

# **Appalachian Women's Stories of Migration from West Virginia to northeast Ohio: A Narrative Analysis of Interviews and Personal Observations**

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper was based on qualitative research that I did in 1999 for a master's thesis in the Department of Family and Consumer Studies at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio. I had the personal experience of being an Appalachian migrant myself, and experience as a social worker in communities of Appalachian migrants. I wanted to tell 'our' story without simply recounting my own. However, the research and writing were greatly influenced by my own experiences and of the many other Appalachians I have met here in Ohio over the years.

The women interviewed for this paper were adolescents and young adults during the 'Great Migration' out of Appalachia in the years spanning 1940 to 1970. In those three decades, about one million people moved from the mountains to the state of Ohio (Hobbs, 1998). Migrants from eastern Kentucky tended to migrate to the Cincinnati/Dayton area, those from West Virginia to the Cleveland/Akron/Canton area (Obermiller & Maloney, 1994). In particular, northeast Ohio drew West Virginians in search of employment in the rubber and steel factories. Between 1950 and 1960, sixty-seven thousand West Virginians arrived in Ohio (Schweiker, 1968). In a 1970 statewide survey, one of every three factory workers in Ohio was an Appalachian migrant. Over 100,000 Appalachians were living in the Cleveland area in 1973; West Virginia migrants made up 73% of the Appalachian population in Cuyahoga county at that time (Kunkin & Byrne, 1973).

The migrants crossed real boundaries when they moved from a culture that was still highly agrarian and traditional into urban industrial centers. Many have acknowledged a period of adjustment characterized by some degree of prejudice and/or discrimination against them in northern and mid-western urban areas (Borman & Obermiller, 1994). They often faced hostility from co-workers and neighbors (Bailey, 1997).

My family migrated to northeast Ohio while I was still a young child, and though I have lived here most of my life, I consider myself a West Virginian or “mountaineer.” Though the specifics of our stories are different, many of the same themes run throughout a conversation with Appalachians, specifically West Virginians, when asked about their migration experiences.

### RATIONALE FOR STUDY

My interviews were with middle-class, middle-aged women living in one county in northeast Ohio. My rationale for excluding women living in or near poverty was that I wanted to exclude the ‘culture of poverty’ theory, as much as possible, from this discussion. It has been my experience as a social worker and family life educator, that there is a resistance in northern Ohio to accept Appalachians as an ethnic or cultural group. Instead, schools and social services focus on poverty, high unemployment, or low educational level of ‘our people’ and exclude any discussion of cultural differences. When culture is taken into account, it is only as a negative factor. This resistance, in my experience, stems more from the established ‘white’ community rather than from other ethnic groups who are more likely to view Appalachians as different, like themselves, from the mainstream culture. When families first migrated out of the mountains in search of employment, they often found places to rent near the factories where they sought employment. These neighborhoods were often already home to immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, and African Americans who had migrated from the South, prior to the large-scale migration of Appalachians. In their neighborhoods, work places, and local grocery, these groups became familiar with each other. In many instances they became real neighbors with each other. Though many of these neighborhoods have changed since the 1950's and 1960's as residents moved out into the suburbs and townships, there are still sizeable numbers of these migrant and immigrant group members living in certain neighborhoods.

Another rationale for focusing on a certain age group was that these women formed a

cohort of individuals who were themselves a part of the 'Great Migration.' I also chose to limit the interviews to women who had been born in West Virginia and spent at least part of their childhood growing up there. Being 'from West Virginia' or 'from Kentucky' tends to be the way that migrants in Ohio identify themselves. The term *Appalachian* is seldom used and even the pronunciation is not agreed upon when it is employed in conversation.

### SAMPLE

Four major in-depth interviews were conducted with middle-aged women of different races and ethnic backgrounds, from four different parts of West Virginia. Aside from basic demographic questions, they were simply asked if they would share with me their thoughts about being of Appalachian heritage and some of their migration experiences.

The areas in which they had migrated ranged from very isolated to one of the largest cities in West Virginia. A three generational depth of time has been suggested as one way to determine Appalachian ethnicity (Maloney, 1993). The women interviewed all met this criteria. Currently the women live in an urban area, a small town, a suburban area, and a rural area of one county in northeast Ohio.

Brief descriptions and biographies of the four major interviewees follow. .

