



# THE MILDRED HAUN REVIEW

*A Journal of  
Appalachian Literature, Culture, and  
Scholarship*



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Fostering Community:  
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## Editor's Note

The Mildred Haun Conference Committee members are proud to offer this selection of some of the best presentations from this past year's conference. The Mildred Haun Conference is dedicated to advancing literary and scholarly excellence; this journal represents just a sampling of the conference offerings. The Mildred Haun Review provides a juried selection of papers on Appalachian art, culture, and scholarship.

This year's topic was Visions of Appalachia (How others see us, how we see ourselves, etc.) and featured Ross Spears as the keynote speaker.

Special thanks to all those who have helped make this conference and this journal a reality. Also, thanks to the Office of Communications and Marketing for all of their help and advice.

For more information about the Mildred Haun Conference and how to submit or attend, please visit our website by going to the Walters State homepage at [ws.edu](http://ws.edu) and search for Mildred Haun Conference.

Thank You,

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# **Honoring the Dead and Fostering Community: Decoration Day in the Southern Appalachian Mountains**

By Vicki L. LeQuire

On a rainy Saturday afternoon in July, 2002, my father, my children, and I tramped silently through the drenched woods. The only sound was the rain as it spattered against our umbrellas. Behind us were fifteen of our close and distant relatives, all huddled together under umbrellas which offered little protection from the steady rain. My dad led our group along an overgrown path which ran past the edge of a small gated cemetery, ducked under the trees, and disappeared into the forest. We followed silently, tiptoeing through the tangle of moss and broken branches underfoot. At last we came to our destination: a smaller cemetery, alongside the pathway and almost overtaken by the forest, its edges marked by tiny red flags. This cemetery contained only four ancient headstones, those of our LeQuire ancestors.

A stillness filled the air; even the rain stopped, and a sense of reverence radiated all around. We stood at the edge of this small family cemetery, generations of LeQuires, come to honor those common ancestors who had given us life. These were the graves of my great-great-great grandparents, Joseph "Little French" LeQuire (1798-1872), his wife Jane Green LeQuire (d. 1871), and other members of Joseph's family (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Distant cousins, Clarence and Don LeQuire, at the graves of "Little French" and Jane LeQuire. First Decoration Day at LeQuire Graveyard adjacent to Blankenship Cemetery, Swain County, North Carolina. July, 2002.

We had been searching for this site for years. This couple was the common link that connected all our families, and on this very special Decoration Day, a powerful feeling of reunion engulfed all who had ventured into the rain. We placed flowers on the graves of our long-lost ancestors and lingered as long as possible in the dwindling light.

This first annual Decoration Day at the LeQuire family graveyard adjacent to Blankenship Cemetery, in Swain County, North Carolina, will long be remembered as a very special day when three generations of my immediate family stood side by side with others from our extended family to



Fig. 2. Laurel Branch Decoration Day, Swain County, NC.



Fig. 3. Relatives gathered around the grave of "Little Mary" LeQuire, removed from Judson, NC and relocated to Luada Cemetery in Swain County, NC by the Tennessee Valley Authority during the building of Fontana Dam.



Fig. 4. "Grandpa Billy's" grave in the Cable Cemetery, Cades Cove, TN, Great Smoky Mountains National Park

honor our forebears. However, the LeQuire family is not alone in celebrating Decoration Day. Across the Southern Appalachian Mountains, Decoration Day is celebrated throughout the spring and summer. Like other families, mine takes part in decoration days at all the cemeteries in which our loved ones rest: Laurel Branch, Blankenship, Luada, and Sawmill Hill Cemeteries in Swain County, North Carolina (Fig. 2-4); and the Cable and LeQuire Cemeteries in Cade's Cove, Tennessee (Fig. 5).

The four "lost" graves adjacent to Blankenship Cemetery are now annually covered in flowers, a tribute to those whose legacy lives on (Fig. 5).

While Decoration Day has always been practiced by those in small communities along the Appalachian Mountain range, it is nevertheless widely unknown, even among residents of the foothills and Piedmont of North Carolina. Alan and Karen Singer Jabbour, in their extensive research on Decoration Day practices, contend that it is necessary to note the differences between the southern Decoration Day and the national holiday of Memorial Day, which is often referred to as Decoration Day in the Northern States.<sup>1</sup>

The southern Decoration Day is a day set aside annually and observed on many different dates scattered throughout the spring and summer months. "Concentrated in the southern Appalachian region and in the states to the west and southwest that were settled largely by nineteenth-century migration from the Appalachians," the event allows for annual cleaning and decorating of gravesites and often includes a religious service held in the cemetery.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is a social and



cultural event. It is a chance to honor loved ones who have passed on, but it is also an opportunity to reconnect with friends and family in a celebration of the lives of the deceased and a remembrance of our shared history.

The northern Decoration Day is a holiday established to honor those who died in battle. The custom dates to around 1868 and was initially created to memorialize fallen Union soldiers of the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> The Jabbours note that in the North, as well as other areas of the country, "there is virtually no awareness of the southern Decoration Day"<sup>4</sup> tradition.

