

Twilight in Hazard

AN APPALACHIAN RECKONING

ALAN MAIMON

“This book is harrowing, angering, and, most importantly, true.” —Wiley Cash, *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Land More Kind Than Home*

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Contents

Preface.....	3
Introduction: Do Us Right.....	7
Chapter 1: The Dams Break.....	29
Chapter 2: King Coal.....	58
Chapter 3: Life Beyond the Mines.....	92
Chapter 4: Killing Season.....	118
Chapter 5: God and Country.....	141
Chapter 6: Bad Nerves.....	160
Chapter 7: Poison Politics.....	180
Chapter 8: The Day the News Left Town.....	207
Chapter 9: From the Hood to the Holler.....	227
Acknowledgments.....	245
Notes.....	247
Index.....	283

Preface

By every socioeconomic measurement, the area of Eastern Kentucky that I covered for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in the 2000s is Appalachia at its most compelling and extreme. I was the last major metropolitan newspaper reporter based in those coalfields, and I wanted to write this book to provide what I believe is the most complete account to date of one of the most mythologized and least understood places in the country.

It took me five years of chronicling Eastern Kentucky as a reporter and another fifteen years of thinking about and returning to those stories, in my dual role as a writer and the husband of a Harlan County coal miner's daughter, to understand why we still don't understand Appalachia.

There was hope after the 2016 presidential election that we might be moving toward a more nuanced view of Eastern Kentucky when, for a moment in time, the country's scholars and storytellers begrudgingly moved past looking at the region merely as an object of perverse curiosity. All of the credit for this hint of progress went to one man: Donald Trump. In the wake of Trump's improbable ascendancy to the White House, writers and commentators, almost exclusively from Blue State America, set their gaze on Appalachia to ask variations of the same question: *How could you have let this happen?* Forget that Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin were the states that swung the election to Trump. Forget that most Eastern Kentucky counties gave previous Republican presidential candidates John McCain and Mitt Romney roughly the same level of support that they gave Trump. And forget that Bernie Sanders trounced Hillary Clinton by a two-to-one margin in most parts of Eastern

Kentucky in the 2016 Democratic primary. The experts pronounced that Appalachia held the key to explaining Trump and Trumpism. For the first time, Appalachians and what they thought actually mattered to the country at large. Or that was the premise, at least.

This wave of national interest in Eastern Kentucky was predicated on a misinterpretation of voter registration figures. It is true that registered Democrats far outnumber registered Republicans in many counties in the region, but those numbers are a vestige of mid-twentieth-century social dynamics that do not represent the political leanings of today. If reporters left their bubbles in the hopes of discovering large clusters of people who voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 and Donald Trump in 2016, they simply went to the wrong place. Of the 206 counties nationwide that fit that description, 31 are in Iowa and 23 are in Wisconsin. Only one, Elliott County, is in Kentucky.¹ The results there were indeed notable because Elliott County had voted for the Democratic candidate in every presidential election since the county was established in 1869.² In 2020, Elliott County again came out in force for Trump, who carried every Kentucky county but two, Jefferson and Fayette.

In the absence of anything more broadly applicable to a dissection of electoral politics, most of the resulting Eastern Kentucky-set stories relied on tired old tropes about alienation from government and parochial worldviews. Welcome to Trump Country, everyone. Nothing more to see here. Time to catch that flight back. Left unchallenged, that bogus narrative has persisted, with national publications ruminating on a “split partisan identity” in Eastern Kentucky that doesn’t exist.

Unlike after the 2016 election, no one in 2020 flocked to Eastern Kentucky seeking insight or votes. Only parts of Central Appalachia in key battleground states received any attention at all from the presidential candidates. Moon Township, Pennsylvania, became a regular campaign stop. For all the attention it was paid, Appalachian Kentucky might as well have been a region on the moon. The future of Central Appalachian coal jobs, a major theme of the ’16 campaign, hardly got mentioned, mainly because Trump failed to

deliver on his promise to revive the coal industry. So, instead, he tried to use Democratic opposition to fracking as a new Republican rallying point.

Yet there remains an undeniable symbolism to Eastern Kentucky, and it is one that both captures and transcends the troubled political climate of the day. But to grasp it, we need to get better at viewing the region in the framework of a larger American story about income inequality, generational poverty, and the lack of upward mobility. Only then will we start the demystification process.

