RAMP HOLLOW
Losing Land and Livelihood in Appalachia

Steven Stoll

This is a book about people who grew their own food. It is also about the stories we tell ourselves about settlers, peasants, campesinos, smallholders, or simply agrarians. Its principal subject is the household economy of the Southern Mountains, a region known as Appalachia. In the years I spent preparing these chapters I found critics who said either that agrarians worked interminably for little gain or that they didn’t work enough. Both views can’t be true. The apparent contradiction between futile drudgery and laziness has nothing to do with how much time smallholders actually spent in their gardens. Instead, these are two ways of saying that they waste their time and resources no matter what they do.

This is a book about the history of Appalachia, but it is really about two versions of human economy. It’s concerned with the changes agrarians experienced during the last four centuries, in which they moved from autonomy to dependency following the takeover of their fields and forests. I am interested not only in how and why smallholders lost land and livelihood but in the ideas that circumscribed that loss. I am interested in how dispossession became part of progress.

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I want to propose a more radical notion of displacement, one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable.


The State is rapidly passing under the control of large foreign and non-resident landowners. We welcome into our State the immigrant who comes to us with the idea of home seeking and home building with all its profits to the State, with its family ties, with its clearing of the forests, its building of church and school houses … But the men who to-day are purchasing the immense areas of the most valuable lands in the State, are not citizens and have only purchased in order that they may carry to their distant homes in the North, the usufruct, of the lands of West Virginia, thus depleting the State of its wealth to build grandeur and splendor in other States. In a few years at the present rate of progress, we will occupy the same position of vassalage to the North and East that Ireland does to England, and to some extent, for the same reasons.

--Governor William MacCorkle, *Inaugural Address* (1892)

Mountains fend off centralized authority. Roads exist seasonally, washed out by rivers and creeks. Surface area on an incline screws up estimates of the distance between points. Nothing moves in a straight line, and time slows down. In the American highlands, two people within sight of each other atop parallel ridges could be days apart by horse.

The English scholar and critic Samuel Johnson took a trip up the Scottish highlands in 1775. He posited that elevation predicted whether a people would be loyal to their monarch or in constant rebellion. Mountaineers live in savage freedom, he said, “ignorantly proud and habitually violent,” where “every new ridge is a new fortress.” These blasted states within states, Johnson grumbled, were “so remote from the seat of government, and so difficult of access, that they are very little under the influence of the sovereign, or within the reach of national justice.” The taxable wealth of the flatlands grows in plain sight, laid out like a picnic. Johnson measured mountain wars not in years, but generations. “As mountains are long before they are conquered, they are likewise long before they are civilized.” Writing in 1857, Friedrich Engels argued against Prussia’s impending invasion of Switzerland. “Military men will recite the names of a dozen mountain passes and defiles, where a handful of men might easily and successfully oppose a couple of
thousands of the best soldiers.”¹

The highlands that stood between North and South became a running debate during the Civil War. A Kentucky reverend theorized that even if the Confederacy won its independence from the Union, it would never dominate this mountain empire. “It is a region of 300,000 square miles, trenching upon eight or nine slave States, though nearly destitute of slaves itself; trenching upon at least five cotton States, though raising no cotton itself.” Nothing, he said, could be more preposterous. Northerners sometimes praised the mountaineers who fought on their side as partisans for freedom. A writer for the St. Paul Press compared slaveholding to malaria and the cotton-bound coastal plain to an infested swamp, but the “peaks of the continents are bulwarks against oppression: and from mountain valleys has often swept [the] most fearful retribution to tyrants.” But appraisals like these did not outlive the 1860s and neither did the idea that mountains would never be conquered.²

... Weeks after Lee’s surrender, snow still melting on the roads in the spring of 1865, an agent for the Department of Agriculture witnessed “an eager crowd of strangers, on horseback and on foot,” treading their way though the narrow valleys, “watching for oil bubbles to rise to the surface on the margins of streams.” The geological reports came one after another, and their conclusions sounded much like this one. “The amount of coal in the Kanawha and its tributaries, Elk and Coal Rivers, is incredible. There is nothing equal to it anywhere.” Another said, “The coal-beds increase in thickness and number east of the Big Sandy.” These sources urged investors to get in while they could. They said the state was empty, undeveloped, nothing but “a squatter's farm.” Corporations formed. The legislature of West Virginia chartered 150 joint-stock companies in 1866 alone, with names like Sand Hill and Mud Lick Oil Company, Marrowbone Oil and Mining Company, Great Kanawha Petroleum Coal and Lumber Company, Hartford Oil and Mining Company, and on and on. The state gave its blessing to manufacturing companies, banks, and railroads.³

... Corporations chartered by the state and backed by jurisprudence accomplished what no invading army could have. They delivered an ax to the neck of the peasant economy within half a
century. Forces from within mountain society and changes that took place before industrialization mattered just as much. Dependency has more than one cause. Yet by 1900, if not before, the farmers and graziers of Appalachia had lost the material foundation of their autonomy, a delicate lattice of ecological spaces. The center of this world was the homeplace.

Their mountain fortress did not protect the plain folk from the onslaught of capital, but for a time their households did. Appalachia did not stand apart from the overall capitalist transformation of the United States during the nineteenth century. Still, that did not mean that capitalism had transformed the ways that households labored, reproduced, and planted. A domestic mode of production can and often does thrive within a highly commercialized economy. By the early nineteenth century mountain Appalachia had settled into a pattern of gardens, maize, and woodspasture.

The homeplace was, first of all, a house. Horizontal log construction traveled with the backwoods settlement culture from its hearth in the Delaware River Valley. While botanizing in the 1770s William Bartram saw low-slung buildings made of tree trunks, “stripped of their bark, notched at their ends, fixed one upon another, and afterwards plastered well, both inside and out, with clay.” A long sloping roofline created a covered porch for eating, drying laundry and meat, churning butter, hanging tools, relaxing and playing. Grass plugged the gaps between the logs, and chestnut bark made the roof. Very often a cabin consisted of one room, with a plank floor (or no floor) and maybe a detached kitchen. A woman born and raised in such a house recalled “one big room … the kitchen and the living room and everything together.” Two cabins placed side by side with a chimney on each end was a “double pen.” An open passage between the two structures created a “dogtrot.” Enclosing the passage around a central chimney made it a “saddlebag.” The house and yard concentrated the commodities that came from the wider landscape.4

The most intimate clearing was the garden. Every homeplace had its own provision ground--a space as large as two acres given over to vegetables and fruits. Beans and squash formed the mainstay: greasy cut shorts, half-runners, Kentucky wonders, Logan giants, and peanut beans, prepared by boiling for hours with cured pork. Mountaineers liked their beans big and ugly--
mottled, spotted, shriveled at the ends, and fat seeded. The people also harvested cushaw, a smooth winter squash that can grow to 30 inches and 20 pounds, using it as a starchy stable in cushaw soup and cushaw bread. They bought and sold lots of things, but they kept the garden for themselves. They didn’t sell garden vegetables because everyone grew them and connections to market were too distended and unreliable for transporting perishable foods. Residents in twenty-four West Virginia counties reported earning no money at all from their gardens in 1860, and only ten counties reported totals of $1,000 or more. Wyoming County’s figure of $2,140 breaks down to average annual sales of $5.50 per farm. Averaged across the state, household gardens earned $56 each. Yet the garden, by itself, did not produce a thriving livelihood.

In 1860 mountain farms were some of the largest in the United States, but no one looking at a vine-strewn garden would have seen that. Almost half of all families in Clay County, Kentucky, cultivated 30 acres or less though they owned or borrowed extensive areas up to ten times that size. The key measure for understanding the agroecology of the mountains is cleared or improved land compared to unimproved. In Upshur County, West Virginia, forested acres out numbered cultivated 2 to 1. In Webster County, bordering Upshur to the south, it was 20 to 1. In Nicholas County, just south of Webster, it was 40 to 1. Northerners tend to think of a farm as consisting of its open and planted spaces, with a spate of wood somewhere in the background. But that’s a twentieth-century image. It’s corn and soybeans in Illinois, lettuce in the Salinas Valley of California, or any other mass commodity. The West Virginia farm, as it took shape in the late eighteenth century and until the late nineteenth, depended on its uncultivated spaces to carry much of the burden of subsistence and commodity production.

The forest commons, not a cleared extent of maize, shares the closest kinship with the cabin garden. It might seem odd to compare the most and least domesticated spaces, but they both provided green things to eat in hungry seasons. With winter stores of beans and fruit preserves diminished and the first squash harvest months away, people bought what they could in town and exchanged with neighbors. But the forest made up every shortfall. Households foraged for uganost, a Cherokee word for wild greens. They brought home tooth worth (a horseradish-like root), corn salad (a sweet flower), and especially ramps (a leek). The early-spring forager searched the leaf litter
for three ovate leaves, hoping to find a colony of ramps. The word comes from German, rampen. It isn’t clear if the same word refers to the onion as well as a platform that connects two surfaces, but that would make sense. Ramps connected the seasons, allowing households to get from one time to the other without starving. Highlanders made soup from ramps and ate them right from the ground. (Cut them into one-inch pieces and parboil. Fry bacon in a large iron skillet to just before it becomes crisp. Drain the ramps and place them in the hot bacon fat. Season with salt and pepper and fry. Serve with a sliced hard-boiled egg. Or fry the ramps [without boiling] and scramble an egg.) The forest commons made an existence that partook of the entire landscape. Rather than make life hard and mean, it offered the security of diversity. It spread risk.  