Also known in the Southern Appalachians as "Memorial Day," "Meeting Day," and "Graveyard Meeting Day,"<sup>5</sup> the practices associated with Decoration Day originate, according to James Crissman, among the ancient customs of European and Asian societies.<sup>6</sup> Since pre-Christian pagan cultures, October 31 has been known as All Hallows Eve. The day was celebrated with bonfires, remembrances of departed loved ones, and feasts to honor the dead. Crissman notes that ancient cultures such as the Greeks, Romans, and Druids used garlands of flowers to decorate graves and that this practice continued even under the Catholic Church's campaign to eliminate or appropriate and Catholicize heathen practices.<sup>7</sup> Begun during the sixteenth century's Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, campaigns against popular religious practices reached most of rural Europe by the seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup> However, as the work by Lynn Hunt, et al. points out, "These efforts did not always succeed...as villagers tenaciously clung to their own traditions."<sup>9</sup> It is evident that these traditions were transported by early settlers to the southern colonies. What happened next is extremely interesting.

Crissman references a southern tradition known as *funeralizing*, described by Larry Thacker as a socialized memorial event held generally a year or two after the deceased had been buried.<sup>10,11</sup> In Southern Appalachia, the necessity for funeralizing was due to the limitations of the season and to the lack of clergy in isolated regions. Before the widespread use of embalming, families often buried their dead quickly in private or small group settings, and then awaited the arrival of a circuit riding preacher to officiate the funeral. Circuit preachers, mainly of the Methodist Church, often covered a four to five hundred mile area and might visit a community just once in a one- to three-year period.<sup>12</sup> Thus, funeralizing fit the unique and often difficult lifestyle of the mountain people. Thacker posits that these funeralizings "evolved over time



Fig. 5. War of 1812 Military Service Marker at the grave of Joseph "Little French" LeQuire. LeQuire family graveyard, adjacent to Blankenship Cemetery, Swain County, North Carolina.

into larger, more celebratory events....intent on providing memorials for the dead en masse,"<sup>13</sup> serving all of the families whose loved ones had passed since the previous clergy-officiated funeral. Crissman notes that "At the time of funeralizing, relatives and friends cleared the grave" of grass and weeds, cut logs for the family to sit on, and fashioned a makeshift lectern for the minister's use; the service included hymns, scriptures, prayers, and dinner on the grounds.<sup>14</sup> He sees a natural progression from the tradition of funeralizing to the modern Decoration Day and contends that "When it was no longer necessary to have a belated funeral, the custom had become so important that each family, church, or community established a day of the year when members could get together and carry out basically the same tasks performed at a funeralizing."<sup>15</sup> The major difference between the two, of course, is that funeralizing is intended to memorialize just the person or persons buried without a proper funeral while Decoration Day memorializes all those who rest in a given cemetery.

Alan Jabbour believes that funeralizing and Decoration Day existed simultaneously, two similar traditions observed for differing purposes.<sup>16</sup> His reasoning relies, oddly enough, on the introduction of the Northern Decoration Day, the forerunner of our National Memorial Day. The first and second recorded instances of post-Civil War ceremonies in honor of those lost in battle took place in Charleston, South Carolina on May 1, 1865 and then at Blandford Cemetery in Petersburg, Virginia in 1866, 1867, and thereafter:

In both instances, organizers used the word "decoration" for what they were doing and used flowers as the key means of showing respect for the dead. Both used a processional march to the cemetery (at Blandford, beginning in its second year) to highlight the community's support. Both had accompanying speeches and prayers, and both may have had music and dinner on the ground, though we have testimony for those features only from Charleston.<sup>17</sup>

Then, in March of 1868, Mary Cunningham Logan, the wife of Gen. John Alexander Logan, commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, visited Petersburg with friends. On her visit, she toured the church and its graveyard, noticing that many of the 30,000 graves of Confederate soldiers had been adorned with flowers and with tiny Confederate flags. Upon her return home, she discussed the sight with her husband, who issued General Order No. 11 on May 5, 1868 which established our National Memorial Day.<sup>18</sup>

Caroline Janney notes that following the first official Memorial Day on May 30, 1868, an article in the Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch* argued that it was inappropriate for the nation to celebrate an "imitation of rebel customs."<sup>19</sup> In response, the Richmond *Southern Opinion* wrote that the national observance was "a miserable mockery and burlesque upon a holy and sacred institution, peculiar to Southern people and

appropriately due only to the Confederate dead.”<sup>20</sup> Interestingly enough, both newspapers credit the practices of Decoration Day to the Southern states. In doing so, they establish the link between southern decoration practices and what we know today as Memorial Day. Jabbour argues “that the southern tradition came first and influenced the northern tradition – a tradition that, though inspired by the older southern concept, was refashioned to focus on memorializing the fallen warriors of the Civil War.”<sup>21</sup> This refashioning excluded the uniquely southern emphasis on honoring all those who lie in the cemetery, a distinct characteristic of the Southern Appalachian Decoration Day traditions to which my family is accustomed.