"Ellie" was born in south-central West Virginia in the 1940's. She believes her family is of Irish and English descent and have lived in the area for more than 200 years. In the 1950's her family made an attempt at migrating to Maryland where her father had found employment. They returned to West Virginia after one year. As a young woman she migrated with her husband and young son to Ohio where they both found good jobs. Her first marriage ended and she subsequently remarried and had two more children. Her second husband is a member of an ethnic family who still have strong ties to their homeland in southern Europe. She has one adult son and two adolescent sons.

Florence was born in the north-central part of West Virginia in the early 1950's. Her ethnic heritage is primarily Native American but also includes some of the earliest Irish and English settlers into western Virginia in the eighteenth century. She first migrated to Ohio as a pre-teen with her family after her father found employment in the Canton area. They stayed for about a year and then returned to West Virginia. After attending college in West Virginia and teaching there for a couple years, she migrated once again as a newly wed with her husband who is from the same area of West Virginia and who is also Native American. She has one adult son.

“Sharon” was born in the southern part of West Virginia in the 1930's. She is of African American heritage. She knows that her family had been in West Virginia for at least three generations. She knew nothing of her family history prior to her great-grandparents who had largely lived a “country style of life.” She herself grew up in town where her father was employed as a bus driver. She taught for several years in a segregated school system in nearby Virginia, living there through the week and coming back to West Virginia on the weekends and over summer vacation. She migrated to Ohio after de-segregation closed the “all black” school system in which she had been teaching. She migrated to Ohio after finding a teaching job here. She is divorced and has one adult daughter.

“Grace” was born in the late 1930's in a remote area of West Virginia which is part of the Monongahela National Forest. Her Scotch-Irish, Welsh, and Dutch ancestors migrated into western Virginia in the eighteenth century after the American revolution. She believes the family also has a Native American heritage. She migrated as a single young adult in the 1950's to Ohio in search of employment. She stayed with other family members who had already migrated to the area. She found employment rather quickly and then married a man who was from the Canton area. She is about to retire from her job that she has had for many years. She has two adult daughters.

In addition to the four major interviews, I also spoke with several women who did not necessarily meet all the criteria for this study, but who were able to serve as key informants regarding some of the recurring themes of the interviews. Some had migrated too recently (after the Great Migration), some were second-generation migrants having been born in Ohio after their parents had already left West Virginia; some were from Appalachian areas outside of West Virginia. All agreed that the topics and themes chosen were indicative of their own heritage and agreed with their own beliefs about what it means to be an Appalachian living outside of the region.

## RESULTS

The major emergent themes were those that were mentioned by all four women in the course of the open-ended interviews. First, in addition to their permanent migration, there was a common element of movement back and forth between West Virginia and Ohio. Three of the four women continue to visit or travel to their home state on a frequent basis. Florence, especially, has almost a bi-local pattern of residence. She speaks of “going

down for the day,” often to attend the Native Americans’ community gatherings or meetings or to run errands between family members in Ohio and West Virginia. It is a three hour-plus drive (one way) that she incorporates into her full life here in Ohio in a way that is amazing to me.

The second major emergent theme was the women’s involvement with extended family, kin, and community back in West Virginia. Cousins were often described as their best friends and were mentioned more often than siblings. One of the women was married to a man who, though not closely related, is considered to be of common kinship. Another is now dating a man she first met decades ago in West Virginia and with whom she was reunited at a community reunion. She said, “At this point in my life, I probably wouldn’t have dated anyone unless it was someone from way back- someone I had a lot in common with because we grew up in the same place.”

Third, and most consistently, the women discussed their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the role of spirituality, faith, and church in their lives. Though I had anticipated some mention of these factors as part of a self-described Appalachian heritage, I was surprised at the length and depth in which religious faith was part of the discussion.

#### Migration in Stages and Movement Back and Forth between Ohio and West Virginia

The poverty and high unemployment of the Appalachian region pushed the women and their families out of West Virginia in the 1950's and 1960's, leading to a permanent migration that dislocated and disrupted families. Ellie mentioned the separation from a teen-age sister who refused to leave with the rest of the family.

When I was in the fourth grade, my dad got a job in Maryland. He had moved out there and was working before he sent for the rest of the family. We only stayed one year. My sister who was fourteen at the time wouldn’t come with us. She stayed in West Virginia with my aunt and uncle. My mom never quit worrying about leaving her behind. She came to visit and had a good time, loved the ocean. But she refused to stay. My dad finally gave up and closed the house in Maryland and we moved back. He gave up a really good job. He’d been making enough money to pay our house payment in both places. We moved back-settled back in and life went on like it had before.

