Mountain People, Mountain Lives

“The invisible people need to be made visible”—Anne Woodford

Alex Macaulay and Elizabeth McRae, Western Carolina University

INTRODUCTION

For seven years, students from Smoky Mountain High School in Sylva, NC have worked with history faculty at Western Carolina University on the Mountain People, Mountain Lives Oral History Project. They have listened to the memories of the local, recent immigrants, recent residents, young professionals. These men and women tell of migrations, great and small, that took people to away from Appalachia and across the world. They describe the coexistence of continuity and personal resonance of the community, its internal and external migrations, and struggles from south of the Rio Grande to the Smoky Mountains were shared and shaped.

They shared their experiences with us, their ideas, and you know, think it's opened up a bigger sense of the world, you know? Sometimes in a small rural area like we live in, people tend to not have a bigger sense of the world, you know? So, with other people coming in and bringing their vision and their ideas, and you know, their life stories, I think it’s opened up a lot.”—Lin Forney

In 1960s Freedom Schools’ model, its all-volunteer staff offers year-round educational programs for children and adults, runs an emergency food pantry, and partners with churches to promote racial understanding. In addressing the present, current, increasingly Latino, community, Forney transforms her sense of community, her roots in a segregated past, and commitment to racial justice to sustain an institution that addresses poverty, immigration, the historical preservation of African Americans, and diverse community needs.

WORK AND COMMUNITY

Discussions of work structure many of the oral histories. For Randy Hooper, Bryson Farm Supply meant employment as a high school student and skills to support a career in agriculture. There, he also found his wife—the daughter of the store owner. Later, he employed insiders—family members and longtime residents. He continued to hire interested students from the school and played out in school classrooms and playgrounds, local diners, family-owned businesses, and international non-profits. Overall, they testify to the depth and breadth of this Appalachian community providing intimate, honest and meaningful descriptions of this Appalachian community providing its importance.

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At the Pigeon Community Center, we try to get that bond back to where community is family and taking care of each other and helping each other out when needed.”—Lin Forney

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INSTITUTIONS THAT SERVE

In 2016, Lin Forney, Director of the Pigeon Community Multicultural Development Center in Haywood County lamented that the history of the modern civil rights movement in western North Carolina has not been properly acknowledged. She and her husband, William Wilkerson, founded the center in 1995 and made it into a civic opportunities. As Lin has done, the Pigeon Community Multicultural Development Center has done so as well. The Pigeon Community Multicultural Development Center is one of the many organizations that have been working to foster a sense of community where agricultural work was valued and where folks sought the Ku Klux Klan and City Hall bureaucrats to become the first African American business owner in Waynesville, NC. It has been a struggle, but many victories have occurred. The decline of communal bonds forged out of struggle. The Pigeon Community Multicultural Development Center provides an opportunity to reflect on these individual experiences and stories testifies to the dynamic coexistence of continuity and change within this Appalachian community.

TAKEAWAYS

Schools:
• Oral histories in western North Carolina suggest that Appalachia is not a remote region.
• Our Appalachia is a boundless place with an identity not limited by geography, race, religion, class, politics, sexuality, or nationality.
• Reflect the futility of the dichotomies so often employed: isolation v. cosmopolitanism, white v. multicultural, rooted in place v. adaptable and vibrant; conservative v. liberal.
• These dichotomies fail to describe or encompass the history of the institutions or the people who built them.
• Western North Carolina is shaped by national and international trends of in and out migration that have long reflected a global population in a rural mountain region.

Methodological:
• High School students trained in oral history are particularly well-situated to record a rural community’s history.
• Collaboration between local residents, high school students, and university region or a people defined by isolation.

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