Regardless of its uncertain origin, nowhere else is this memorial custom given the status that it has achieved in the Southern Appalachians. Mountain communities not only honor their deceased on the nation’s official Memorial Day in May, but also scatter decoration days throughout the spring and summer at all the local cemeteries. Each cemetery has its own decoration in order to facilitate those families, like my own, who need to visit more than one graveyard. Additionally, these dates are fixed and remain the same Saturday or Sunday of the same month, year after year. Deborah McCauley in *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History*, asserts that:

Cemeteries are not forgotten places in the mountains that individuals visit only occasionally....Instead, decoration days have an established place on the church calendar, calling forth the whole community, not just relatives, who gather in cemetery after cemetery to clean them of overgrowth and debris and to beautify all the graves, the known and the unknown, with explosions of color. This annual event...constitutes a major season of the year.<sup>22</sup>

For the precise examination of my family’s decoration tradition, and in order to better understand the cultural phenomenon of Decoration Day, I interviewed several family members. These included my parents, Charlotte and Clarence LeQuire, and my aunt, Edna LeQuire Rice.



Fig. 6. Laurel Branch Cemetery Decoration Day, Swain County, North Carolina.



Fig. 7. The grave of Rev. Abraham Wiggins, Sawmill Hill Decoration, Swain County, North Carolina.



Fig. 8. The grave of Clera Wiggins, Sawmill Hill Decoration, Swain County, North Carolina.



Fig. 9. The grave of Jane Thomasson, Sawmill Hill Decoration, Swain County, North Carolina.

My mother, Charlotte LeQuire, has a unique perspective on decorations as she had never experienced this custom within her own family. She grew up in the foothills of North Carolina. As the daughter of a Baptist minister, she was well accustomed to funeral practices but had never attended a decoration until she did so with my father.<sup>23</sup> My father, Clarence LeQuire, grew up with eleven brothers and sisters in Bryson City, North Carolina. His experience with Decoration was very different, in that he has attended decorations for, "As long as [he can] remember."<sup>24</sup> Aunt Edna agreed, saying that she had participated in decorations "All [her] life, ever since [she] got big enough to walk to the cemetery."<sup>25</sup>

Both my father and aunt indicated that the tradition has changed very little since their childhoods in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. Aunt Edna stated that, "Everybody took flowers, even the kids."<sup>26</sup> The children, she noted, would gather daisies from the fields around the house and from the sides of the road and braid them together into wreaths. These daisy wreaths and cut flowers from the garden were childrens' contributions to the decoration.<sup>27</sup> My dad stated that he remembered seeing his mother and sisters making crepe paper flowers "in the forties or early fifties."<sup>28</sup> Aunt Edna added that she, her mother, and her sisters "made crepe paper flowers for all the graves" starting about a month or two early in order to have them all made by Decoration Day.<sup>29</sup> Her instructions for making crepe paper flowers were thorough, the result of years of experience. She explained that the paper flowers were dipped in paraffin wax to protect them so that they would last longer in wet weather.<sup>30</sup> She went on to say, "Everybody buys flowers now, nobody makes them anymore....Back then people didn't have money to buy flowers like they do today. I used to make flowers all the time, even after I was grown. Mama and me would help each other. I'd help her make flowers and then she'd help me make flowers."<sup>31</sup> The making of crepe paper flowers was not just a way to save money but



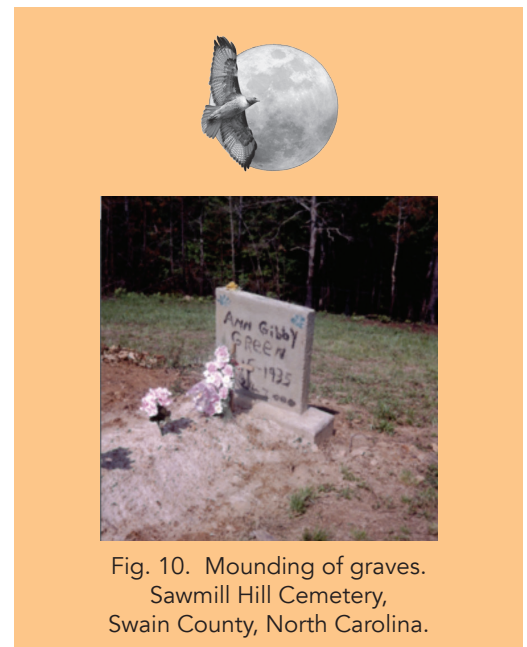
served a social function as well. My aunt recalled sitting around the kitchen table with her family and friends, making baskets of flowers for all the different decorations spread throughout the summer. She recalled her mother making a Tennessee Stack Cake to share with those who came to help make flowers, and that they would gossip and laugh, drink coffee and eat cake while they worked, in a manner similar to a quilting bee.<sup>32</sup> In this regard, the preparations for Decoration Day brought the community together, all working toward one goal.

For instance, my father recalled that, as a young man, he would help clean up the graveyards in preparation for the decorations, mowing the grass and mounding graves. Graves are typically cleared of any grass, and then the dirt is mounded so that they look like fresh graves and so that the wire stems of flowers can easily penetrate the soil.<sup>33</sup> Not everyone has continued the practice of mounding graves, perhaps making it easier for one person or a small crew to maintain cemeteries. There has, of course, also been a trend toward silk flowers, largely replacing the paper flowers and fresh flowers of the early half of the twentieth century.