In another migration story, a teenage sister also chose to stay behind when the rest of

the family moved- this time in Ohio.

When I was in eighth grade, my dad got a good job up here in Ohio and we moved. We stayed for one school year,. When we decided to move back to West Virginia my oldest sister was a senior in high school She refused to go back home with us. She wanted to get married to a boy from back home who was working up here. So they got married while she was still in high school and she stayed here.

Grace, born just before World War II, remembered how everyone was leaving West Virginia in the 1940's and 1950's.

I knew growing up I would probably move away some day. Everybody was leaving because there was no work. All my older brothers and sisters had moved to Ohio or Baltimore. (Maryland) I saw them move away, move back, then not be able to stay and have to leave again. So I pretty much knew I'd move away and live somewhere else when I grew up. There were a dozen of us and only one sister stayed in West Virginia.

Sharon, on the other hand, had not expected that she would ever have to leave West Virginia. She had earned a college degree and had a steady teaching job in a segregated school just over the state border in Virginia. Though she would not condone segregation, ironically, it was the reason she lost her job. She could not find a teaching job in West Virginia which was already de-segregated.

I went to Bluefield State College which was an all black college at that time, and I earned a teaching degree. I taught in the 'colored' schools in Virginia. I would stay there through the week and come home (to West Virginia) on the weekends. I was happy doing that. But when the schools were de-segregated most of the black teachers lost their jobs. They promised they'd re-hire us when there were openings. Some of us waited around and eventually got some kind of teaching job, but a lot of us left because we couldn't afford to wait around.

All of the women spoke of movement between both rural and urban areas with Appalachia, as well as out of the region, before finally settling permanently in Ohio.

I went from a real small town to a big town even before I left West Virginia. When I lived there, I could still go home all the time, every weekend. I stayed a member of the church in my hometown. I still went to church there almost every Sunday. After we moved to Ohio, my husband didn't go back as much as I did, even though he had family

there, too. But me and my son went back and forth a lot- just me and him.

Sharon and Grace no longer visit as frequently as they once did, but Sharon actually chose the city in Ohio where she now lives, so that she could remain close to 'home.'

I decided to move here and apply for a teaching job because it was not a real big city, but a medium-sized town. I also knew I could get on the highway and get back home easy from here. My brother had moved to New York and after visiting there I knew the big city was not for me. I also picked this town because it had diversified industry in case my teaching job didn't work out. I didn't want to go somewhere that the climate was much different. And I didn't want to get too far away from West Virginia so I could go back and forth when I wanted or needed to.

### Extended Family and Community Networks

Researchers of Appalachian culture have noted the importance of family and kinship ties, some of which are actually fictive kin- people that the individual or family has 'adopted' and are 'like family.' Extended family continues to be important. In my interviews, cousins were twice referred to as "just like brothers and sisters." Close relationships to aunts, uncles and other extended family were also mentioned as being very important in their lives.

Grace described her move to Ohio and in the process mentioned in-laws as an important source of support.

I came out here after I graduated from high school. First I stayed with my sister who lived in the city. Her husband was out of work at the time, too. So everyday he took me out with him looking for work. He took me to all the stores downtown to fill out applications. Then one weekend I went back to visit mom and dad with another brother who lived in a little town down near the Ohio River. When we were almost back to his home, we got in a car wreck. I was banged up pretty bad and couldn't work for awhile. Since I had been with him when the wreck happened and he took me to the hospital, I had a doctor down there. We all just decided I should stay there with him and his wife and baby till I got better. But about a week later, my brother got killed in an accident at his job. My sister-in-law was beside herself, alone with a little baby. So I just stayed with

her to help out. I got a job at the grocery store in her little town. Even though I moved away and she got re-married, we have stayed good friends and always kept in touch.

Florence and Sharon both talked extensively of their aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Cousins are the same as brothers and sisters. That's why I worry so much about my cousin who's ill and will always help him out. He's family. I can remember when we were young, all of us got chicken pox together. One cousins' parents would be away and then different aunts and uncles would take care of everyone, just like they did their own children. Sometimes they were all at our house. Sometimes we were all at somebody else's house.