When I think about the things I saw and documented in Appalachian Kentucky, I realize that this small swath of America with a population of around 700,000 offers tremendous insight into who we are and what we value as a nation. You cannot tell the story of a place as complex and contradictory as Eastern Kentucky in 800- or 1,200-word chunks written in inverted pyramid style, as I was once tasked with doing. That was a whiplash-inducing and at times overwhelming assignment. Coal mining could have been its own beat. The same applies to prescription drugs, poverty, religion, and culture. This book is my attempt to pull all of the strands together, to journey beyond the hundreds of newspaper bylines I accumulated, to capture the essence of a place that I observed for years and continue to revisit and reevaluate. The major events I chronicled for the *Courier-Journal* frame the narrative, but it is the material that didn't make it into the paper that I believe makes this more than just another crack at explaining Appalachia.

The book examines the economic and social experiment that created the power structure of modern-day Eastern Kentucky, a proxy for struggling regions everywhere, and traces how the dramatic events of the early years of this century impacted the region and influenced the soul of the nation as a whole. It also highlights the essential role of the journalist in writing the first rough drafts of history, especially now that newspapers have left Eastern Kentucky and places like it, leaving no one to tell some very essential stories.

The result is a story about drug epidemics, political violence, environmental degradation, and morality debates, but also about

a seemingly laid-back rural culture where a large segment of the population is clinically depressed, about an area of natural beauty where the land has been stripped and the forests torched for amusement, and about a defining push and pull between fierce pride and a nagging sense of inferiority. Ultimately it is a story about how America and its institutions have failed Eastern Kentucky, but for better and for worse, how the people of the region have remained loyal to their idea of Americanism.

The Dams Break

In the early 2000s, CBS, which was enjoying ratings success with a string of new reality television shows including *Survivor*, decided that Americans might like an unscripted show about hillbillies. The idea was inspired by the network's classic situation comedy of the 1960s and 1970s, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, a show about a family from the Ozarks that ends up striking oil and moving to a posh California mansion. Out West, the Clampett family's circumstances change, but it just can't shed the backward ways of home. The popularity of the sitcom spawned other CBS shows with stereotypical rural American characters like *Green Acres* and *Hee Haw*.

The concept for the reality show, tentatively titled *The Real Beverly Hillbillies*, involved plucking a sheltered, multigenerational Appalachian family from its mountain home and relocating them to Hollywood, where they would live in luxury and wealth for as long as the cameras rolled. CBS sent producers to Eastern Kentucky and other locales to scout for the ideal clan for the gig. Amid criticism, network executives defended the premise by arguing that Beverly Hills, and not the Appalachians who relocated there, would be the butt of most of the show's jokes.

Appalachians protested. But what could they do to stop a corporate giant like CBS from airing anything it wanted? That had always been a losing fight. But timing worked in their favor this time. A newly formed Eastern Kentucky-based group called the Center for Rural Strategies was looking for causes and decided to make a confrontation with CBS its first major initiative. Dee Davis, the group's leader, launched a \$1 million campaign against the proposed show, running ads in papers including *The New York Times*

and *The Washington Post* and threatening a boycott of the network if the show went forward.

The protest got the attention of Kentucky Congressman Hal Rogers. In a letter to then-CBS president Les Moonves, Rogers condemned the premise of the show, writing that “many people, including you, continue to believe the long-since outdated and erroneous stereotype that Appalachians are lazy, uneducated, barefooted hicks.”¹

CBS blinked. The show went into developmental limbo and subsequently died. In the years since, it has never been resurrected.

Davis’s group won the battle against CBS, but that doesn’t mean Appalachia has come close to winning the war against negative media representations. A few years later, another major network swooped in and gave the deep dark hills of Eastern Kentucky the kind of journalistic beatdown that can influence a whole generation’s impressions of a place.

The ABC News *20/20* special “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains” was two years in the making and pulled in the show’s largest viewership numbers in years. Hosted by veteran journalist Diane Sawyer, who was a few months away from becoming ABC’s lead news anchor, the hour-long show had all of the appearances of serious investigative reporting.

With her trademark gravitas, Sawyer, a native of a non-Appalachian part of Kentucky, introduced viewers to a thirty-six-year-old woman with eight grandchildren, a recovering drug addict who walked sixteen miles round trip to attend a court-ordered GED class, and a high school football star living out of his truck.