For those cemeteries that are connected to churches, Decoration often follows regular Sunday services. In that regard, it is an extension of the religious service. In civic cemeteries, there may still be a short sermon, a smaller version of a regular church service, complete with the singing of traditional hymns, prayer, and the reading of scripture. There is often music, both spiritual and secular, especially in the form of fiddle and guitar playing.

Another aspect of Decoration Day is the tradition of having “dinner on the grounds.” Family and community luncheons typically follow decoration services. Some such events are held in the church yard if the cemetery is adjacent to a church. If not, then picnics are often held at the cemeteries. Others are held at family homes immediately following the decoration. Aunt Edna remembered the decorations of her youth this way, “At Judson, we used to have dinner after decoration. They’d all come to mama’s house, all the family...and we’d spend the day.”<sup>34</sup>

It is clear that Decoration functions as a social entity. Family members gather to reunite with loved ones and to re-establish the ties that bind. Whether gathering in preparation for Decoration Day, or gathering to place flowers on graves and share the noonday meal, Decoration rekindles a loving, familial spirit. Some of the most important lessons of Decoration Day are that death is part of the never ending cycle of life and that loved ones are

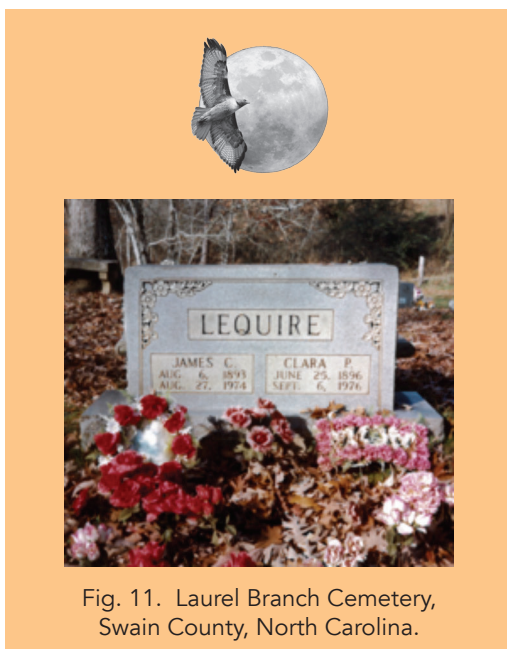


never forgotten. Within the graveyard, there is a sense of reunion and homecoming, facilitated perhaps by actually spending a substantial amount of time in the cemetery throughout the years. Children learn that graveyards are not spooky places but are gathering places for family and friends.

Jan Brunvand defines material culture and customary lore as “those materials in a culture that circulate among members of any group...whether in oral form or by means of customary example, as well as the processes of traditional performances and communication.”<sup>35</sup> Decoration Day in the Southern Appalachian Mountains fits this description nicely. The tradition has been handed down, generation to generation, for as long as anyone in the family can remember. Decorations have become a family custom, the instructions for the preparation and implementation communicated by means of example. Young people learn the dynamics of decorations from their parents and grandparents, and in so doing, learn to respect the living and to honor the dead.

Decorations have changed only slightly throughout the years. The family still gathers on the same day at the same cemeteries. Flowers are still placed on all the family graves, and dinners are still being served. In its cultural context, Decoration Day functions within a community to provide unity between neighbors and between close and distant relatives. There is a true sense of family among those who attend decorations, a feeling that bridges the generation gap to include young and old alike. We are reminded of our proud heritage and of the need to pass that heritage on to the younger generation. Our family feels strongly that knowing where we’ve been helps determine where we’re going and that each step in that journey is guided by the influence of our forebears. My mother perfectly demonstrated this concept when she asked, “How can you honor yourself if you don’t honor your ancestors?”<sup>36</sup> Through our remembrance of and by honoring our ancestors, we honor the entire LeQuire family;

past, present, and future generations included. This sense of connectedness, of being part of something bigger and more powerful than any one of us alone, is what we felt on that July afternoon as we stood in the rain, in a tiny cemetery, lost in the woods.



### **Vicki L. LeQuire**

Vicki L. LeQuire is a teacher of English at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC and a writer of fiction and creative non-fiction. Her interests include Southern literature and culture, magic in the Early Modern period, and women’s and gender studies issues.

## Notes

1. Alan Jabbour, Karen Singer Jabbour, *Decoration Day in the Mountains: Traditions of Cemetery Decoration in the Southern Appalachians*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of NC Press, 2010), 116.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 117.
5. James K. Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia: Changing Attitudes and Practices* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 153.
6. Ibid., 151.
7. Ibid.
8. Lynn Hunt et al., *The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures, Volume II: Since 1500*, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 545.
9. Ibid.
10. Crissman, *Death and Dying*, 148.
11. Larry D. Thacker, *Mountain Mysteries: Investigating the Mystic Traditions of Appalachia*. (Johnson City, TN: The Overmountain Press, 2007), 101.
12. Crissman, *Death and Dying*, 146.
13. Thacker, *Mountain Mysteries*, 101.
14. Crissman, *Death and Dying*, 149.
15. Ibid., 153.
16. Jabbour, *Decoration Day*, 123.
17. Ibid., 117-118.
18. Ibid., 119-120.
19. Quoted in Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past*, 77, 226 (endnotes); the *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch* is quoted in *Southern Opinion*, June 6, 1868.
20. Ibid.
21. Jabbour, *Decoration Day*, 130.
22. Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Region: A History*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 432.

