

ON BEING APPALACHIAN
Cherokee/Clay Senior Games & Silver Arts
Essay
Sheilah Queen
April 4, 2025

One of my elderly relatives lived in a log house in Yadkinville, North Carolina. It was built in the 1800s, and he filled it with antiques. As a ten-year-old, I remember standing in his pasture, marveling at the rustic charm of the cabin. Two of my cousins have written books about the Appalachian way of life, so perhaps it was ingrained in me. However, I have always been proud of the people from where I was born and their traditions.

Geologists describe the Appalachian mountain range as "disorganized" due to the centuries of rain and erosion. Eons ago, the region was flat and covered in limestone, coal, clay and thousands of caves. Rain washed away the dirt around these underground obstacles, creating the distinct ridges and hollows that characterize the disorganized landscape. The Appalachian mountain range spans almost 2,000 miles from Canada to Central Alabama. I grew up in the Smokey Mountain section of the region, living in Nantahala. The area is a popular tourist destination, and has attracted out-of-state residents into our area, being drawn to the beauty of the mountains that we native residents have always loved.

Religion plays a significant role in the lives of the mountain people. As someone who grew up in the Bible-belt, I have witnessed the strong influence of Christian values passed down by our parents. Our community is centered in the church with events like Homecoming Day and week-long revivals. We also believe in the importance of helping our neighbors, and in times of hardship, such as a house fire or expensive medical bills, the entire community rallies together, organizing fundraisers to help support those in need.

Throughout history, the isolation of our geographical area has taught its residents to be self-sufficient. The only way people got around in early Appalachia was by foot or horse and wagon. The roads were treacherous and barely wide enough for a horse and wagon to pass through, and funds were limited. There was no running water, and it had to be carried from a nearby creek or spring. Stacks of firewood filled their yard. Life was not easy, but they had a strong work ethic, and took pride in their work. Growing up, my grandparents taught me to work hard, and "always do your best." Times are easier now, but the lack of many good paying jobs in our area have sometimes left people feeling somewhat disadvantaged and having to do with what they have.

Families used to have to produce their own food. In the 1800s, our ancestors grew their own livestock, and raised chickens. Everyone in the family had to help with the vegetable garden. North Carolina is still an agriculture state, and many of us still enjoy growing food for our own family. Beans, potatoes, corn and greens have been staples in our diet. Residents long ago, knew how to live off the land, picking poke salad and other wild food. They also hunted and fished. To them, these animals weren't wild game, but livestock they didn't have to care for.

The area's natural beauty and resourcefulness have carried over into the fine craftsmanship for which our people are known. The early settlers not only crafted their homes, but also all the furniture within them. They created items that they both wanted and needed. Quilts, pottery and woven baskets were often proudly displayed in their homes. These items not only added beauty to their surroundings, but also served functional purposes, as in the warmth of a quilt. The natural resources of the region allowed for the creation of vibrant and colorful pieces. Although only a few individuals continue to practice these skills, their work is still often showcased in craft fairs.

Our mountain region heritage is deeply rooted in storytelling. Folklore and legends have long served as means of sharing wisdom, preserving history, and providing entertainment. Appalachian stories were handed down through oral tradition rather than being written down. Each family cherished their tradition, retelling their family stories, until all its family members seemed to know them by heart.

Music is also a crucial part of Appalachian culture, serving as a powerful form of expression. Through songs, the community shares stories of struggle, resilience, love, and togetherness. Traditional instruments such as the fiddle, dulcimer and autoharp have long been associated with the region's music, and the practice of oral transmission helped preserve these songs for centuries. In modern times, efforts are still being made to keep the music alive through music festivals and by teaching instrument skills at folk schools like John C. Campbell.

The elements that define the meaning of Appalachia are diverse. We have an appreciation of the natural beauty that surrounds us. We highly value the teachings of the past, and have a deep love of home and family. As one quote says, "Appalachian culture teaches us the value of hard work, resilience, and community; it's a place where people come together to support one another and lift each other up."