to Appalachians, and very few farmers left their farms even though they would make more money in the coal fields.                                    |
| _____ | _____ | 6. African Americans make up over half of the Appalachian population today.   |
| _____ | _____ | 7. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson determined that poverty was a huge problem in the Appalachians and started programs to try and help people in the region. |
| _____ | _____ | 8. Today, many people have left the Appalachians and the traditional way of life in order to find employment.   |

#### Answer Key: Anticipation/Reaction Guide

1. True
2. False: Most people in Appalachia have plumbing in their homes and wear shoes (although many are poor).
3. False: The first Appalachians were Cherokee.
4. True
5. False: Many farmers left farming to make more money in the coal industry.
6. False: African Americans make up only a very small percentage of Appalachians.
7. True
8. True

ing together, in order to accomplish that goal.<sup>6</sup>

*On Top of Old Smoky: A Collection of Songs and Stories from Appalachia*, includes folktales and songs that were brought to Appalachia from the British Isles during the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>7</sup> I have fond memories of songs such as "Over in the Meadow," "Hush," "Little Baby," and "The Frog He Went A-Courting." Young children love the repetitive nature of the verses and refrains in these songs. They also enjoy the humor of refrains such as

The frog he went a courting,  
he did ride, Uh-huh.

The frog he went a courting,  
he did ride, Uh-huh.

The frog he went a courting,  
he did ride,

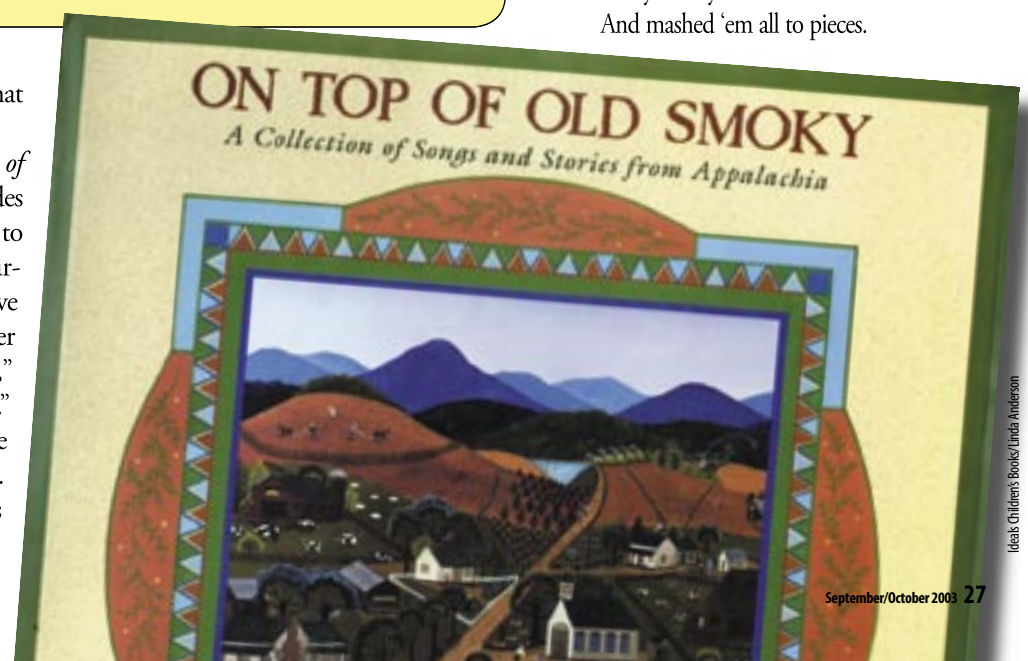
With a sword and pistol by his side,  
Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh.

Teachers can discuss with children the history behind these verses and stories with an emphasis on the value of storytelling. For example, this picture book includes the folktale "Jack and the Bean Tree", which is an early version of "Jack and the Beanstalk." Children could be encouraged to interview parents, grandparents, and other relatives to discover the stories that might be passed down from generation to generation. They might be surprised to find out that family members do have stories and rhymes to share as they remember their own childhood. My father liked to share these two verses that were passed down to him from his grandfather as he was "trotted" on his grandfather's knee.

There once was an old man  
from Gorham,  
Who bought some new pants  
and he wore 'em.  
He stooped and he laughed,  
And he felt quite a draft,  
And he knew right then  
he had tore 'em.



Tritty Trotty went to town  
To get a load of peaches.  
Tritty Trotty's horse fell down  
And mashed 'em all to pieces.



## Sidebar B:

### Circle Game

This circle game can help students think about their own heritage, consider the ways in which they are different from others, and experience the ways that they react to differences.

Children begin by standing in a large circle. Explain how the game works. Then read aloud the first category below. The children who belong to that category can step into the circle if they wish. Children in the circle can notice who is standing with them in the circle. Then the teacher asks them to return to the large circle. The teacher reads the next category, and the sequence repeats.