Between garden and forest they planted grains, especially maize. As a summer crop, it could be planted after rye. Like rye, it could be used as cattle and hog feed and could be turned into sour mash for whiskey. Unlike rye, it had a much deeper place in the human diet. Mixed with flour, it made bread. Fried in lard, it provided the essential starch at just about every meal. Combined with beans, it formed a complete protein. No other plant crop added value to wedding dowries. But most of all, corn gave them food and feed than any other plant for the labor and the seed. Most of all, it yielded about twenty bushels per acre, or one thousand pounds. That would have been an unimpressive return to any farmer in Nebraska at the time, but it was still two to three times the yield of small grains and for only sixteen man-days of labor a year.

A varied landscape allowed mountaineers to spread risk across domestic and feral niches, each offering its seasonal products. Frederick Law Olmsted traveled though the highlands during the 1850s, chatting up everyone he met. This strategy got him invited to cabin after cabin for supper. Olmsted concluded what many others did, “Extreme poverty is rare in the mountains, but a smaller proportion of the people live in a style corresponding to that customary among what are called in New England ‘forehanded folks,’ than in any other part of the civilized world.” By forehanded he meant prudently frugal, not poor. Even a visitor as unsympathetic as the anonymous author of “Poor White Trash” described plenty of food during a two-month stay in eastern Kentucky. “Every mile or so, a little log-cabin sits in a varied growth of beans, potatoes, maize, and tobacco.” He saw squashes and melons, paw-paws and apple trees. The author joined a
Sunday dinner, sitting elbow-to-elbow at a table wedged tightly between the front door and the bed. The meal began with a dozen watermelons before moving on to chicken, bacon, green maize, beans, potatoes, sweet potatoes, apple pudding, biscuits, and cake.\(^9\)

A full larder ensured cultural and biological reproduction, but the makeshift economy also depended on exchanges that would bring new and novel commodities to the homeplace. Mountaineers found it difficult to launch their grains into circulation, and they never did so with their garden crops. Of the 7.8 million bushels of corn grown in West Virginia in 1860, most of it never left the farm. It didn’t pay for its own transport to distant markets. Locally, it had no value at all, since every cabin grew it. The key exchange commodity south of Pennsylvania and west of the Blue Ridge was not a plant but an animal.

Since the eighteenth century, visitors traversing the roads leading to the uplands witnessed the visible wealth of otherwise hidden farms lowing and snorting their way to Lynchburg, Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, and other regional cattle markets. Herders migrated northwest to Ohio and west into the “settlements” of bluegrass Kentucky. A century later, in 1870, livestock (including horses) accounted for 73 percent of agricultural value in West Virginia. Animals slaughtered on the homeplace or sold for slaughter accounted for 21 percent. And yet, while livestock made up a larger portion of farm value than in nearly any other state, its absolute value was among the lowest in the Union, just $432 per farm, placing West Virginia twenty-ninth out of thirty-seven. Cattle were the most valuable product households sold, but households didn’t sell very many of them.\(^10\)

And yet, using dollar amounts to make sense of the agrarian economy is misleading. Such numbers lead to the conclusion that the people were poor. But poor really refers to people who depend on money and have too little of it. It tells us less about people who liked money but could live without it. Worse, such numbers often carry the assumption that farmers on the low end of farm income strove for high incomes but failed. What if they made no attempt? The question circles back to peasant economy. The agrarian household as a human institution was not organized for profit. It could not exceed its ecological limits and labor capacity. This explains why highlanders, who produced cattle specifically for exchange, behaved with near indifference toward
the survival of the animals.

Mountain cattle lived in the mountains, not in barns or pastures. These were hard-bitten animals that dwelled in open woodland. Olmsted never saw cattle under shelter. Even in heart of winter, “they are only fed occasionally, hay or corn being served out upon the ground, but this is not done daily, or as a regular thing, even by the better class of farmers.” It was just as common to meet mountaineers who never fed the beasts at all, never took them off the mountain, only to find “heaps of them” emaciated and frozen when the snow melted. One author familiar with the practice confirmed that cattle “seldom have any sheds to run to, but are accustomed to ‘rough it’ under the lee of hills, or timber, as best they may.” On one hand, letting the animals eat wild grasses gave farmers something for nothing. On the other hand, farmers got what they paid for. The gaunt creatures that crept out of the icy woods could be fattened to increase their value or sold for $10 to $18 to lowlanders who fed them before resale. Cows and sows not only had to survived the cold but wolves and bears. Olmsted listened as neighbors in North Carolina counted the number of pigs they had lost to predators during the previous two months. “It amounted to three hundred.”

The logic that permitted this die-off reveals the relationship between ecology and economy. Free-range cattle took from the general fund of matter available in the forest without making any demands on the household. If money came from trading the animals or if they could be bartered, then dishes, dresses, candy, or tools entered the cabin. Woodspasture allowed mountaineers produce things with exchange value from the ecological base without eroding it. Looked at another way, they didn’t really lose anything by allowing predators to hunt up hundreds of pigs. Instead, they hedged against the uncertainty of money and markets. Keeping bears in business, so to speak, kept bears on the menu just in case it ever became necessary to hoist one over a spit. And yet, money was crucial--not because they lived on it but because it made life worth living. They didn’t need it in order to eat or reproduce themselves, but without it they existed narrowly, by barter and borrow with kin, when they wanted things from the wider world.

Woodspasture, however, did not encompass the entire business of cattle in the mountains. A more intensive practice also came out of the colonial era, and it involved corn. In the 1780s Blue
Ridge settlers began feeding corn to cattle. They invented the feedlot. The method came from the region known as South Branch, in Hardy County, the northwestern portion of what is now West Virginia. Cattle up to four years old spent summers fending in the forest before being turned out to pasture in the fall. The animals did not starve during the winter but were corralled in eight to ten acre fields where they ate corn on the stalk. (In 1820 one cattleman said, “this plan has been proved here for forty years.”) A middling rancher might have owned between twenty and thirty head. Some of them got rich, turning cattle wealth into land and land into more cattle.¹³

Lowland tourists sometimes missed altogether or miscomprehended the rich mountaineer. In 1848 Charles Lanman, an author and painter, visited Tesnatee Gap in northern Georgia looking for Adam Vandever, famous in those parts as a hunter. Lanman found a small man about sixty years old with a “weasel face,” gray eyes, and a long white beard riding a mule named The Devil and Tom Walker. Lanman treated Vandever with contempt. “I told him that the first portion of the mule's name was more applicable to himself than to the dumb beast.” The mountaineer grinned a rack of broken teeth. Lanman collected colorful hunting adventures, like one in which Vandever killed a bear with a knife in order to save his dogs. He walked away sure that the poor idiot had nothing to his name. “He tills, with his own hand, the few acres of land which constitute his domain. His livestock consists of a mule and some half dozen of goats, together with a number of dogs.”

Not according to the census. Either Lanman entirely missed or chose not to mention a greater stock of wealth. A year later, an enumerator recorded herds of livestock on the Vandever farm, along with a diversity of products, including wheat, oats, rye, corn, peas, tobacco, honey, milk, butter, garden vegetables, and fruit. By 1870 the same Adam P. Vandever owned 800 acres valued at $700, with a total taxable property valued at twice that amount.

Other metropolitans wrote with amazement about grizzled men living in smoky cabins, their half-naked children rolling around with the pigs, with holdings larger than feudal estates. One known as Uncle Billy owned 1,200 acres where he raised top-quality cattle and let out small parcels on shares. Edward Pollard called Uncle Billy’s farm “a beautiful domain on a broad tableland, probably three thousand feet above the sea level.” Yet Pollard also noted that rich
mountaineers lived in the same cabins as those of lesser means. Two New Englanders in West Virginia said the same: “They neither know poverty nor riches, the well-to-do living about the same as their poorer neighbors.”

Uncle Billy and Adam Vandeever represented a highlander entrepreneurial class. We get a larger view from the census. In 1870 West Virginia had 285 farms larger than 500 acres, less than 1 percent of the nearly 40,000 farms in the state. Counties in the Shenandoah Valley included the highest number of large farms and the highest value of livestock. Harrison County, with twenty-one large farms, recorded $400,000 in cattle value. But the bottom 50 percent of counties had only ten farms larger than 500 acres. Of these only five counties had a livestock value higher than $100,000. McDowell County produced just $10,000 worth of cattle, hogs, and horses. Large farms did not have row upon row of vegetables, tobacco, or cotton. They had forest and pasture for commercial ranching businesses.

A grazier became rancher under certain conditions. One needed to own land with secure title, thus remaining in control of woods. Internalizing forage for hundreds of head required deep, broad river bottom for hay production. A ranch needed to be close to consumers, either coal camps or market towns, for easy sale. Finally, cattle needed to increase in price with demand, thus capturing a larger and larger share of the value created by the infrastructure of logging and mining. Only a few graziers made this transition, the favored few who received attention and resources from the state of West Virginia. “The ‘come-and-go-easy’ methods together with the ‘pennyroyal cow’ and the ‘razor-back hog’ are rapidly becoming a thing of the past,” wrote the State Board of Agriculture in 1899. The same institution had no advice for the majority striving to stay in place and make a little money. Though farms of between 3 and 99 acres were the largest agricultural constituency, at 79 percent of the total, West Virginia behaved as though they didn’t exist.

