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Women in the Appalachians: Standing Strong with Deep Roots

The Appalachian region of the United States has several mountain ranges, including the Catskill Mountains, the Allegheny Mountains, and the Blue Ridge Mountains. The land mass includes portions of 13 eastern states, is 2400 km (1500 miles) long, and varies from 160 to more than 480 km (from 100 to more than 300 miles) in width.

Because many areas in this vast region are isolated as a result of mountainous terrain, its inhabitants are unable to share in the economic prosperity found in more populous urban areas. For this reason, there is often a perception among people living outside the region that "Appalachian" is synonymous with poverty and cultural deprivation. People who live in the mountains are referred to by the derogatory term "hillbillies." While there is passionate love for this region in those who either live in the area or can trace their roots to mountain homes, there is often a sense of embarrassment about being from "Appalachia." After several discussions involving faculty and staff on the campus of Ohio University Zanesville, located on the fringe of Appalachia, it was decided to con-

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FIGURE 1 Elizabeth Baird Hardy. (Photo by Rhonda McGee)



FIGURE 2 Folk Singer Anndrena Belcher. (Photo by Rhonda McGee)

vene a conference to encourage scholars to explore the characteristics of the Appalachian culture that generate pride and devotion to the region. It was hoped that a significant addition could be made to the body of literature describing the heritage and accomplishments of the people of the region, especially the women, because there was limited information about them, although their influence from one generation to the other has been strong.

In late October 1999 the first conference was held with over 100 people from 15 states coming to share, learn about, and ponder the essential characteristics of Appalachian culture and the contributions of women to the way of life and traditions that have evolved in the isolated areas of the Appalachian region. Conference organizers were surprised and thrilled by the enthusiasm of the participants and, with some financial support from outside nonprofit foundations, have expanded upon the original conference concept for each of the past 3 years.

Nationally known musicians, writers, scholars, and directors and producers of films are selected as primary presenters (Figures 1 and 2). Six months before the event, a call for papers solicits speakers for smaller sessions. Applications come from the college faculty in history, literature, social work, art, music, women's studies, and a variety of other fields. All are eager to meet with others who share their interest in the Appalachian region and to have their work published in the conference proceedings. Other women from the Appalachian region, who make their contribution as artists, nurses, poets, and in many other ways, also participate. The result is a 3-day event that 1 participant has described as her annual personal retreat.

The young learn from the old, who fondly describe a love and respect for nature and the recognition that people are just part of a universe that they have to protect, not its masters. They tell stories about their parents and grandparents migrating from the Celtic and Highland regions of Europe to the Appalachian Mountains of America because it was much like their mountain homes on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. The importance of the family in the Appalachian hierarchy of values is made clear, as is the importance of religion. The result is a growth of pride and a feeling of belonging to a clan much larger than the regional community.

The conference has expanded to include a Saturday component for schoolteachers so that they can help children recognize that the word "Appalachian" can be a term to describe a proud culture with European roots rather than an insulting adjective referring to a person who lives in poverty in an isolated mountain region.

A new goal of conference organizers is the formation of a women's leadership group to encourage young women from the Appalachian region to aspire to positions of responsibility not often considered possible for someone living in a relatively isolated area with a high incidence of poverty. Because the conference attracts women who are role models, there is a plan to recruit them to speak to young women in high school and in college about serving in the legislature, running large businesses, or excelling in academics. It is anticipated that we will receive corporate sponsorship for this worthwhile project.

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