Me and my cousins grew up just like brothers and sisters. My parents were gone and my older brother had moved to New York by the time I came to Ohio. But I wanted to be close enough to West Virginia so that I could get back there and visit my cousins and my aunts. Now, partly because of my own health problems, and partly because of theirs', if I see them getting old or sick, I wouldn't be able to help them and that would make me feel bad. I try to keep up lots of contact with them through letters and phone calls. I have an aunt who died and left me a little house and a little piece of property down there. I thought of just selling it, but my daughter asked me to just hold on to it. Since she is out of college now, we might go down in the summer and stay there sometimes.

It would seem from Ellie's description of her son's fondness for his aunt and her home in West Virginia, that these extended family ties and association with 'home' are still important to younger generations.

My youngest is always asking me, 'Mom, when can we go to West Virginia? I love Auntie's house. It smells like West Virginia. I love that smell.' She keeps a wood fire going most of the time and he loves to bring in the wood and stoke up the fire for her.

Florence and Grace had extended family already living in Ohio which made the adjustment easier. Florence had an extensive kin network in Ohio.

I was scared. But I found some friends. I found them by their last names- the names of 'our' people (Native Americans) - mostly from the same community in West Virginia. But I made a good friend with one girl who was from West Virginia who wasn't 'our people.' We called each other my 'hillbilly' friend and sat on the bus together everyday.

Sharon knew no one when she came to Ohio, but she believes that because she was African American, she was rather quickly accepted as part of the black community here.

She also found a lot of support and friendship in the neighborhood she first moved into.

I moved into a neighborhood where there was a real sense of community. Right away I found a church and got active in it.

All of the women interviewed spoke of the importance of faith and church attendance in their lives. In many instances, church was closely associated with the presence of family and community networks. All spoke of church attendance while they were growing up in West Virginia as their “social life.”

### Religion and Spirituality

Contrary to popular opinion, all of the women I interviewed had been raised in either the Methodist or Baptist church. If they had ever attended a Pentecostal church, it had been after moving away from West Virginia. The women I interviewed did not appear to be highly influenced by denomination. They were comfortable with a Pentecostal-style of worship during times of revival.

Ellie spoke of her family’s move to an area in Maryland where it was difficult to find a Protestant church.

The area we moved to was a big Catholic community. We had a terrible time finding a church to go to. We had to drive for miles. The one we found was real tiny. It was Pentecostal, I think. Not what we were used to. Back in West Virginia a lot of my life was going to church. It was our social life. We went on Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, choir practice on Thursday night, usually something on Saturday with the youth group. They weren’t real strict or ‘hell-fire and damnation’- except when there were revivals.

Florence also recalled the Methodist church that had been established by her own family; and her church experiences in Ohio, as well.

My grandpap started the church. We went at least three times a week. I think Appalachian religious practices are mostly about helping each other out. When somebody was sick, they would come to the house. When somebody died, church members would come and sit up at the house. Our ministers didn’t have formal training from a college. It was just whoever the people decided was the preacher. We had Pentecostal preachers come to our church for revivals. But there weren’t any Pentecostal

churches near where we lived when I was growing up.

I started going to a Pentecostal church after I moved to Ohio. I knew some people who went there. I went for about four years. But there were so many rules- how to dress, wear your hair, no jewelry or make-up. After awhile I thought maybe they were more man's rules than God's rules. Now I go to a Baptist church that's led by our people. There are some who go there who aren't our people, that is they aren't Indian, but are from West Virginia. I really like it there. My sister who was the first member of our family to stay here in Ohio has gone to the same little Baptist church for thirty years. It's out in the country and it's all country people. She loves it there.

Of her experiences with different churches and denominations, Ellie says that

First I went to the same denomination here that I had belonged to in West Virginia. But the church was just too big and all they talked about was money, needing money. I also went to a little Pentecostal church for awhile. But I was a little uncomfortable. People would get up and testify on Sunday mornings- things that I had only experienced at revivals. I like the church I go to now. It's real mainline, more liberal. But it's mostly my children that I go to church for. I tell people that I've made my mistakes and bad choices in life. Of course, I do get something out of going. I enjoy the friends I've made there. I enjoy working in the nursery and preschool department and helping out with the youth group.

Both Grace and Sharon attend more than one church.

We started going to the Baptist church up the road because when they were building it we stopped and talked to the builders. We ended up helping to build it and get it ready to open. It doesn't seem any different than the Methodist church I went to sometimes back home. Sometimes we go to a large Baptist church in Akron for special services, too.