Most households did not have a choice as to intensify or not, and they did not enter capitalist social relations as entrepreneurs with proliferating opportunities for profit, even if some did find those opportunities. Mountaineers had long been part of the capitalist world system by producing commodities sold into it, like whiskey, lumber, and cattle, without they themselves
becoming subject to wages. As a rule,” writes Robert Brenner, “the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist property relations cannot occur as the intended result of the rationally self-interested actions of individual pre-capitalist economic actors, even given the appearance of new opportunities for exchange or new technologies or new demographic trends.” Instead, the transition usually came about under four linked conditions: population pressure, the loss of the homeplace itself by dispossession, ecological destruction, and the dwindling value of mountain commodities. Subsistence regimes die by a thousand cuts, and the wounds proliferated after 1860.17

The first cut came from within mountain society. The plain folk increased at a terrific rate, placing stress on every cultivated and uncultivated space. The counties that make up the Appalachian Plateau, including most of West Virginia, increased 156 percent between 1850 and 1880, before any significant logging or coal mining. Average farm size in West Virginia declined from 350 acres to 173 acres in the same period. The farm acres available per person fell from 34 in 1850 to 21 in 1880. This drove an increase in the ratio of cleared to forested farmland from 30 percent to 58 percent between 1870 and 1920. More people demanded more cleared space, making necessary more labor—not for profit or surplus but just to keep up with their own needs. And when coal and lumber production took off, it caused a flood of humans, creating instant towns. Charleston went from 1,000 residents in 1850 to 11,000 in 1900. Ten years later it had doubled to 22,000. All those people should have provided a market for local farmers, but the quality of soil, the yields, and the general capacity of mountain farms had begun to decline.18

In the early 1920s a seventy-year-old man told a journalist of the changes he had seen. “The farm I inherited was 225 acres, of the which forty-five were in cultivation. Now it is occupied by ten families and 150 acres are in cultivation.” That meant that each family ate from 15 acres, with only 75 remaining in the forest commons. The journalist commented, “Year by year the axe clears the steeper slopes and the plow tears them open … Up a two mile ‘branch’ you may find twenty to thirty farms, becoming more Lilliputian as you mount to the head of the ‘branch’ where the valley has narrowed into a ravine.” More and smaller farms and loss of the commons for grazing and hunting posed unprecedented challenges. Still, why should these have been existential problems?
Why when each individual had more cleared space for food production, not less, did the subsistence culture enter a tailspin?19

Agrarian people have a long history of adapting to population pressure. The relevant thinker here is Ester Boserup, an anthropologist who in 1965 wrote against the ruthless determinism of Thomas Robert Malthus. The dower English parson thought the problem could be stated in mathematical terms. Too many people impinging on too little land equaled starvation and death. It is too much for this narrative to go into all the class and social implications of Malthus’s erroneous thinking. He knew nothing about agriculture and made no distinctions as to modes of production or advances in knowledge and practice. He made a blanket statement that appealed to apologists for enclosure and imperialism, who argued that “surplus population,” lacking employment and food, caused social stagnation, crime, and chaos. Malthus gave them exactly what they wanted. He made it possible for them to ignore the social causes of class formation and inequality by appealing to an invented natural order.20

Ester Boserup did not attack Malthusian social thought but the notion that peasants and other smallholders faced historically inevitable decline. They rarely starved, she showed, because they could always spend more time to their gardens, apply more manure to their fields, and generally redouble their labor. “The reaction normally to be expected would be an increase of the average number of hours worked per year so as to offset the decline in return per man-hour.”

No Arcadia here. Adding to working hours resulted in more food but less leisure. It interrupted chatting with neighbors or just sitting around. But Boserup’s model added up to something more remarkable than it sounds. She undermined the Malthusian notion that people will starve, that decline is inevitable and necessary, that the solution to smallholder distress is to replace them all with steam-powered harvesters. As Netting put it, “Boserup’s model of intensification was revolutionary in part because it cast doubt on evolutionary scenarios that made technology the prime, indeed the sole, engine of agricultural change.” And her conclusions argue that no economic imperative exists that makes seizing frontiers or peripheries necessary for providing more food.21

Modest increases from additional hours worked should have been easy in Appalachia.
What if a family only had fifteen acres, as in the above example? Take that small farm out of West Virginia, for a moment. It might have included a large garden, an orchard, three acres of corn, space for chickens and pigs, a stretch of meadow, and another for hay. That should have been plenty and within the capacity of a family of five or six. Safe subsistence can be achieved on a third of that—even less. Add to it this hypothetical example a modest division of labor among neighboring farmers, including cash from berries, apples, or eggs, and a family could have done well. So why didn’t this come to pass? Why, instead, did Appalachia experience starvation and dependency?  

Environmental, social, and geographical factors made the transition Boserup observed in other parts of the world less likely in West Virginia. The problem was not that the Belchers and their legacies did not understand intensive practices. Everyone who plants a garden intensifies labor and yields per unit of area. But mountaineers approached the landscape with longstanding assumptions about the environment that they could not adjust or abandon without someone offering them an alternative. Though Boserup did not know of them, she well understood what they faced.  

When population growth becomes so rapid, in a pre-industrial economy … new and difficult problems, unknown under slow or moderate growth, present themselves. The cultivators must be able to adapt themselves quickly to methods which are new to them, although they may have been used for millennia in other parts of the world, and—perhaps even more difficult—they must get accustomed, within a relatively short period, to regular, hard work instead of a more leisurely life with long periods of seasonal idleness.  

This last clause is not a rebuke. It merely acknowledges that more extensive systems operating in fresh forest and fertile soils return lots of food for little effort, leaving time for leisure. Mountaineers needed to adapt themselves quickly to a worsening situation without knowing how. Instead, they continued to clear forest for new fields rather than do the harder, longer work of generating fertility on the farm by penning cattle and collecting manure.  

restorative system would have required them to build new structures and plant different crops. Most of all, they would have had to internalize the ecological base itself by collecting all those feral forest niches, from subsoil to canopy, into their cleared spaces. It can be done, but it’s not easy. The rapid loss of topsoil caused by plowing up steep slopes made constant shifting necessary even though they ran out of space to shift in.

For the first time, the mountains themselves closed in on them. In 1916 the geographer J. Russell Smith asked a mountaineer what he did when his corn showed signs of worn-out land.

“I kin turn the field into grass a couple o’ years.”

“Then will you put in corn again?”

“Law, no; by that time hit will be so pore ‘twouldn’t raise a cuss-fight.”

“Then you must begin all over again with a new one?”

“That’s what we ben a-doin.”

No higher altitudes awaited them and no frontiers. Cotton reached south to the Gulf and wheat west to the Rockies. Some of them left for the Plains to become small-scale commodity producers on arid quarter sections, but perhaps not many, because moving cost money and entailed risk. Trapped in place by neighbors, private property, and the topography itself, mountaineers had no way to make up their losses. Smith said that what might have been an agricultural Eden had become “a slum with a high death rate.”

J. Russell Smith was the Ester Boserup of this time. He believed that nothing made the demise of the mountain farm inevitable. Highlanders simply needed new ways of doing things. It was not for lack of existing knowledge that they suffered. Look at Wisconsin and Illinois. The transformation of the Prairie into the Corn Belt came from an unprecedented mobilization of government, industry, and universities. Smith had his own (somewhat eccentric) development plan for West Virginia. Farmers needed to stop plowing and instead cultivate tree crops, like chestnuts, that prevented erosion and brought good prices elsewhere. He approached them empathetically, constructively, evaluating their problems thoughtfully, toward their betterment.
To those who condemned the mountaineer as a savage, Smith responded, “He is doing the best he can … He should be taught better, and that is the task of the schools and of the great organizations that we have built up for the dissemination of agricultural knowledge. We have a Federal Department of Agriculture, many State departments, State colleges, State experiment stations, sub-stations and a host of peripatetic demonstrators. Can they not among them develop and teach a mountain agriculture that will make the mountaineer prosperous and leave him his mountain?”

No one else in the United States asked that question. And yet it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the Appalachian Plateau could have thrived in the late nineteenth century. Between 1840 and 1880 almost every commodity had declined in quantity and value. As the mountains slipped, the flatlands surged. Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin had matched or surpassed the Plateau in grain, potatoes, cattle, dairy products, and even hogs by 1880. In the 1870s West Virginia farmers brought in 138 bushels of corn per acre. In Wisconsin they harvested 223. The Prairie and Great Plains attained tremendous economies of scale compared to the mountains because their large, square, flat, and unobstructed fields were ideal for the machinery coming out of Chicago after the Civil War.

The Homestead Act of 1862 worsened every downward trend in the mountains. It should be known as the Small Farm Impoverishing Act, since by shifting population to highly productive soils it saturated markets with cheap grain that out-competed that of other regions. (It finally outcompeted the farmers who grew it, impoverishing them as well.) All told, the yields of mountain farmers deteriorated in absolute terms at the same time that their land became commercially marginal relative to other regions. The effect was to cut them off from the cash that made their lives viable. They turned into what they had never been before—the caricature imagined by political economists, subsistence savages who live hand-to-mouth, lacking exchanges in money because they have nothing to exchange.

But the cut that came closest to killing them had to do with their hold on the homeplace itself and the overlapping property rights that rarely worked in their favor. Before the mineral men and the logging engineers arrived, mountaineers began to lose control of their land piece-by-piece,
hollow-by-hollow, without an armed invasion or a shot fired.

Humans appropriate in order to live. What we eat no one else can eat. Where we garden no one else can garden. Groups of people have appropriated spaces for seasonal hunting and fishing. New England towns created public lands for grazing and gathering firewood and limited these uses to residents. Appropriation is a usufruct right. Its legitimacy comes from active use. Private property is different. It carries an exclusive right whether land is used or not. Governments that create private property usually eliminate other kinds of rights because the two are usually incommensurate. While vernacular appropriation allows for many users and different uses, private property is an act of enclosure. It is bounded and named on cadastral charts, making it into a commodity. 

Mountain households acknowledged both the use value and the exchange value of land. In 1889 Thomas K. Totten wrote a deed in the form of a will. Totten wanted to ensure that his wife and five children would inherit his land and take from it “a good and peaceable life maintenance.” He meant this literally. His will transmitted very useful things, like kitchen furniture, two horses, two cows, a heifer, two calves, eight hogs, and assorted blacksmith’s tools. But while Totten wanted his family to remain on the homeplace, he stipulated that this land could be sold, “if the family ever became needy of anything.” The same document revealed that Totten claimed more than 1,300 acres that he admitted he did not own. He anticipated that he or his family would gain title to it somehow, and he brazenly assumed that its eventual sale would pay his outstanding debts. The deed-will reveals the economic realms Totten dwelled within. He played both sides of the makeshift world, tending to his household in the most immediate sense while making a gambit for gain elsewhere.

