A Walk across Uneven Ground

A Conversation with Appalachian Historian Ron Eller

You’ve spent your entire career writing about and studying the people of Appalachia and the social and political policies of the region. Where did this intense interest come from?

I came by it naturally. I’m a descendant of eight generations of families from Appalachia and was born in southern West Virginia. I’ve always been in love with the mountains.

But you moved away from the mountains.

Yes. Because my father couldn’t find a job, we moved to Ohio in the early ’50s. Years later, in college, I took a southern history class, and all the stories about Appalachia were about people who were poor and lived in log cabins up on the hillside and played the banjo and drank moonshine and shot everybody as they walked by [laughs]. We were living in Ohio, but our family would travel back to West Virginia every other weekend, so I knew these depictions were simple stereotypes. It made me angry. So I decided I would rewrite Appalachian history from the perspective of the people in the region. And the rest, as they say, is history.
The 20/20 program. How did you become involved in this? Did one of Diane Sawyer’s “people” call you up?

I was first contacted by ABC a couple of weeks before the program was to air. The producers had finished all of their filming but were having difficulty providing the “context” for their story, and they felt they needed more information about the history of the region. Diane Sawyer decided they needed to do a taped interview with me, so they flew me to New York the weekend before the program was to air, and I was interviewed for about two hours by Diane. They ended up using only a few seconds of that interview because, I think, they were more interested in constructing an emotional story about the conditions endured by these children than in describing the context, causes and solutions to the region’s problems. But I did get the last word in the program. They quoted me saying that what Appalachia needed as much as anything else was the ability to dream about an alternative future free of the inequalities of the past.

What was your impression of the 20/20 program?

Well, I had certain expectations based on previous coverage of Appalachia by the national media. Over the past few decades Charles Kuralt, Dan Rather, Rory Kennedy, and dozens of other journalists decided to take us on a little shock walk through Appalachia, so I didn’t expect anything different from Diane Sawyer. Shock journalism, of course, often utilizes stereotypes and paints entire regions and communities of people with unfair and inaccurate generalizations. In this most recent treatment, you have shots of trash-filled yards, ramshackle shacks, toothless men and women, small children whose teeth are dotted with cavities, a young man sleeping in his truck. And mostly I was disappointed because the program didn’t delve more deeply into the causes or the problems of Appalachia, or illuminate some of the programs working to address them.

But if such images aren’t in some sense “true,” why do they still persist in national media coverage?

Stereotypes persist because they are useful, not because they are accurate. They have political power and always mask some self-interest. They are used by those in power to justify some action, some exploitation, toward those who have little power. Stereotypes in Appalachia have helped to justify exploitation of the land and the people for profit by those who don’t live in the region. These same images that we

Ron Eller, a UK history professor and former director of the University of Kentucky Appalachian Center, served as a consultant for Diane Sawyer’s 20/20 program, “A Hidden America: The Children of Appalachia,” which aired last February. His impression of the program? “Mostly I was disappointed because it didn’t delve more deeply into the causes or the problems of Appalachia, or illuminate some of the programs working to address them.”
saw in 20/20 have been used to blame the persistent poverty of Appalachia on the culture of the people rather than on basic social injustices and structural inequalities handed out by the economic and political systems. Stereotypes allow us to blame the victim.

Clearly the program dealt us some stereotypes, but didn’t it also result in some viewer sympathy and care. I read that someone sent the 12-year-old girl featured on this report the Hannah Montana-style boots she wished for. The 18-year-old football phenom who slept in his truck was offered scholarships to several Kentucky colleges, and ended up accepting one. And Pepsi has promised to send a fully equipped mobile dental clinic to supplement the Appalachian dentist who talked about “Mountain Dew mouth” and childhood tooth decay caused by constant soda drinking from toddlerhood.

I would be last person to argue that charity is not a good thing. But if we stop at charity, we never get to the point where we address the underlying issues that generated the problems that exist. We never get to the “justice” side of the social equation. And there’s a very significant difference between charity and justice. One of the points I make in Uneven Ground is that in Appalachia we have chosen paths to development that have benefited some at the expense of others, and we continue to define development in ways that bring opportunity and resources to some, but leave others with poor healthcare, poor access to education, and less opportunity for decent-paying jobs.

What “underlying issues” are we talking about? Why have the poorest communities in Appalachia remained so poor?