For the appearance of balance, but also to highlight the notoriously poor health of Appalachian Kentuckians, the program featured legendary activist Eula Hall. Born in 1927, Hall did as much as anyone to ensure that even the area’s poorest people received quality medical care. In the proud tradition of the Frontier Nursing Service, Hall in 1973 established the Mud Creek Clinic, a practice that drew patients from hundreds of miles away. The clinic that Hall ran out of her house thrived and, after it burned to the ground

in an unsolved arson incident in 1982, Hall, the community, and the federal Appalachian Regional Commission banded together to build an expansive new clinic that has remained in operation ever since.

Many people's lasting memory of the special, my own included, centered on Sawyer's exploration of Eastern Kentucky's dental woes. If viewers tuned in expecting to see toothless Appalachians, they were not left wanting. Sawyer's report noted that it wasn't just poor eating habits and a lack of dental care that made Eastern Kentucky one of the tooth decay capitals of the country. She breathlessly introduced us to another culprit, a fizzy green one called Mountain Dew.

Forget the tragically mishandled opioid epidemic unfolding across the region. The real story, according to Sawyer, was that Appalachians were becoming addicted to Mountain Dew at a tender age. Young kids were swilling it by the twelve-pack. Teenagers were struggling to go cold turkey on it lest they lose all of their teeth. Babies might even be drinking it from bottles. As a petrified-looking teenage girl sat in a dentist chair about to have the living hell drilled out of her teeth, Sawyer leaned over and cooed, "I think the doctor is going to tell you that Mountain Dew isn't your best friend."²

Much to the dismay of PepsiCo, Mountain Dew's parent company, the 20/20 episode led to the coining of the term "Mountain Dew Mouth." PepsiCo called the report "old, irresponsible news." By that time, the area's soda-drinking habits had become something of legend. A 1980 *Courier-Journal* article about aluminum can recycling stated that Eastern Kentuckians were the world's largest consumers of Pepsi. In a blow to tradition and the local economy, PepsiCo, in 2017, closed a bottling facility in Hazard that had operated for sixty years. The Mountain Dew narrative gained new life in 2020 when, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, a Kentucky couple tried to buy a Louisville grocery store's entire canned inventory of the soft drink, some twenty-three cases. An angry confrontation ensued when a store manager told them they couldn't make the purchase.

Does it really matter if television networks continue to produce shows that depict Appalachia in a harsh light? Maybe, after all, there is some truth to what they're showing. Saying Eastern

Kentucky is poor is not a generalization. It is a fact-based statement. Saying *all* Eastern Kentuckians are poor is the generalization. In reality, some are incredibly wealthy, and that is important to portray, because it is impossible to understand the struggles of the region without acknowledging the socioeconomic inequities that arise from having a regional ruling class. The people at the top of the Eastern Kentucky financial ladder, everyone from the late mayor of Hazard to the coal executives who live in mansions and vacation in exotic locales, are integral to the story of how power has been gained and exerted in the region. But that type of investigation wouldn't make for entertaining prime-time television. It would only feed fears of class warfare.

But what happens when unflattering associations with a certain group start affecting public policy?

A 2017 journal article about opioid abuse endorsed by the National Institutes of Health website codified the idea of Central Appalachia's otherness. Citing a twenty-seven-year-old article, the report compared rural Appalachians to the Amish and other minority groups that have "self-contained cultures."

"Such groups may resist Western medicine approaches," the report said. "However, unlike the subcultures of Native Americans and Amish people, the distinct ways of life and belief systems of Appalachians are less readily acknowledged . . . Similarities between normative Americans and rural Appalachians may work against Appalachians in that less emphasis is placed on awareness and specialized training to facilitate understanding of local beliefs that could lead to better patient experiences and improved treatment outcomes."³

Let's put that into plain language, the kind that even poor Appalachians would understand: They might look like normal white people, but beneath the surface, they are different and need to be treated as such. Their rejection of what is "normative" might explain why it is so difficult to keep them off of drugs.

No one would describe blue-collar communities in Wisconsin or Ohio in such alien terms. It is true that Appalachian Kentucky isn't

your typical “working class” region. Taking into account the percentage of the population that depends on government assistance, it can easily be argued that the region is predominantly “non-working class.” But we should use history and data, not a strange form of exoticism, to examine health care disparities and other social challenges. If we had taken that approach in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I believe we would have saved a lot of lives in Appalachia and the rest of the country. Instead, a pair of dams broke wide open, one literally, the other figuratively. The coal mining disaster and the opioid crisis that ensued highlight how corporate greed and institutional neglect can more easily rule the day in a place never thought of as normal.

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