The deeds themselves were improvised documents. Owners usually filed at the nearest county courthouse, but not always. Sometimes money changed hands with a farm, but not always. The deeds themselves were written in the local language of landscape. (One farm embraced an area from the white oaks by the bend in the creek, west to the smooth rock, 50 rods north to the three chestnut trees, then east as far as the dogwood on the top of the spur, southeast to a walnut
stump, and so on.) And while deeds look like impersonal legal instruments, they often transferred land within families. A succession of owners, all with the same name, took turns on a given farm. Between 1875 and 1895 members of the Belcher family made at least 100 exchanges, with approximately seventy-five of those between individuals named Belcher. Land went from Tobias to Andrew in 1871 and again in 1875. Owen deeded to Tobias, who turn it over to Henry, who turn it over to John T., who turned it over to Andrew. Belchers sold to Lamberts and Tottens. Since the families were intertwined by marriage, land ping-ponged inside the same kin group.

The duel meaning of the homeplace makes it interesting. It was life maintenance that could always be traded or sold. Yet the same people made a mockery of the real estate transactions that defined the class of backcountry grandees, like George Washington. Private property had existed in Appalachia since the 1770s, but it did not put an end to capillary practices. A variety of use-right customs continued under the awareness and without the knowledge of absentee owners. For about a century, households came and went on land they claimed to own but never really did or used at will without paying anyone. This is what began to change in the 1840s.

The game of squatting in the crevices worked only as long as absentee landowners remained remote and unwitting. Mountain households traded land and proliferated for a century within one of the largest estates in the history of North America. Its first owner was Wilson Cary Nicholas, a Virginia Federalist who served as United States Senator and governor of the Commonwealth. Virginia didn’t sell it but gave it to him as a reward for service. By 1795 Nicholas likely owned 620,000 acres, including almost the entire drainage of the Guyandotte River in what became McDowell County. The next year, he sold all of it to Robert Morris, the financier and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Morris added it to the 8 million acres he owned throughout the Southern Mountains.

But though Virginia legislators and governors did not exactly say so, they regarded these fiefdoms as investments. The benefits might be delayed, but they anticipated the extension of cotton and tobacco into the reaches of their western counties. Turning coves and hollows into capital required that they first become private property. Otherwise they were dead assets,
wilderness liabilities. In the meantime, while Virginia waited for Morris to found an inland empire, the swidden-and-cabin folk took whatever they wanted. And this is where things become murky.

At some point it became clear that Robert Morris was not planning to break up his millions of acres into plantations. What would Virginia do about the thousands of households living on his land? The state had two interests. It wanted to encourage the settlement of the backcountry but without depriving Morris of ownership. Virginia could have upheld the principle of adverse possession, giving title to anyone who lived on and improved abandoned private property for twenty years. Governments create rights to property, and they can modify those rights in any number of ways. But Virginia chose to protect Morris’s title as long as he continued to pay his taxes.

Settlers continued to file suit against Morris for rights to his land. Southern attorneys and judges who handled these actions began to refer to the granted, surveyed, and deeded class of ownership as *senior patents*, meaning that they came first and were founded on the unassailable legal transfer of property. A senior patent was not bound by use or residency requirements. But any settler who lived on a senior patent for more than twenty years without provoking an ejectment suit accumulated rights adversely. Squatters often ended up with a limited form of ownership, called a *junior patent*. Think of it as “subprime” title. Judges actually used the phrase “color of title,” meaning the appearance or façade of private property. Unlike senior patents, junior patents extended only to land that settlers plowed and planted, only to land they actually used.

This looks like a victory of usufruct, but it wasn’t. The junior patent did not replace the senior. Both existed simultaneously. Awarding squatters limited privileges had the effect of protecting grandees from adverse possession. Senior holders could buy and sell land from under the feet of the junior holders and then file ejectment suits to get rid of them. In other words, to get around the problem of an active agrarian class on land that belonged to an inert capitalist class, Virginia created an appropriative right within private property. Like peasants on a manor, settlers could buy and sell this right until the lords decided to make a move.29
Robert Morris died in 1806, and his land became delinquent. Word spread. White farmers running from the encroaching power of planters and the valuation of land understood that territory locked up for decades would soon become available.

Sometime around 1820 William “Billy” Floyd Belcher and Sarah Elizabeth Belcher Kingery moved with their four or five children from Tazewell, Virginia, through Peeled-Chestnut Gap to enter the Appalachian Plateau in what became southern West Virginia. They settled at a place known today as Big Four, taking up the north side of Elkhorn Creek, part of a vast tributary system. In 1831 Virginia gave them what they had been waiting for. Morris’s holdings were officially confiscated. A grace period allowed anyone with a claim to any part of the estate until 1838 to pay Morris’s back taxes. Any land not redeemed by then would be exposed to sale. In the meantime, the Belchers proliferated and moved along Elkhorn Creek, spreading out over an area of about 200 square miles. Billy Belcher might never have owned an acre of land in his life, but his son did. Between 1850 and 1857 William Belcher, Jr. received senior title 326 acres in five patents, all located on the ridge separating Tug Fork from Elkhorn Creek.30

Some mountaineers became landowners, but most continued to trade deeds for land they held tenuously, if at all. They might have believed that after the breakup of the Nicholas and Morris grants, ownership reverted to them, that junior patents became senior. They were wrong.

Speculators and industrialists came rushing in after 1838. They sent attorneys to county courthouses to record transactions, watching a given piece of land for an opportunity. Some of these investors and joint-stock companies paid Morris’s back taxes and picked up pieces of his estate before a single acre went for auction. But this generation of capitalists was not like the last. By the 1830s it had become clear that making money on mountain land meant extracting from it. It meant industrial development, not passive speculation. The Belchers and other folk went after ownership at the very moment that the first corporations form, and the two ran right into each other.

A Philadelphia industrialist named William H. Edwards acquired senior patents to more than 100,000 acres in three counties originally surveyed and granted in 1795. Edwards immediately incorporated the Paint Creek Coal and Iron Mining and Manufacturing Company. He then filed
ejectment suits to remove all those who either squatted or held junior patents. But while Edwards could have won every suit he filed, each ejectment required its day in court. He faced years of litigation, and he might have been advised by attorneys to find another way. Days before the first trial, Edwards made an offer to the mountaineers. He would not contest their deeds if they agreed to sign over rights to any minerals beneath their fields and woodlots. Likely bewildered and misled into believing that they had prevailed, many of the residents compromised their already compromised titles.\textsuperscript{31}

The mountaineers did not know what it would mean for Edwards to exercise this right. Digging out coal meant spectacular excavations, roads cut through hollows, creeks and branches dammed, buried, and eventually poisoned. What they actually owned, in effect, amounted to little or nothing as a consequence of what they traded away. The same thing happened all over western Virginia and elsewhere in Appalachia during the 1840s and 1850s, so much so that in some places major disputes over who owned what had been resolved by the time full-throttle industrialization began. More than a century later, Cody Dickens of Raleigh County, West Virginia, remembered how the Rowland Land Company arrived while his father-in-law was hoeing corn. “Make a deal with you,” said the company men, “You make us a deed to the mineral right, and we’ll make you a clear deed to the surface.” The old people, said Dickens, “didn’t know what they was doing.”\textsuperscript{32}

Then came the Civil War and Reconstruction. Jed Hotchkiss, the Confederate cartographer, returned from the Valley Campaign in western Virginia convinced that he had seen among the richest coal seams in the mountains. He boosted Flat Top Mountain to Philadelphia capitalists and anyone else who would listen. In 1873 one group hired Hotchkiss to make a survey of the region. He suggested a former Confederate captain and civil engineer named Isaiah Welch to do the footwork. Sniffing around in McDowell County, Welch documented a seam thirteen feet thick at Laurel Creek. Over the following decade the Flat Top Coal Company formed around a series of claims to the minerals in the vicinity of Flat Top Mountain. In 1883, the year that the first carload moved out, the company began to acquire land along Tug Fork and Elkhorn Creek, homeplace of the Belchers.\textsuperscript{33}

[Map of Tug Fork and Elkhorn Creek about here]
The company moved quietly at first. Its subsidiary, the Flat Top Land Trust, kept meticulous notes on every acre near Tug Fork—surveying, checking county records, and examining deeds to see if anyone missed a step. They waited to pounce. But investigators found local practices perplexing, if not absolutely maddening. “It would seem that all the lands of James M. Totten [father of T. K. Totten] were forfeited because none of them appear to have been consecutively on the books. While the lands entered year to year are so entirely different in quantity as to puzzle one how they came there.” One tract changed hands in whole and then in part within the same family. Then it was deeded to family members who are not named. Then it disappeared from the books for a year before reappearing. A farm might be described in a deed with one owner but entered at the courthouse as having a different owner. “How could land certified by the [tax] auditor as having been forfeited and not redeemed be alternatively redeemed?” Obviously, because not every agreement and arrangement took written form.34

[Photograph of timber and mineral buyers from 1880s, Eller, 55, Alice Lloyd College Archives]

A series of remarkable letters reveal direct dealings between mountain households and the Trust, sometimes through speculators. In one instance, John C. Belcher wrote to the Trust after the sale of his father-in-law’s farm to request that the elderly man be allowed to live out his life there. Belcher had spoken to a manager the year before, in 1882, at the courthouse in McDowell County. “You told me that I could have the benefit of the orchard and the grazing of the place[,] he wants to cultivate some ground[,] if you have no objection[,] he will take care of the fencing as well as he can[,] write to me as soon as possible[,] yours truly John C. Belcher.” The letter illustrates a common arrangement in the process of dispossession: use-rights separated from ownership as an intermediate step to removing people.35

A second letter is more complicated. A member of the Belcher family wrote on behalf of a family member or a neighbor. The recipient was James W. Davis, a land speculator and attorney who represented Flat Top Coal.