23. Charlotte Berry LeQuire (Valdese, NC: April 12, 2003), Personal Interview.
24. Clarence Monroe LeQuire (Valdese, NC: April 12, 2003), Personal Interview.
25. Edna LeQuire Rice (Old Fort, NC: April 12, 2003), Personal Interview.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Clarence LeQuire. Personal Interview.
29. Edna Rice. Personal Interview.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Clarence LeQuire. Personal Interview.
34. Edna Rice. Personal Interview.
35. Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 1968), 405.
36. Charlotte LeQuire. Personal Interview.



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# Religious Surveys 1931 & 1959 and Their Role in Reinforcing Appalachian Stereotypes

By Joseph Spiker

In 1931, the Institute of Social and Religious Research conducted a survey to identify the religious tendencies of people in the Appalachian region. This survey looked at over a thousand churches in 17 rural counties across West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia to examine both the religious characteristics and the state of mission work in the area. Specific items were examined such as denomination, population percentage, church attendance relative to population, and the structure of the church. The survey area of 17 rural counties was used to represent the entire region. The results helped define the religious traits of the area by relying on the perceptions of Appalachian backwardness, isolation, and poverty that had been popularized at the turn of the century. Another survey conducted in the late 1950s reaffirmed the original survey's conclusions. These surveys defined the religious characteristics and population of twentieth century Appalachia, and the Commission on Religion in Appalachia used these characterizations as the basis for their mission efforts.<sup>1</sup>

Appalachia already had a certain mystique in American culture by the 1930s. The "rediscovery" of the region in the late 1800s by writers and missionaries shaped Appalachia's image in an almost inalterable way; many of the terms and the imagery used to describe Appalachia in the century since are still used. The stereotypes are not as prevalent now as they once were, and the stigma tied to the region has been chipped away due largely to the work of Appalachian scholarship since the 1970s. However, the early work on the region that portrayed a romantic, isolated region of backward people in need of help survived with assistance from periodic reexaminations and studies. The religious surveys of 1931 and 1958 are examples of two of these studies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Bureau of Home Economics, and the Forrester Service. "Economic and Social Problems and Conditions of the Southern Appalachians." U.S. Department of Agriculture Miscellaneous Publication no. 205, January 1935. 1935 Religious Survey Collection, Accession 34, Box 6, Series IX, Folder 13, Berea College (B.C.).

<sup>2</sup> Appalachian scholarship has certainly expanded over the last 40 years, and scholars have made great strides in attempting to demythologize the region to the point that there have been debates as to whether there is a such place as "Appalachia." All of the prior work in the region is important, including the works that have been damaging, and I can only hope that this study can make a contribution of some merit.

The 1931 survey discovered that the strongest denomination in the region was Protestant, with Baptists and Methodists making up the largest percentage of those surveyed. Baptists made up 39.8 percent of the Protestant population while Methodists comprised 33.4 percent. The 2 percent of the population that was listed as non-Protestant is only mentioned as being “mainly Catholic and Jewish.”<sup>3</sup> The survey’s summarization of the strong Protestant presence in the region reflected the impact of Great Awakening ideals, Scots-Irish heritage, and Protestant missionaries that have been attributed to Appalachia’s religious culture.<sup>4</sup> Even though the survey only looked at rural counties, the results were used to describe the entire region. As a consequence, Appalachia as a whole would be defined by traits identified in only some of its rural counties.

Urban areas around towns and larger cities would have been more likely to have a larger percentage of non-Protestants than had been represented in the survey. In *Coalfield Jews*, Deborah Weiner shows a significant Jewish presence in Appalachia as early as the late nineteenth century. She examines the arrival of Jewish settlements in Appalachia, especially among the boom towns that were created by the emergence of industries such as coal and railroads. Her study focuses on coalfields, economics, and religion, and she blends them together to show that Appalachia was more heterogeneous than often shown to be.<sup>5</sup>

Weiner’s study certainly adds more to the understanding of the early twentieth century Appalachian religious landscape; it also serves as a supplement to the rural survey of 1931. Appalachia may have been dominated by Protestant forms of Christianity, but there was also a small yet influential Jewish population in the region. Although the percentage was greater in urban areas rather than the rural counties that were surveyed, the presence in both undercuts the notions that arose as a result of the survey. According to the survey only 2 percent of the population in the rural counties that were surveyed were non-Protestant, defined as Catholic or Jewish, while the urban areas around boomtowns and other cities saw up to 10-15 percent of the population that was Jewish. Often times, that 10-15 percent was at the economic and political



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<sup>3</sup>“Economic and Social Problems,” 169-172.