During the game, children must be silent, ask no questions of the teacher with regard to what the categories mean, and decide on their own whether they want to step into the circle. Explain to the students that, if they are uncomfortable, they do not have to move at all. The game is just for fun. It is not a test.

After the game, children can discuss their feelings, their reactions, and what they learned from the experience. The teacher can ask if volunteers would like to describe how they fit into a particular category in more detail. (For example, the teacher might ask: What does the quilt in your house look like? What sort of plants grow in your garden?) The diversity that is America may show itself in this activity and in the ensuing conversation. Teachers can add new categories based on the students in the classroom and their heritage and life experiences.

Step into the circle if:

1. You have a pet at home.
2. You live on a farm.
3. You have participated in a spelling bee.
4. Someone in your family makes baskets or clay pots.
5. Someone in your family plays a musical instrument.
6. You like using computers.
7. You've gone hunting or fishing.
8. Your family grows food in a garden or in planters indoors.
9. Your parents can speak a language other than English.
10. There is a quilt on one of the beds in your house.
11. You wear glasses.
12. You have traveled outside of the United States.
13. You are a boy.
14. You are a girl.

Inspired by the book *A is for Appalachia: The Alphabet Book of Appalachian Heritage* by Linda Pack.

*Granny Will Your Dog Bite and Other Mountain Rhymes*<sup>8</sup> contains additional Appalachian rhymes such as these.

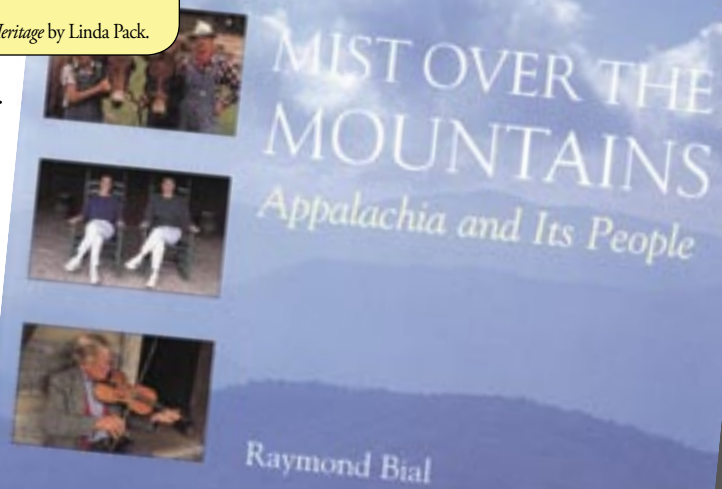
*A is for Appalachia! The Alphabet Book of Appalachian Heritage* is detailed in content and perfect for the middle elementary grades.<sup>9</sup> From baskets, to Jack Tales, to mountain music, to quilts, this alphabet book by a West Virginia author emphasizes the history and heritage of the region. A glossary of terms, list of places to visit in Appalachia, and beautiful watercolor illustrations by Pat Banks add to the appeal of this book. Teachers might help children to use it as a model for creating their own

heritage alphabet book. In addition, children could play a circle game that could help them think about their own heritage, consider the ways in which they are different from others, and experience the ways that they react to differences (Sidebar B).

*Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds*, provides vivid

descriptions of the culture and people of the region, while also addressing common misconceptions.<sup>10</sup> The author has a very gentle way of approaching Appalachian stereotypes. She writes, "Those who don't live in Appalachia and don't understand it sometimes make the mistake of calling these people "hillbillies." It isn't a good word for them. They probably would prefer "Appalachians." Like anyone else, they're sensitive about words." After listening to the story, children could get into small groups and prepare for a book talk. Each group would cover a coffee can with construction paper and decorate the can with pictures, drawings, and words to describe the book. Each child would then bring in one item to put in the can that represents something about Appalachia, such as a piece of coal, a quilt square, or a picture of a banjo or fiddle. Each group would present their book talk by either retelling parts of the story using the items in the can as props, or by explaining why each item represents Appalachia.<sup>11</sup>

*Littlejim's Gift: An Appalachian Christmas Story* can help children to understand what celebrations of Christmas were like long ago in this part of the country.<sup>12</sup> Littlejim uses the money he has saved for a toolset to buy his little sister a china doll. Before reading the book, teachers could construct a time capsule of artifacts that represent the story of Littlejim. Objects







Orchard Books/Peter Catalanotto

for the time capsule might include tools, a doll, a photograph of a Christmas tree, eight dimes in a tin can, and mittens. After viewing the cover of the book, children could predict how they think the items in the time capsule relate to the story. After predictions have been made, the teacher reads the story and encourages children to discuss the significance of each object. Children can then make their own shoebox time capsules with objects that represent their lives and heritage. When the boxes are displayed, children can guess to whom each belongs. They can discuss the unique nature of each box and the differences that represent distinct cultures.<sup>13</sup>