Enclosed you will find leases of Hill H. Cecil. Cecil is on your land in a House he built some
time ago and left it and another man had taken possession and sold his improvements to a Mr Edwards. Mr Edwards wants Cecil to give him possession[,] you will have to decide between them … Truly yours[,] G. W. Belcher.

Cecil had written leases to land owned by Davis, who appears not to have known that Cecil lived there. Cecil then leased, sold, or abandoned it to another man. That man then sold it to Edwards (who could have been the same William H. Edwards who was buying up land in the same region at the time). Edwards did the due diligence and found that the last recorded deed belonged to Cecil. Three weeks later Belcher again wrote to Davis, telling him that Edwards had “taken out a warrant from a justice in McDowell and has dispossessed Cecil.” Edwards convinced a judge to uphold his deed.36

What about Davis? As far as the state of Virginia was concerned, he was the only owner. That did not stop three people from exchanging deeds for the same land at will. And yet, something else was going on here. Belcher (along with whoever really authored the letter) knew about Davis and decided to give him the whole story. Did they want to stop Edwards by alerting the holder of the senior patent? Or did they take pleasure in grinding whole mess in Davis’s face? The letters reveal that speculators and financiers didn’t have control over their property. If Edwards believed that he had the strongest title, then he and Davis would have to fight it out in court. In the meantime, the next person to move into the cabin probably hunted at will and planted a garden.37

When Belcher met Davis at the courthouse in McDowell they talked about land. Mountaineers wanted money but often did not have it. For years they saw their output falling as other regions surged in productivity. When demand for land began to intensify, any stretch of river bottom not part of the homeplace must have looked like a stack of dollars. Tottens and Belchers sold lands to Flat Top Coal during the 1880s. Rather than swap deed for deed or barter land in some other way, the new buyers showed up with cash. Their offers must have sounded compelling. Yet the game they played with capital no longer had the same rules. The families surely benefited by selling, but they might not have realized that the farms they signed over would
never be sold again. They likely did not understand that the new owners extinguished all common use rights. These sales, in short, fed a process of enclosure that removed land from the mountain economy, once and for all.38

By 1887 the Flat Top Land Trust likely owned the easy-to-acquire patents. The pile of notes and lists that I read at the small archive in Bluefield, West Virginia, could only have been written by someone traveling by horse from creek to branch in order see who lived where, knocking on cabin doors, seizing a vacated farm in one hollow and writing a check in the next. This work required a fixer who knew the topography and represented the company. The fixer was Isaiah Welch. In one instance, the managers sent Welch to protect them from adverse possession. “In regard to the 3225 acre tract 2/3 of which is owned by the trust … [you are] advised to put someone on the property at once and take possession, as without this is done there is no title. I want you to attend to this as soon as possible. If there is no house on the tract, you had better select someone and have a cabin put up at once and the Company will pay for it.” Another fixer watched a piece of land for twenty years, keeping track of who used and how often. When the Totten family failed to pay taxes for five years, the company got hold of it.39

Most of all, the company won these battles because its managers knew things that the targets didn’t. They knew the future routes that railroads would take and the future locations of towns. They knew the value of the coal itself. “Capt Welch has just returned from his trip to Tug,” wrote a manager to the president of the Trust, “The Hunt option is very short and must be decided soon. It is very valuable tract and we ought to own it in view of the R.R. extension West.” They were talking about a parcel of riverfront at the junction of Elkhorn Creek and Tug Fork where they planned to build a town to service mining operations in the area. (Today Welch, West Virginia, is poor and almost empty, but it still serves its original purpose.) Flat Top Coal brought in attorneys who knew the entire history of title and intimidated residents into selling. One farmer turned over 740 acres for $3.58 each, a big sum to him but a trifle to the company. Flat Top and its subsidiary Pocahontas Coal pulled billions of dollars from the Tug Fork over the following century.40

A year later, the Trust made a triumphant announcement: Flat Top Coal now owned, “A vast unbroken … coal bed traversing an area of over 200,000 acres, undisturbed by a single break
or fault and until recently comparatively unknown to the commercial world.” They owned, that is, the surface and mineral rights they needed to begin large-scale mining. Yet though mountain families along Tug Fork had been dispossessed, many others lived at a distance from company designs. Their first encounter with industrial capital did not involve mining but logging.41

It looks like a locomotive with a ship’s mast. It clanks and spits, chugs steam, and sweats grease from its wheels and pistons. The power from the coal is released by the engine and transmitted to long cables that extend from the mast every which way. Workers attach them to fallen trees, pulling or skidding the logs hundreds of feet to a railroad flatbed. During the 1880s the high-pitched whistle of the steam skidder echoed in the coves. The men worked in crews. They entered a forest with axes and two-man saws and cut everything, leaving slopes barren except for stumps, branches, bark, and dried leaves that burned whenever a spark from a wheel or a cinder from a tinder box fell on the detritus, creating forest fires without forests. Dorie Woodruff Cope described an alien landscape on the flame-covered, cutover hills--an eerie orange sky, pine needles shooting like darts, and “the hissing sound of sap boiling” as the fire came closer to where she fought it alongside the families of other lumber workers.42

Mountain people had always cut trees and sold them. In winter and spring, when nothing else went for sale and money ran low, they felled a giant yellow poplar or black walnut. They would build “splash dams” to hold back the spring floods until logs could be rolled into the creeks. Opening one of these earthworks released a torrent that heaved the logs with tons of debris down the hollow to the nearest river. The logs were then lashed together into rafts and steered west, toward the Bluegrass or Cincinnati. John Fox, Jr. traveled down the Kentucky River during a spring flood. “Sweeping around the bend I saw a raft two hundred feet long at the mouth of the creek--tugging at its anchor--and a young giant of a mountaineer pushing the bow-oar to and fro.” Rafting logs, however, only worked in one direction. To reach the Seaboard they assembled yolks of oxen to haul the trunks overland to sawmills sometimes set up by buyers. This was the cottage phase of logging. Households directed it, managed it, and took all profits.43

As modes of production, cottage logging and industrial logging had only trees and saws in
common. The former sustained households and forests while providing a modicum of money. The second funneled profit to shareholders and resulted in a transformation so devastating, that it marks the end of an epoch in the history of the Southern Mountains. The clear cutting of the Appalachian forest did not happen all at once but in different locations and altitudes at different times. Yet taken as a single event, it was a dispossession by environmental destruction. It literally uprooted the ecological base of highland society, setting off the transfer of tens of thousands of people from the subsistence economy to wage earning. They tumbled and splintered down the creeks into camps. Combining logs and workers in sawmills resulted in lumber, the sale of which accumulated capital. Like their own labor in the form of wages and the trees they had known in the form of boards, the landscape they had always known now confronted them as an alien force.44

Companies that formed around logging in the Southern Mountains purchased land on a scale that the coal companies had not yet contemplated. Tracts of 10,000 to 100,000 acres and more recalled the land grants of the previous century. They required a transportation infrastructure. Railroads went down along the rivers and up the tributaries, into almost every hollow. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was no longer the only line. Joining it was the Winchester and Potomac, the Wheeling, Pittsburg and Baltimore, the Huntington and Big Sandy, and the Ripley and Mill Creek Valley Railroad, along with many others. With skidders attached to railcars and sawmills throughout the region, the take accelerated into the twentieth century.

They proceeded with the blessing of the governing economy. By the 1870s the United States had begun to integrate natural resources into the structure of federal authority. Bernard Fernow was among the first of an emerging class of forest professionals who joined a widening collection of agencies. In 1888, as the third Chief Forester of the United States, Fernow directed eastern capital away from the cutover hills of Maine and toward the Blue Ridge. He beheld a nation-sized vault of photosynthesizing wealth--10 million acres, “The greatest body of uncut hard wood timber of the eastern United States,” ash, aspen, beeches, and cottonwood; black oak, black walnut, and black locust; red maple, red oak, and red pines; along with chestnut, birches, buckeye, cedar, cherry, and hickory. Fernow told of stands of poplar with an average diameter of 30 inches, each with a volume of 400 board feet (one square foot, at one inch thick). Every acre yielded 16,640
Then came the take. Of the 10 million acres that had never been cut in 1870, only one and a half million stood in 1910. In that year, one county manufactured one million board feet a day. One thousand mills turned out a total of between 1 billion and 1.5 billion board feet each year from 1907 to 1914. By 1920 the Appalachian forest had yielded 30.4 billion board feet. A newspaper editor and booster marveled at the mobilization. “Tremendous onslaught has been made upon the forests … New sawmills are building every day, new territory being opened, and it is safe to say that now the total cut of all the mills is no less than 500,000,000 feet a year.” The largest trees went first, then the smaller ones for telegraph poles and railroad ties. “The forests are being rapidly destroyed,” said the editor. A northern lumberman, probably a manager, explained his company’s plan as rip and run: “All we want here is to get the most we can out of this country, as quick as we can, and then get out.”

The take happened so fast and with such efficiency that nineteen years after Fernow had advertized Appalachia to industry, another Chief Forester predicted doom. After inspecting 5,000 square miles of eastern woodland, Gifford Pinchot concluded that the United States would enter a “timber famine” within twenty years without conservation. The Weeks Act of 1911 followed, creating the Monongahela National Forest, a new role for the governing economy, in which the raw material of industry would be guarded and managed for future consumption and the employment of capital. But notice that the mountaineers had no place in the landscape. They had no way of living on denuded hillsides and no rightful place at all in national forests. Both private and public planning ruled them out.