<sup>4</sup>The religious traits of rural Appalachia are covered in Walter Brownlow Posey’s *Religious Strife on the Southern Frontier* and Deborah McCauley’s *Appalachian Mountain Religion: a History*, among other studies.

<sup>5</sup>Deborah Weiner, *Coalfield Jews: an Appalachian History*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

center of the city giving members of these groups a good deal of power and influence.<sup>6</sup> Protestantism was at the heart of Appalachian religion. However, if a broader range of counties were surveyed, then a slightly different picture of Appalachia in the 1930s could have been produced.

One of the goals of the survey was to try to compare Appalachia's data to the rest of the nation. The Appalachian data varied considerably by county; therefore, it was difficult to draw accurate conclusions, especially when applying them to the whole region. This was due largely to uneven distribution among the mountain counties because of population density variances.<sup>7</sup> Applying Appalachia's data unilaterally was problematic. Using the average to draw national comparisons was useful because it could provide a general idea to see how the region resembled the rest of the nation. However, the problem was that applying unilateral data found that many areas were either far above or below the statistics especially because of population inconsistencies.

According to the survey, Appalachia was behind the national numbers in most categories. For example, church membership by percentage to population was 36.7 percent in Appalachia's mountain counties while it was at 47.8 percent in other parts of the rural United States. Appalachia was only slightly behind in the percentage of churches that had Sunday Schools with 81 percent compared to 85 percent nationally. However, Appalachia was considerably behind in other categories. Only 21 percent of Appalachian churches had young people's societies while that number doubled nationally. There was even more disparity when it came to women's societies; only 18 percent of churches in Appalachia had them compared to 63 percent nationally.<sup>8</sup>

The Home Missions Council used this data to conclude that missionary efforts were

needed to bring Appalachia up to the national level. They decided that the church was to become the tool that would save Appalachia. The Home Missions Council believed that Appalachians themselves were not doing enough to maintain mountain churches which only increased the need for outside presence to come into the region, an idea that was reflected in the Department of Agriculture's Economic Report based on the survey results.<sup>9</sup> From their perspective, if Appalachia was to change then the church would have



*Only 21 percent of Appalachian churches had young people's societies while that number doubled nationally.*

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<sup>6</sup> Deborah Weiner, "Lecture" (9/23/10): East Tennessee State University.

<sup>7</sup> "Economic and Social Problems," 172.

<sup>8</sup> "Economic and Social Problems," 172-179.

<sup>9</sup> "Economic and Social Problems," 181. One of the concluding statements about the survey and the condition of Appalachian religion was this: "Whether proportionate gains in enlistment can be maintained is uncertain, for the facts presented in this section show that the churches, set in the midst of rapidly changing conditions, are doing almost nothing to adopt themselves to their altered environments."



to be able to keep up with that change.

The results of the survey were published in 1931 by Elizabeth Hooker and reported to the Home Missions Council. In her publication, Hooker reports on the isolation, poverty, religious primitivism, and inadequate home missionary endeavors among mountain people.<sup>10</sup> These characteristics reflected those that were applied to Appalachia before the first wave of missionaries swept into the region in the nineteenth century. They would likewise contribute to the notions of the problems plaguing Appalachia again in the 1960s and the need for an outside solution.

The 1931 survey laid the groundwork for a revamped Appalachian mission in the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, it served as the foundation for a second Appalachian religious survey. The second study was undertaken in 1958 to reexamine the religious characteristics of Appalachia and how they might be related to the rest of the United States. It was also designed to expand the original results by broadening the questions. The original 17 counties that were examined in 1931 were looked at again to measure any possible changes, while additional counties were included in an effort to provide a more expansive survey.<sup>11</sup>

There were some structural differences between the two surveys. The second survey attempted to have more complete coverage by including more denominations; it also covered a broader range of area and topics. The 1958 survey again dealt with religion, but it also looked at the larger secular community. This shift in focus led to missionaries heavily addressing issues such as education and social welfare in the 1960s. By identifying religious and community identities, the survey allowed home missions to come up with a plan for Appalachia.<sup>12</sup>

The results of the second survey were published in Earl D.C. Brewer's *Religion and Church Life in the Southern Appalachian Mountains*. While the results were treated independently, some of the conclusions were described comparatively since the survey was partially designed to look at the changes that occurred in Appalachia between 1931 and 1958. For example, based on results the general conclusion was made that church membership had declined overall from the first survey.

Two significant groups were characterized by distinctions made in the results of the second survey. The first group is "lay people," and the second is "leaders;" the former included the general population, non-Protestants, and non-church members, and the

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<sup>10</sup> Hooker, Elizabeth. *Religion in the Highlands*, 1931.

<sup>11</sup> Earl Brewer, *Religion and Church Life in the Southern Appalachian Mountains*. Emory University (Atlanta): n.d. From Brewer and Weatherford Manuscripts, Records of the Southern Appalachian Studies, Accession 3, Box 89, Series V-Religion, B.C.

<sup>12</sup> Brewer, 17-21. The first part of the book, "Home Missions in the Mountain," identified religious characteristics of Appalachians as indicated by the survey.

latter included ministers and community leaders. The survey results that best reflected those divisions related to identifying community problems and deciding what extent the church should be involved in fixing them.