One of the inequalities that has occurred in the region is that when programs like the War on Poverty focused on Appalachia, a disproportionate amount of money and resources flowed into the higher population centers. There’s been a significant leveling of ground in Appalachian areas of northern Georgia, western New York state and western Maryland, based upon socioeconomic measures we tend to use; but in central Appalachia, no. In terms of income, poverty rates, educational levels, and general health, we’ve made much less progress there.

Is it a matter of these people being literally harder to reach? Is it because of the barrier of the mountains?

This is a common belief, that the land itself is to blame, its daunting geography. When in reality, the issues facing the region and the inequalities there are not a result of the landscape. I’ve traveled throughout Western Europe, Germany and Switzerland, as well as mountainous areas of the Northwest and Northeast in this country, areas that are just as mountainous as Appalachia. But the people who live there haven’t suffered from the types of disadvantages as people in central Appalachia have. The bottom line is, we can design strategies for equal economic opportunities no matter what the landscape is.

So then, what accounts for the inequality?

This is a major point I make in Uneven Ground. Our approach to helping Appalachia has been to take national assumptions about how we define progress and superimpose those ideas on local communities in Appalachia, a top-down approach that has created inequalities there. The remodeling of the education system is one example among many. The idea took hold in the 1960s that consolidating schools, as cities all over the country had been doing, would clearly lead to a better education for students in the
mountains. The problem was thought to be that there were too many small schools, two- and three-room schoolhouses, isolated all over the place. The new equation was that consolidated schools equal a quality education—obviously we couldn’t put science labs in every one of the small schools. So we built consolidated high schools that looked just like consolidated high schools anywhere else in the country.

But didn’t the model of the consolidated high school work pretty well in the rest of the country?

Some worked very well, but we aren’t talking about the rest of the country. What the new model did throughout the Appalachian region was take schools out of communities and relocate them primarily next to the growth centers of county seat communities. Then we began to transport rural kids from their homes, three hours one way sometimes. What we did is take a very important social institution away from community. We put these kids in what, in many cases, was an alien environment. And as an added “bonus” to these students, because of the distances they had to travel, they had less opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities.

Didn’t some of the students do well, despite the travel time?

Yes, and it’s not surprising which ones succeed: kids who come from middle-class backgrounds. They generally don’t have as far to travel because middle-class families tend to live closer to these schools rather than in far-flung rural areas. So their kids can participate in extracurricular activities more easily after school. Middle-class parents are more likely to be engaged in the school because of proximity and culture. Consolidated schools are often culturally alien to working-class and poorer students who have little experience with highly structured learning environments and competitive learning strategies. Working-class and poorer students tend to experience learning from a more oral, less formal, usually family-based and peer-group set of relations. What we’ve found through the years is, kids from more rural, more remote, communities are the first to drop out and are less likely than middle-class students to go on to any level of college. So what the consolidated schools approach did is design an educational system modeled after an urban environment that has created unequal ground, that has reinforced the inequality that has existed in the region.

If you were in the position to make specific changes in Appalachia to solve some of the problems you’ve been discussing, what would those changes be?

First, there are no easy solutions to the challenges facing our communities. If there were, we would have already addressed them. But my immediate response to that question is, we must look beyond an extractive-based economy to one that values and enhances the landscape and the resources that it holds, one that connects our own sustainability and future to that of the mountains themselves. We must begin by abolishing surface mining, including the radically destructive practice of mountaintop removal. Mountaintop removal isn’t necessary to the regional or the national economy; it’s just cheaper. We can continue to mine coal, gas, and other mineral resources but the impact of extraction on the land, on water, on forests, and other sensitive ecosystems must be strictly regulated and enforced.

Second, I’d like to see the decentralization of education and health care, putting schools and health providers back into smaller communities, especially rural communities where they provide not only jobs but community cohesion, collaboration, identity, and responsibility. It is much easier for a parent to be involved in a child’s education if the school is down the road instead of across the county.

What would it take to achieve these goals? Nothing less than a new generation of leaders for Eastern Kentucky who dream and think creatively. Appalachia, and especially East Kentucky, is one of the most creative places on Earth. Our musicians, artists, writers, and storytellers make magic out of nothing but dreams. This same culture can surely create new and innovative ways of thinking about what makes a good life and how to achieve it.