The system of forest and farm staggered. For a while, graziers borrowed forest in neighboring counties to make up for losses closer to home. They gained the habit “of sending their stock to be summered in the woods, in distant and less improved sections, under the care of some settler of the locality.” But the relentless take finally reached even the highest elevations … The people had been cornered, their homesteads made into islands, their economies hollowed out. “The woodlot,” said the forester clinically, “must be made to yield the product which has heretofore been drawn from the larger adjacent forests.”
G. D. McNeill depicted these losses in homely fiction informed by a life spent hunting and fishing outside Pocahontas, Virginia. “The Last Camp Fire,” one of a collection of stories published as *The Last Forest*, is about the great deforestation in the lives of three men. It opens with displacement and disorientation. Zeke Miller owns a prosperous farm in Kansas, with a ten-room house and 1,000 plowed acres, but he has never felt at home on the Great Plains. He was born in a log cabin. Depressed and recently separated from his wife, Zeke decides to journey back to the Big Black, the mountain of his youth, where he meets up with two childhood friends, Dock and Tone, for one last fishing trip.

On the train entering his home ground, Zeke counts seventy boxcars go by, their open doors revealing stacks of short spruce logs from the Cheat River, one hundred miles away. Pulpwood, a man informs him. “Zeke thought of asking whether there was any lumbering about the Gauley or Big Black, but he dared not make the inquiry.” Yet the evidence mounts for his worst fears. The pulpwood is like a trickle of blood. Next he passes the home of old family friends. “The dwelling and the neatly built rail fences were gone. The railroad ran squarely through what Zeke reckoned to be the site of the McClune garden.” The farm was now a lumberyard, with a band saw consuming a giant white oak at the moment that Zeke passed by. The railroad through the garden emphasizes the totality of the violation, the utter destruction of the mountain home. “He had loved the mountains and the woods,” writes McNeil of Zeke, “The trees were personal friends of his, and it made him angry to see them cruelly used by these aliens who, for the sake of dollars, were come to destroy the mountain country.”

The three friends pack up food and tackle and walk the trails of their youths, but nothing is as it was. They walked in almost constant apprehension of what they will see over the then next knob. In one scene, “The spruces were gone!” In their place they find skidroads where logs had been dragged, scrub and briers where they remembered trees as wide as kitchen tables. But nothing prepares them for the ascent that would give them a view of Big Black.

“Boys, boys!” Says Dock, at last. “What a shame! What a shame!”

Where, in the other days, the boys had seen blue waves of spruce and hemlock, stretching
away mile upon mile, the men now beheld desolation--bare hills, ribbed with shale, from
which fire and erosion had swept every vestige of soil; long mountain ranges without a tree
... a monotonous panorama of destruction, as far as the eye could run.

“Well, fellers,” said Zeke, “I knowed it wuz bad; but if I’d dreamed it wuz like this, I’d
never a asked ye tu come up here. I’m sorry I seen it.”

Their revulsion is all the worse for the powerlessness in Dock’s voice. None of the three knows
anyone involved. The few voices from lumbermen are anonymous, almost disembodied. And the
three never discuss a public sphere or means of redress. There is no political process that they
could have used to set their interests against those of the outsiders.49

The end of the woodlot meant the end of the old subsistence. When chestnuts and tanbark
disappeared, when cattle could not be raised on woodspasture but only on hay grown or
purchased, and when every hungry time demanded money to be spent at the store--everything
changed. Like the enclosure of any commons, the assault against the highland forest threw people
into wage work in order to make up the difference between their household needs and the few and
declining resources they still controlled. It yielded labor in addition to lumber. Their forests and
fields had always provided them with money, whether as whiskey, ginseng, cattle, lumber, hay, or
corn. All that was left was the garden, a source of strength and flexibility when combined with the
other two, but impoverishing without them. They had long added wages to the compliment of
household income, but wages that served subsistence were different than wages that stood alone.
Now money replaced what logging took away. “During a comparatively few years nearly the
whole population which originally earned its living from the ground has been pushed out from
places of seclusion into a whirl of modern industry,” lamented the forester Brooks.50

Mountaineers laid the track and cut the trees. It is one thing to describe how this happened
and another to understand it as political economy. Models that depict hinterland and market,
country and city, periphery and core, and so on, are abundant. One with greater promise to
illuminate the confluence of a failing subsistence economy comes from the work of an economist
named William Arthur Lewis who won the Nobel Prize in 1979 for his “dual-sector” model. Lewis
accounted for social classes, poverty, the rate of wages and profit, in a structure robust enough to include comparative natural advantages. He asserted a dismal view of subsistence economies, arguing that they have lots of people with little or nothing to do. This put him at odds with Boserup, Netting, and other anthropologists, who would have responded that there is no such thing as unproductive labor in an agrarian household, with the exception of those too old, sick, or injured to work. And yet, a badly gullied farm in a landscape denuded and infertile can be said to have wasted the labor expended on it, effectively creating underemployment.¹

Lewis said that when industrial production begins the differential in wages attracts the underemployed from the subsistence sector. The wages don’t need to be much higher than the value of food grown on the homeplace. Once this relationship begins, it changes the homeplace. If farmers make more food to provide for the new workers in the mill or mine, the price of food drops, leaving them no better than before. But since they don’t depend for their survival on money, lower prices might make little difference to them and the greater output serves their needs. But if they produce less food, for any reason, their hunger and lack of money accelerate their conversion into industrial workers. In West Virginia after the Civil War, output fell.

Desperate mountaineers looked for compromise with the companies. Some households agreed to live as sentinels over an enclosed commons from which they once took freely. Dorie Woodruff Cope grew up in the Great Smokey Mountains and recalled this from her childhood. “It was common practice for men to be paid by the company to live in cabins on land the company was claiming through legal occupancy. Most of the lumber companies used this method to secure thousands of acres of land for timber cutting.” The Elk River Coal and Lumber wrote these leases and described them in its annual reports. “We have about 100 tenants living through the mountains who pay but a small rental and are chiefly of value to us for holding possession of our land.” The tenants lived a vestigial existence. “In some cases the lease includes a house and cultivated land; in others it merely covers an old field or unimproved strip … None of the land covered by these leases can bring the tenant enough money when cultivated to pay any considerable amount.” The company asked them to report “undesirable parties” who gathered firewood and hunted. But the families didn’t stay long. From one hundred in 1908, sixty remained
in 1910. After 1912, the company never mentioned them again.\textsuperscript{52}

Leaving the mountains meant either migrating to Pittsburgh or Cleveland to work in factories or, more commonly, to logging or mining camps. Cope told of the move her family made to a high-altitude lumber camp in 1912. “My childhood was over,” said Cope, “Never again would I have the freedom I had enjoyed here in this world of rounded hills and orchards.” The accretion of farmers into industrial workers took literary form in Hubert Skidmore’s novels. Skidmore was born in Webster County, West Virginia, in 1909. He grew up after the peak of the logging boom, among barren slopes. \textit{I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes}, published in 1936, opens during a drought year between 1895 and 1900. Nat and Maw Cutlip realize that they will harvest and store less food for the winter than ever before. Maw remembers when the farm was new, the soil that turned out fat corn, the honey in the hives. Two years before Nat “had found it imperative to clear out more land, to cut deeper into the woods at the top of the field.” But the work was hard, and Nat doesn’t have the energy or optimism to do it again.

Nat decides to look for work in order to buy the supplies that would make up for the dry and failing soil. After neighbors decline to take him on as a hired hand, he turns to the mill at the bottom of the valley. Nat follows the logic forced on him. As the environment disintegrates he turns his labor into money. The money opens another world to the family, and they feel happy and secure for the first time in years. Nat brings home fabulous things for Christmas. A golden-haired doll for the youngest daughter replaces the one made of rags. One son receives a pocketknife. There are calico dresses and candy canes. Maw gasps as she opens a box of shoes manufactured somewhere far away, perhaps New England or Philadelphia. But neither Nat nor anyone like him saw the feedback loop. Additional labor at the mill drove wages down to about the level of subsistence. As more and more Nats went to work in new lumber camps, and eventually in mines, the flush of abundance diminished, even as worker productivity climbed.

Store-bought wonders introduced a new kind of depravation as the inverse of the plenty they also represented. Depending on money for survival, especially under the tight control of the logging and mining companies, was a different relationship to exchange than they had known before. They had always worked for wages or exchanges in kind, but these arrangements
augmented the household economy. Outwork served the ends of autonomy. But when selling labor for a price took over the meaning of subsistence it became a compulsion. Dorie Cope explained this dependency better than any historian ever could. “The lumber companies had opened the door to the outside world. We became aware of ‘things’—things that money could buy, things that made life easier (or harder), things to see, things to do. Our isolation had ended. They had opened a door—a door we were forced to use as an exit from our ancestral homes. Then, after the exit, the door was closed to us. We were given visitors’ rights to the land—to come and look, but not to stay.”

Dependency looked like a shack on a narrow shelf of stone overlooking the Gauley River. Skidmore described the structure that the Cutlips would call home as little more than a hen house. “Maw walked slowly about the room, looking at the thin, wrapped walls and rafters, and feeling the floor give beneath her weight.” Aunt Binney had been in camp for a while already and told Maw that the houses weren’t meant to last. Once they all moved to a new camp, these would “rot an fall to the airth.” The house reflected the family’s insubstantial existence in camp. Maw looked past the house. She tells a neighbor that she intends to return to the Knob. “Thet is the way with us all at furst!” says the neighbor, “hit’s bin six years come cold weather an we’re worser off then ever as fer as money is countable.”