A correlation permeated the survey's conclusions about the Appalachian community, and it can be clearly seen when the survey looks at measuring potential problems. The basic correlation is that the number of identifiable problems increased according to each group. For example, lay people did not find as many community problems as leaders did. Subsequently, leaders saw both more and different problems than lay people, and all of the groups had different ideas about what solutions would be the best. When asked to "consider the major problems facing this community," there was a marked difference between lay people and ministers. Looking first at lay people's responses, 33 percent were unsure if there were any problems or saw none, 33 percent named only one, and 33 percent named two or more problems. Interestingly, 50 percent of non-Protestants saw no problems within the community. This was in stark contrast to the response given by ministers and leaders, nearly 75 percent of whom named two or more problems.

The problems that were identified in the survey offer an interesting perspective into how Appalachia was understood, especially in regard to possible problems and potential solutions. While the percentages on what group identified which problems were not available, the general frequency and identified problems were provided.



Starting with the least-frequent problem identified they are as follows: marriage and family life; drinking and personal immorality; political problems including law enforcement, crime, delinquency, etc.; lack of adequate school facilities; lack of social and recreational facilities in the community; religious problems including inadequate church buildings, programs, etc.; economic problems including job opportunities, income, etc.; and general community-wide types of problems including lack of adequate community organization, lack of

community spirit, problems with physical facilities such as roads, etc.<sup>13</sup> Some of these problems fell clearly in the realm of religious issues and could be addressed by home missions and various denominational interests. However, several of these problems were generic community issues that were unrelated to religious matters and could be seen in most typical communities across the nation. It would be interesting to see the percentages on which groups were identifying as the most pressing problems, but they were not provided.

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<sup>13</sup> Brewer, 22.

Looking at the percentages that are present is very beneficial. Essentially, the ministers and leaders saw Appalachian communities as being in dire need of fixing, whereas much of the lay population saw few problems. These different points of view are even more critical when it comes to identifying organizations that were either working with these problems or able to work with them. When proposing solutions, the division between lay people and leaders was just as evident as it was when perceiving problems. The role of churches was an integral part of solutions for ministers. However non-Protestants did not know of any church actions that had been taken in the community, and three-fifths of lay people and non-Church members either did not know what churches could do or thought that they could do nothing. Leaders and ministers thought that churches should play the most important role, but they were only about 33 percent of the total; an equal percentage thought that political or civic organizations were the most important institutions.<sup>14</sup>

The results of the second survey were illuminating. Many Appalachians were allowed to have a say in how they identified their community, its problems, and what role the church should play. Ministers and community leaders were also allowed to have a large hand in identifying those same issues. Church leaders' views on community problems and solutions were in line with survey administrators. Therefore, their definition was more likely to be accepted even though it was not necessarily the majority opinion; the input of non-Protestant church members was marginalized. Although Protestant Christianity was the majority religion in Appalachia, it did not necessarily mean that there was a majority voice on what role it should play in the community. And, according to the survey, Protestantism did not dictate the definition of community problems to all Appalachians. A majority of both Protestant and non-Protestant Appalachians, church-goers or not, did not perceive many community problems and did not see what role churches could or should play in addressing what problems did exist. However, the impact of the survey's results came from the definitions and characterizations provided by the ministers and leaders which would result in a missionary movement in the following decade.

The second survey ultimately had a more profound impact in the region. The 1931 survey was reported to the Home Mission Council, and the Council and other groups continued to engage in missionary work in the region. However, no new significant action was taken. When the 1958 survey results were published there was a greater sense of urgency among church organizations. Appalachia was described in the same

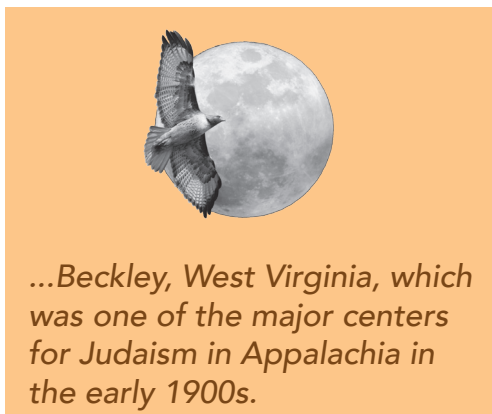
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<sup>14</sup> Brewer, 22-25. The data used in this and the preceding paragraphs were taken from the summary listed on these page numbers in Brewer's study.

terms as it was at the turn of the century. After the results were published numerous councils, meetings, and lectures were held to identify Appalachia's problems; by 1965 the Commission on Religion in Appalachia was formed and presented as the best possible solution.