*Jack and the Animals* is an Appalachian folktale and one of many “Jack tales” brought to the Appalachian Mountains from the British Isles.<sup>14</sup> In this story, Jack leaves home to seek his fortune and invites several forlorn animals that he meets along the way to accompany him. Jack’s problem is that he does not know what a fortune is and isn’t sure he’ll be able to recognize it when he finds it. He and the animals come upon a deserted house that is filled with sacks of money and jewels. When robbers return to the house, the animals attack them and they run for their lives, believing that monsters are after them. The sheriff

allows Jack to keep the fortune since he got rid of the robbers. Teachers can share other “Jack tales,” such as those found in *Southern Jack Tales*, and discuss with children the origin of folktales.<sup>15</sup>

It might also be interesting for children to participate in some character development activities related to the character of Jack. The teacher could write sentence stems such as “Jack could be described as....,” “Jack demonstrated kindness by....,” “We know that Jack was a risk-taker because he....,” and “From his experiences Jack learned....” on separate pieces of newsprint. The teacher would hang the newsprint at stations throughout the room and then divide the class into the same number of groups as there are sentence stems. Each group begins at a different sentence stem and has one minute for its members to complete the stem. All group members work at the same time, and no one is allowed to stop and read what other groups’ members have written. Groups then rotate to the next sentence stem.<sup>16</sup>

After students have completed all of the sentence stems, each group returns to its original place and pauses while its members read the written sentences (the stem plus its completion). Each group again moves to each station, and everyone’s work is read, station by station. To process this activ-

ity, each group writes a brief summary of the various comments on the newsprint. A spokesperson from each group discusses the summaries and the teacher can then facilitate discussion of common themes and points of disagreement. This activity can help children to realize that even though Jack did not understand what a fortune was, he did have many positive qualities. Students can then compare the “Jack tales” with folktales from other areas of the United States, such as the Old West.

*Mama is a Miner* is a daughter’s tribute to her mother and the difficult, dangerous work that she does in the mines.<sup>17</sup> Although this little girl is somewhat hesitant about her mother’s work, mama is there in the evenings to reassure. In addition to the story line, there is rhyming verse that describes the experience of mining.

Scream and ring, rail wheels sing.  
Back into black. Battery pack.  
Gloves, dinner bucket, big boots.  
Gloves, dinner bucket, big boots.

The teacher could read this poem before reading the book and ask the class what they guess that each line means. After reading the story aloud, ask the question again, and see if the students now have a more accurate understanding of what the images in the poem mean.

To begin to understand the experience of working in a coal mine, students could participate in “dinner and a conversation.”<sup>18</sup> They must imagine that they are inviting “Mama” to dinner. Children make up a guest list of those who will be attending, a menu, and interesting dinner conversation questions. For example, students might wonder, “How dark is it in the mine?” “Are you ever afraid?” “Why do we need all that coal?” or “What is the wage of a coal miner?”

### Three Standards

The picture books, verses, and classroom activities presented here represent three strands in the curriculum standards for social studies. The study of **I CULTURE**; **III PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS**; and **IV INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY** are supported as children learn about Appalachian culture, the region

known as Appalachia, and their own heritage and identity.<sup>19</sup> Picture books, which are an excellent supplement to the social studies curriculum, bring a human perspective to the study of Appalachia. In so doing, children who live in the region, as well as those who live outside it, will be better able to confront the stereotypes and discrimination which persist, and comprehend the social realities and rich heritage of life in this culturally distinct area of the United States. ☞

#### Notes

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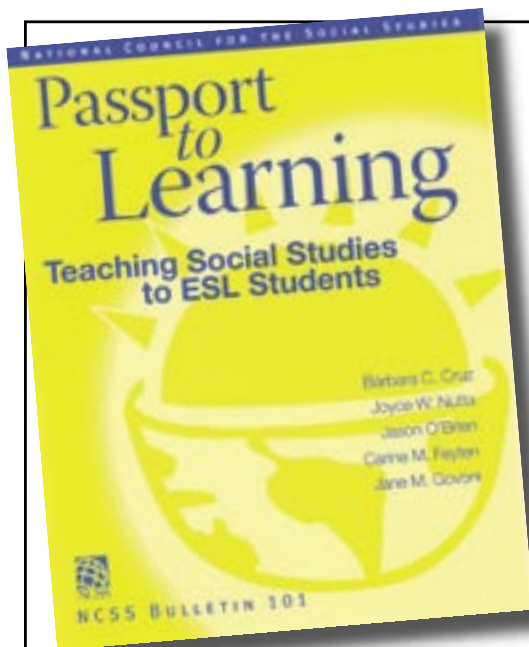
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