Through all these changes, even as they descended into that terrifying, tomb-like, deafening darkness, the homeplace remained a dimming possibility and an ideal. Those who hung on in the hills had their misfortunes thrown back at them. One ally of the coal industry called them “forlorn and miserable in appearance and behavior … never having known or dreamed of anything better than the wretched surroundings of their everyday life.” The basis of their autonomy gutted or enclosed, they pecked and scrimped, hunted squirrels, and sent the men and boys to earn tokens that bought a bag of flour at the company store. When they lived or died by those tokens they finally became poor. They finally became the horrifying hillbillies that lowlanders had always assumed them to be.
to Cause

Cattle Kingdom of the Southern Great Plains at the peak of the long drives. The annual value of Southern livestock (not limited to the mountains) was one and a half times the Cumberland plateau 4.1, and in middle Tennessee 3.6. See Gray, 876. Roger Kennedy notes that mountains, 1.32 for the Valley. In the Kentucky mountains Gray found 2.7 pi cattle: 1.9 per person to .81 in the Valley. With pigs the differences diminished.

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Pudup, Billings, and Waller, Deforestation, and the Transformation of Agriculture in the West Virginia Back Counties, 310. L.C. Gray collected this data, comparing the mountains and Shenandoah Valley by livestock per capita. They were close in the number of horses and mules, .28 to .33. But the mountains out produced the valley in cattle: 1.9 per person to .81 in the Valley. With pigs the differences diminished--1.63 for the mountains, 1.32 for the Valley. In the Kentucky mountains Gray found 2.7 pigs per person, on the Cumberland plateau 4.1, and in middle Tennessee 3.6. See Gray, 876. Roger Kennedy notes that the annual value of Southern livestock (not limited to the mountains) was one and a half times the value of cotton in 1860. Livestock in the South embodied a value far greater than the so-called Cattle Kingdom of the Southern Great Plains at the peak of the long drives. Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause, 57. Those who spent money to fatten their beef, spent little. During the 1850s raising a steer to the age of three cost around $8 in West Virginia, compared to $24 in New York and Ohio. See


3 Oil-Dorado of West Virginia, 32; Prospectus of the West Virginia Iron Mining and Manufacturing Company; Dodge, West Virginia, 220-225; Faulkner, Speech … Upon the Mineral and Agricultural Resources of the State of West Virginia … April 10, 1876, 10, 6; Acts of the Legislature of West Virginia (1866), 141-269.

4 Bartram quoted in Williams, Homeplace, 24. Blankets and curtains created separate spaces, which could then be taken down for a dance. Visitors described beds near the back wall and the table placed near the hearth. Williams, Homeplace, 48-52.

5 Appalachia Cook Book, 42: “Mountaineers don’t look for the greenest, straightest, cleanest beans. In some cases it seems that the worst looking, most mottled beans are the old varieties that have the best flavor ... brown spots, shriveled ends, large seeds, stems, and leaves.”

6 It is not at all clear if “unimproved” included land once cultivated but left to fallow; the census poses many more questions than it answers. Taking the category at face value, I set up a ratio of acres of improved land in farms to acres of unimproved land in farms for Virginia counties according to the census of 1860. Also, this really goes for the people at the high elevations, in the hollows. Gentle rolling Taylor County fell below 1 to 1 unimproved land in farms to acres of unimproved land in farms for Virginia counties according to the census of 1860. Also, this really goes for the people at the high elevations, in the hollows. Gentle rolling Taylor County fell below 1 to 1 improved land slightly exceeded unimproved. University of Virginia, Historical Census Browser; Billings and Blee, Road to Poverty, 180-181.


8 Warman, Corn and Capitalism, 117. Farmers in Nebraska harvested 60 to 80 bushels per acre.

Nebraska State Board of Agriculture, Annual Report For the Year 1888 (1889), 243. On corn and yields, see Otto, “Forest Fallowing in the Southern Appalachian Mountains,” 55-56 and Debar, West Virginia Hand-Book, 57-60. Mountaineers produced a regional average of 37 bushels per capita, according to Gray, History of Agriculture in the Southern United States, 876, 884. “Planting more corn than was needed for one’s own annual consumption was also a calculated way of ensuring family survival.” Davis, Southern United States: An Environmental History, 145.

9 Olmsted, Journey in the Back Country, 228-232; “Poor White Trash,” The Living Age 153(June 17, 1882), 688-691; King, The Great South, 503. Two New Englanders recounted being served, in one meal, pork, potatoes, cornbread, applesauce, blackberries, buckwheat cakes with maple syrup, pies and wheat biscuits. “A Farming Experiment in West Virginia, Part II” Catholic World, 627.

10 “Although farm commodities were production for local consumption in the mountains, livestock was the backbone of West Virginia's agricultural economy. Prior to the arrival of railroads, once or twice a year mountaineers drove their stock to regional gathering points, where large herds were purchased and driven to distant markets by professional drovers.” Lewis, “Railroads, Deforestation, and the Transformation of Agriculture in the West Virginia Back Counties,” in Pudup, Billings, and Waller, Appalachia in the Making of the Mountain South, 310. L.C. Gray collected this data, comparing the mountains and Shenandoah Valley by livestock per capita. They were close in the number of horses and mules, .28 to .33. But the mountains out produced the valley in cattle: 1.9 per person to .81 in the Valley. With pigs the differences diminished--1.63 for the mountains, 1.32 for the Valley. In the Kentucky mountains Gray found 2.7 pigs per person, on the Cumberland plateau 4.1, and in middle Tennessee 3.6. See Gray, 876. Roger Kennedy notes that the annual value of Southern livestock (not limited to the mountains) was one and a half times the value of cotton in 1860. Livestock in the South embodied a value far greater than the so-called Cattle Kingdom of the Southern Great Plains at the peak of the long drives. Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause, 57. Those who spent money to fatten their beef, spent little. During the 1850s raising a steer to the age of three cost around $8 in West Virginia, compared to $24 in New York and Ohio.
The practice of not feeding cattle in winter was well observed and documented. Olmsted, *Journey in the Backcountry*, 224; Debar, *West Virginia Hand-Book*, 83-85; Dodge, *West Virginia*, 43. Henry M. Price of Nicholas Court House, Virginia, explained the custom of the country, “Cattle command the chief attention of our farmers. They are chiefly raised by ‘browsing,’ having little attention given them besides regularly salting during the summer. In winter, if kept over, they are fed with hay upon the meadows and open grass lands, which serves to enrich them without other manuring ... The fall before the cattle are four years old, they are usually sold and driven off to other counties to be grain fed. The usual price is from $17 to $20.” *Report of the Commissioner of Patents for the Year 1853: Agriculture*, Senate Document 27, 33d Congress, 1st Session (Washington, D.C., 1854), 8, 19. A correspondent for the Missouri State Board of Agriculture wrote this of the method, “I have no doubt but one-half of the entire neat cattle of this country with horses, mules, sheep and hogs go through the winter season with no more food than would be required to feed them well two years.” Quoted in Vance, *Human Geography of the South*, 149. Pigs rarely went for sale. “We only raise meat for our own use, not yet deeming it so profitable for sale as other things,” wrote one farmer. Lanman said, “his beast subsists upon whatever it may happen to glean in its forest rambles, and, when the first supply of his own provisions is exhausted, he usually contents himself with wild game.” Lanman, *Letters From the Alleghany Mountains*, 49.


Will book from Augusta County, Virginia, quoted in MacMaster, “Cattle Trade,” 143.

He sometimes spelled his name Vandivier. Ninth Census of the United States (1870), Halberstam County; Bonner, “Profile of a Late Ante-Bellum Community,” 664 (note); Lanman, *Letters From the Alleghany Mountains*, 40-43. Billy’s tenants probably included members of his extended family, whom he referred to as his “boys.” He likely charged them little, accepting food or labor in exchange for a field and garden. But he also might have taken a portion of their crop and sold it, adding to his own accumulated wealth. Pollard, *Virginia Tourist*, 170.

West Virginia had 53 counties in 1870. Another measure is to divide the value of animals slaughtered or sold for slaughter by the total value of livestock. Most of the counties with large farms also had more than 30 percent of their livestock sales for direct slaughter. Almost all cattle went for sale at some point, so the measure only says that ranchers in these counties raised their cattle to maturity and sold them directly to slaughterhouses. Data from the United States Census of 1870, Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia Library, http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php.


Brenner, “Social Basis,” 23-28. The crucial distinction is not how many head of cattle households sold or the manufactured commodities they bought, write Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee, “but rather to what extent agrarian households were able structurally to reproduce themselves independently of these exchanges.” Billings and Blee, *Road to Poverty*, 164; Pruitt, “Self-Sufficiency,” 335.

Ross, “Pocketed Americans,” 171. One researcher assessed Kentucky between the 1890s and the early 1920s. He found about the same conditions as West Virginia. Improved land in farms, which included old field in its use as pasture, was 30 to 40 acres on farms that averaged 144 acres. Davis, Geography of the Mountains of Eastern Kentucky, 52-60.

For an example, see Wakefield, View of the Art of Colonization, 66. But even if Malthus was right about the rate of growth of people and food, he gave that vague fact his own particular spin. He said that the mounting and ravenous poor should die rather than sink everyone else. Never mind that the rich produce less by their own labor and consumed more of everything. Malthus privileged them over those who labored on farms and factories, suffering from the consequences of enclosure, unemployment, and starvation wages. Nevertheless, Malthus and his dismal “lifeboat” thinking still influences the way economists think about development, poverty, and technology. For a marxian critique of Malthus see Foster, Marx’s Ecology.

Netting, Smallholders, 270; Boserup, Conditions of Agricultural Growth, 64, 44.


“If population is increasing in communities of this type a change directly to annual cropping or multi-cropping imposes itself.” Boserup, Conditions of Agricultural Growth, 41; Gray, “Economic Conditions and Tendencies in the Southern Appalachians” 7-12; Jordan and Kaups, American Backwoods Frontier, 76-78; Debar, West Virginia Hand-Book, 83-85.

Davis, Geography of the Mountains of Eastern Kentucky, 61.

Smith, “Farming Appalachia,” 333.