During the post-survey meetings that would form into the Commission, there was an examination of the relationship between Appalachian churches and minority populations. Unlike the original survey, minority populations were examined in 1958. This issue was addressed in a lecture on "The Rural Church and Minority Groups," given by Reverend O. Worth May. In his lecture, he spoke of what he called his "limited experience with minority groups in the church," saying that contact with minority groups was an issue that rural churches did not have in the past. The largest minority group that he identified was African-Americans, and although they resided within the community, white and black congregations seldom intermingled.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, May was the reverend of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Beckley, West Virginia, which was one of the major centers for Judaism in Appalachia in the



early 1900s. Although the city's Jewish population fluctuated over the decades, it still maintained a Jewish presence in the 1960s. This is an example of some of the surveys' shortcomings in terms of understanding Appalachia and the ineffectiveness of transplanting data universally across the region; with its focus on missionary aspects and rural areas it can overlook some of the impact that non-Protestant church members were having in the community, especially in non-rural areas. If you look at the 1931

data and say that 2 percent of Appalachia is non-Protestant, defined predominantly as Catholic and Jewish, that hurts regions such as Beckley, which had upwards of 10 to 15 percent Jewish population in the early 1900s. The surveys attempted to understand Appalachia without considering its urban centers, which was a flawed approach that failed to capture the complex dynamics of the region; the results enhanced the flaws of that approach by leaning on definitions of Appalachian Protestantism and preexisting stereotypes.

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<sup>15</sup> O. Worth May, "The Rural Church and Minority Groups." n.d:1-7. Records of the S. Appalachian Studies (1962 survey), Box 91, Folder 15-Religious Lectures. B.C. Special occasions such as weddings and funerals would occasionally see white people attending African-American churches and vice versa; it was definitely not the normal circumstance.



Beckley, West Virginia, and its 10-15% Jewish population were one county removed from a county that was surveyed in 1958. Also, Asheville, NC; Knoxville, TN; and Bristol, VA were all adjacent to at least one county that was included in the 1958 or both surveys. The proximity of these urban areas to the counties that were surveyed helps contextualize Appalachia's urban characteristics against the popular perception of the region, especially with the Jewish presence in Knoxville and Bristol before the first survey.

There was a slight nod to a Jewish presence in the second survey. In a religious attitude and opinion questionnaire that was part of the survey, there were references to ministers as well as Rabbis.<sup>16</sup> This brief acknowledgement signifies that there was at least some notice of a Jewish presence, but its location was not identified and its impact was not examined. Non-Protestant church members of rural communities did not get a chance to voice their opinion in the questionnaire, either. The questionnaire itself was based solely on fundamental Protestant beliefs. The questionnaire categorized "lay denominations" and its style minimized the impact of non-Protestant religious voices. For example, it would ask about an aspect of Protestant belief such as the authority of the Bible or the relationship of Jesus to God, and there would only be three answer choices: agree, disagree, or undecided.<sup>17</sup>

There are two negative consequences to using a questionnaire of this sort. First, any non-Protestant presence would be diminished and subsequently unable to contribute to the religious understanding of Appalachians. Second, limiting the survey to rural areas created a certain image of Appalachia; it also allowed a mission effort in the region to seem more necessary. Based on the questionnaire's design it functioned more to measure Protestantism in rural areas instead of the religious traits of the entire region, and any voice that did not answer in line with Protestant beliefs would register as non-Protestant. Therefore, if the questionnaire was going out even to a few members of non-Protestant Appalachia, their answers would help skew the results to a Protestant stronghold that was deteriorating with a population that was losing touch with its religious beliefs. A particular religious and social identity emerged; based on the methodology, the surveys ensured the need for missionaries into the region.

The two twentieth century religious surveys of Appalachia helped portray the region as a homogenous, declining Protestant region in need of reform and missionaries. The first survey laid the foundation of the region's identity as largely rural and backward while the second reaffirmed those notions and paved the way for mission work that

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<sup>16</sup> "Religious Attitudes and Opinions Survey." n.d. There were also references that signified the presence of Catholics. Religion of Appalachia Study Collection, Box 94-5, Series V-Religion.

<sup>17</sup> "Religious Attitudes and Opinions Survey."

would come in the region in the 1960s. The limited focus and over generalization of the surveys were detrimental to Appalachia's actual complexities. The survey results provided an incomplete understanding of the region because they did not include urban areas. The imagery created by these surveys was used to spearhead a mission movement in the 1960s highlighted by the Commission on Religion in Appalachia. The Commission would be formed in 1965; since CORA would operate within the same parameters as the religious surveys, the same shortcomings would also be present.

### **Joseph Spiker**

Joseph Spiker serves as adjunct professor for Walters State Community College's Department of History. He started teaching for Walters State in Fall 2014 and has taught courses on U.S. History to 1877 and U.S. History Since 1877. He also taught U.S. History courses for East Tennessee State University as a graduate assistant from 2009 to 2011.

Joseph received his B.S. in 2008 and M.A. in 2014, both from E.T.S.U. His thesis was on 19th and 20th century Appalachian history. In "The Commission on Religion in Appalachia and the Emphasis on Appalachia's Rural Identity," he examines the roles of 20th century religious surveys in reinforcing Appalachian stereotypes, the impact those issues had on the Commission on Religion in Appalachia's mission work, and where urban Appalachia fits in the definition and perceptions of the region.

His research interests include colonial and Revolutionary United States, pop culture, Appalachia, and 20th century United States, among others.

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