

What Does this Have to Do with Living in the City Today?

In the years following World War II, 3 million people left the Appalachian region. Because of worsening economic conditions, including mechanization and closing of the mines, the people were forced to leave in order to survive. Looking for work, they headed for large cities. Detroit, Chicago, Columbus, and Indianapolis became home to many. Cincinnati, because of its proximity, was the most frequent destination. Today, 34% of Greater Cincinnati's population is of Appalachian descent. They represent an important part of Cincinnati's workforce and add to the cultural and civic life of the city.

Yet, Appalachian people and their culture have not always been embraced in the city. The early migrants found the city a strange place and had a hard time adjusting. In return, the city did not always understand the ways of these newcomers. Hillbilly jokes still persist. People are still made fun of for the way they talk. Many Appalachian people deny their own heritage because of these stereotypes.

The Urban Appalachian Council believes it's important for people to know their roots, to pass their heritage on to their children, to celebrate in ways that are their own. We think all cultures deserve to be acknowledged and respected.

We invite you to examine your own heritage, whatever that may be. And we invite you to explore Appalachian culture—we think you'll like what you find.

Suggested Reading

"Too Few Tomorrows"
—Obermiller/Philliber

"The Doll Maker"
—Harriet Arnow

"What My Heart Wants to Tell"
—Verna Mae Sloan

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magazines, and videos.

For additional resources and
research materials, visit our web site at
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How Do You
Know If You're
Appalachian...

and What Does
That Mean
Anyhow?

What Makes Appalachian Culture Unique?

An Appalachian is a person born in, or whose people come from, the Appalachian mountain region.

Urban Appalachian refers to people of Appalachian descent who settled in northern and mid-western cities.

The Appalachian region is named for the mountain range that covers parts of the following states: Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, Pennsylvania and New York.

In Cincinnati, most urban Appalachians have roots in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

The people who settled the Appalachian mountains were among North America's first non-native settlers. They were the first to "move west". They were mainly English, Scotch, Irish, and Welsh.

One characteristic they shared was an intense desire for freedom. Freedom to live as they pleased, with lots of space to themselves—"elbow room", as Appalachian Daniel Boone used to say. People who settled Appalachia were not inclined to be bound to institutions, religious or otherwise. Those ties and that external authority were part of what they wanted to leave behind. These people brought their traditions, values and beliefs with them. They came into contact with Native Americans, and while doubtless there were fights for land, the settlers and Indians reached an understanding.

The rough terrain played an important role in shaping the culture: steep mountainsides kept outsiders out and insiders close to home. The people that settled in these mountains shared their traditions and ways. They learned how to farm the mountainsides, how to live independently, how to come together in times of need and celebration. They shared their music, their religious beliefs...and, like a woven fabric, a new pattern emerged, based on the raw materials of who the people were.

While the industrial revolution was defining life in the north, its effects were barely noticed in the mountains. The impact of the industrial revolution would take its drastic toll on the region all too soon.

At the end of the 19th century, with the country's increasing demand for coal, more Europeans, Slavs and African Americans were brought in to build railroads and work the mines. Their influences were woven into the existing fabric of mountain culture. The way of life shifted from subsistence farming to working for someone else—the mines, on the railroads and in the logging industry. People who had lived in isolated hollers for generations came together, not only with the newcomers, but with each other.

Appalachian culture is a unique blend of European, Native American and African elements forged in isolation over time. The blend of Celtic, Native American and African influences can be seen in the steps of traditional clogging and can be heard in the old time mountain music, which took on a new sound when combined with the banjo, an African instrument.

Remnants of early Anglo Saxon speech can still be heard in the mountain dialect.