Salstrom, “Agricultural Origins of Economic Dependency,” 275. The same marginality describes New England as well as Appalachia, and in some ways the same thing happened in Connecticut as West Virginia. See Clark, The Roots of Rural Capitalism. We will consider W. Arthur Lewis’s “duel-sector” model in another section.

Environmental easements and land trusts are examples of private property with public purposes. These make up very little of total estate of private property in the world. Works of environmental history that consider different kinds of appropriative and communal use-rights include White, Roots of Dependency; Judd, Common Lands, Common People; McEvoy, The Fisherman’s Problem; Jacoby, Crimes Against Nature.

“In the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia, Charleston. Major Henry Totten [son of T. K. Totten] vs. Pocahontas Coal and Coke Company” (1908), typescript in the West Virginia State Archives.

This is a sample of the language: “If an entrant goes on a boundary under a junior patent, entirely or partly within a senior grant or survey, he will be deemed in actual possession of only so much as he actually encloses.” If a junior titleholder has land that partially impinges on or overlaps with a senior grant, he only really owns that part that does not impinge on the senior grant. The law continually upheld the senior over the junior patent. All of this has to do with laws of adverse possession. Second Decennial Edition of the American Digest: A Complete Digest of All Reported Cases From 1906 to 1916, vol. 1 (1917), 103. In Cook et al v. Raleigh Lumber Co., argued before the Supreme Court of West Virginia (June 16, 1914), the holder of a junior patent was sued for collecting firewood outside of boundaries that marked the senior patent held by the lumber company. Southern Reporter … Containing all the Decisions of …, vol. 82, 327.

Elkhorn Creek flows into Tug Fork, which meets Levisa Fork to form the Big Sandy, which drains into the Ohio River. Patents for William Belcher, Jr., listed in the online catalog of the Library of Virginia:

“I pleas at the Court House of the County of Logan before the Circuit Superior Court of Law and Chancery for said county on the 13th day of October, 1846,” Pocahontas Land Company Papers, Eastern Regional Coal Archives, Craft Memorial Library, Bluefield, West Virginia. The laws were known as the forfeiting laws of 1831 and 1835. Grattan, Reports of Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia, Volume 13, 794. I don’t know if Belcher secured title by adverse possession on forfeited land (meaning, no senior patent over him) or if he paid for his land.


33 G. W. Duhring (manager) to E.W. Clark (president), (February 1, 1889), Pocahontas Land Company Papers, Eastern Regional Coal Archives. George Byrne, “Pocahontas-Flat Top Coalfield,” *Manufacturers’ Record* 52(July 25, 1907), 33.

34 The subsidiary was also known as the Flat Top Coal Land Association. “Note 1--Redemptions,” in General Letters (August 20, 1887 to July 2, 1889) and “List of Surveys Within the Maitland Davis Survey ... February 1887,” in the Flat Top Land Association Papers. More from the survey list: “On the waters of Laurel Creek ... Edmond Lester claims 97 acres. I could not find any record of a survey or grant, in Virginia or West Virginia, to answer the local description.” “On the waters of Burke and Buzzard Creeks, near the Indian Ridge ... John T. Belcher claims several tracts, could not find any description. He claims as heir of Samuel Lambert.” I also used “List of Landowners and Letter From M.A. Miller,” Pocahontas Land Company Papers (1888), Easter Regional Coal Archives.

35 I have kept Belcher’s grammar. Letter from John C. Belcher to M.A. Miller (February, 12, 1883), Letters, 1883-1885, Pocahontas Land Company Papers, Eastern Regional Coal Archives.

36 Letter from G. W. Duhring (General Manager) to E. W. Clark (President Flat Top Land Trust), January 11, 1884 and January 31, 1884. Belcher only wrote the letter and appeared to have no role in it. He took the opportunity to ask Davis about an important case regarding West Virginia land, in which the state repossessed delinquent land and gave it to the schools of Wyoming County for sale. Maitland, the dispossessed owner, appealed and lost. Belcher wrote, “Please let me know what has been done with McClure vs. Maitland about the Wyoming School land in the Court of appeals.”

37 Letters from G. W. Belcher to J. W. Davis, January 11 and 31, 1884, Letters, 1883-1885, Flat Top Land Association Papers, Eastern Regional Coal Archives. Another Belcher wanted to buy 100 or 200 acres from Davis. On July 16, 1885 John T. Belcher wrote, “I have signed your lease and would have been glad to have seen you as I have 2 tracts of land lying parallel with each other and you own a string between them about 2 or 3 hundred yards wide and about 3/4 of a mile long. I would like to buy yours if you will sell it.”


39 An engineer and surveyor who testified that he had “followed the occupation” of the land in question for twenty years. “At different times during the last twenty years I have made surveys on Tug River and Sand Lick Creek of same, and I have been more or less familiar with the land in this neighborhood during this period.” Deposition of J. E. Wagner, civil engineer for the company and land surveyor, in “Major Henry Totten vs. Pocahontas Coal and Coke Company,” 117.

40 Letter from Duhring to Clark, (January 1888 and January 23, 1888), Flat Top Land Association, Eastern Regional Coal Archives.

41 One of the last parcels of land belonged to Hiram Christian and his son Maston. The company drove hard to get his land in place because it was crucial to their mining operations. E. W. Clark to G. W. Duhring (January 23, 1888): “The Maston Christian tract comes to the creek on the second right hand fork of Sand Lick and commands the outcrop. When Maston Christian can give title to the 82.9 acres lying within the lager tract we will then have a connection with the Hiram Christian tract and be able to mine the coal through the Maston Christian Tract. The Clear Fork Tract must be mined from Tug River.” The same letter has details of the sale of the Christian homeplace.

Letters from Flat Top Land Association Papers, Eastern Regional Coal Archives. The speculator named lager was Andrew Yeager, who owned about 2,000 acres along the Greenbrier River. Part of this land is detailed here: http://image.lva.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/drawer?retrieve_image=LONN&dir=/LONN/LO-7/180/180&image_number=0047&offset=%2B33&name=Grants+No.114++1857-1858&dbl_pgs=no&round=. Another named speculator was John H. Divine. It is possible that
Christian leased or rented the land from Divine, as suggested in a dispute over these lands in 1906, detailed here: State v. Harman, Submitted January 25, 1905, Reports of Cases Determined by the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia, Volume 57 (Morgantown, 1906), 447. The company announced its unbroken ownership in an internal report of February 1, 1889.

42 On fire and mountain logging see Message From the President of the United States Transmitting a Report of the Secretary of Agriculture in Relation to the Forests, Rivers, and Mountains of the Southern Appalachian Region (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902) and Bush, Dorie: Woman of the Mountains, 132-133.

43 Eller, Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers, 89-91; Fox, Blue-grass and Rhododendron, 63.

44 For the most important recent arguments, see Salstrom, Appalachia’s Path to Dependency; Dunaway, First American Frontier; Simon, “Uneven Development and the Case of West Virginia”; Pudup, Billings, and Waller eds., Appalachia in the Making.

45 Fernow, Great Timber Belt: The Timber of West Virginia, 5, 10.

46 Kephart, Our Southern Highlanders, 383-384. Market logic drove the depletion of forests. James Watt Raine observed, “The best timber was cut along ago. As the price of lumber rises, and the sawmills pay more for logs, another swath still farther off may be cut.” deforestation.” See Land of Saddle-Bags, 226-227.


49 McNeill, “The Last Campfire,” 122-154. Among the first literary writers to notice the scale and scope of the taking and to account for the psychological loss was Francis Courtenay Baylor. See Baylor, Behind the Blue Ridge (1887), 16-19.

50 Brooks, “Forestry and Wood Industries,” West Virginia Geological Survey, 5(1910), 44-46; Pruitt, “Self-Sufficiency,” 335; Fox, “The Future [of] Kentucky’s Feuds, Colliers 33(January 18, 1904), 14. Generally, the plain folk did not exchange wages for work. In 1870 West Virginians disbursed the lowest annual wages of any state in the country—$48 per farm. By comparison, Minnesotans shelled out twice that ($95) and Californians almost ten times as much ($437, an average composed of tiny sums paid to armies of harvesters on thousand-acre wheat farms). In Mercer County, households paid an average of $3 for all the work they hired out in a year. In Wyoming County they paid $29. In Logan and Nicholas Counties they paid nothing at all. Only sixteen of the state’s fifty-four counties paid higher than the state average. Calhoun County represented the mean at $33 per farm in annual wages paid. University of Virginia, Historical Census Browser.


52 Dorie Woodruff Cope described struggles over home and wages when she told her story to her daughter in Bush, Dorie: Woman of the Mountains, 131. The annual reports of the Elk River Coal and Lumber Company contain substantial evidence of these leases. “The leases are, therefore, made to protect your title rather than as a source of income.” “Financial Statement For the Year 1908,” Elk River Coal and Lumber Company Collection, West Virginia State Archives. I also consulted “Financial Statement For the Year 1909,” “Financial Statement For the Year 1910,” “Financial Statement For the Year 1911.” The company knew the complexity of removing “undesirable parties entirely” because custom protected gathering firewood. “In case of damage done by stock no relief whatever is allowed, nor can hunting on the property be stopped except on petition of a number of free-holders to the County Court.” Their attorney said that only a civil suit could stop these practices, and it probably wouldn’t work. For the founding of Elk River Coal and Lumber
Company see Lewis, *Transformation of the Appalachian Countryside*, 74. James Lane Allen also noticed them: “The buying up of the mountain lands has of course unsettled a large part of these strange people. Already there has been formed among them a class of tenants paying rent and living in their old homes.” Allen, “Mountain Passes of the Cumberland,” 561. John Fox Jr. also saw companies lease cabins back to households, “thus leaving a friendly guardian to keep, through possession, their titles clear.” Fox, “Future Kentucky Feuds,” 14. King, *The Great South*, 503.