I grew up Baptist. Now I go to the AME (African Methodist) for Sunday worship. But I go somewhere else on Wednesdays for Bible Study. I don't think denomination is important- just that it's Christian and offers good guidance. If I go to church, my week goes well. If I miss, my week just doesn't go as well.

Children's author and native West Virginian who has also lived in northeast Ohio,

Cynthia Rylant, believes that educators can help Appalachian girls realize the options and

opportunities that are open to them. "But, it would have to be someone who understood the culture- the tremendous influence of religion on women's choices." (Rylant, 1991, p. 9)

## Other Emergent Themes: Stereotypes; Poverty Issues; Education

Two of the women interviewed made reference to having been hurt or offended by “being made fun of” for their ‘funny-sounding names’ or for the way they spoke.

Ellie, (whose real name is actually more unusual for a woman of her generation) recalled that her fourth grade classmates, upon being introduced, “assumed I was some kind of foreigner. People made fun of me. It was awful.”

Florence remembered a more recent experience.

I was telling someone at work about a cousin and they asked me what this cousin's last name was. When I answered her, another worker who was listening said, “There are too many of *them* already here- they should go back to West Virginia.

As I have been writing this paper, I have been having conversations with a twenty-year-old acquaintance who says all this happened to her less than ten years ago when she moved here from West Virginia with her family. She says,

We were the only ‘hillbilly’ family in that neighborhood and I had no friends. Everyone at that school made fun of us. They made fun of my name, the way I talked. They treated me so bad and I got very depressed and didn’t want to go to school.

Ellie remembered that her accent and speech patterns drew howls of laughter from her classmates.

I was reading out loud one day..... isn’t it awful how these things stand out in your memory?... and the story had the word ‘creek’ in it and I pronounced it ‘crick’ and .... like the house came down. They laughed and laughed and I cried. I can still remember that story- my part was about a dog jumping the creek.

## Poverty Issues

Only one of the interviewees specifically spoke of growing up in poverty. At the time of her divorce some years ago she said that:

My biggest fear was being poor again. I did without when I was growing up. I didn't want to be poor again.

Two of the interviewees (who both happened to live on mountain farms of some kind) commented that they had been poor, but didn't realize it until later. Grace said that,

We never did without food or the basic things we needed. We grew and raised our own food. There was nowhere to go or anything to do, so you didn't need much money. One of my older sisters said that during the Depression we did better than some because in addition to what we raised ourselves, the government provided surplus food and my father worked for the WPA. I don't remember that. But I guess I knew things were getting worse instead of better. (In the late 1940's and early 1950's)

### Education

Of the four women in these in-depth interviews, all had children who had graduated from college or were currently attending. Two of the women had degrees themselves, and were the first women in their family to ever attend college.

Florence, herself an educator, had advice for teachers and their students of Appalachian heritage.

Let them know they can go to college. Encourage them. They might be the first person in their family to ever think about college. Let them know that Appalachia has a different culture, but that it's not inferior. It's just another culture like Native Americans or African Americans. Let them know that differences are good. I think Appalachian culture should be included in diversity programs in the schools.

I would add as a personal note, that many young people of Appalachian heritage really need this encouragement because they may not get it at home. Not because their parents are bad people. But because their parents simply don't understand the value attached to a college education. These may be parents who never had much schooling themselves, and yet managed to find fairly good employment in the years following World War II. We should also encourage adults of all ages, who may have missed the

opportunity earlier in life, to attend college and let them know they can achieve, scholastically.

### Concluding Remarks

I recognize that four interviews cannot adequately represent the spectrum of experiences of Appalachian migrant women. It was my intention when first working on this study for my master's thesis, to gather descriptive data about the subjective feelings of Appalachian women about their heritage and migration experiences. I felt it was important to interview women who could speak about their ethnicity and heritage, over and above, the 'culture of poverty' thesis that has been long used as an explanation for the challenges and difficulties faced by Appalachian people in a modern and post-modern society.

It may well be, that those women and families who continue to live at or in poverty, do not have the luxury of celebrating their ethnic heritage. They are unable to make trips back and forth to another state for visits or reunions. In my years as a social worker I met many of these women and men. It is particularly difficult for them when a family member in Appalachia needs them, is ill, or dies and they are unable to be there. It can be very lonely at certain holidays and times of the year when they would like very much to reconnect with their 'home place.' The elderly or those with physical disabilities and chronic illnesses may feel a very large loss when they can no longer travel to participate in reunions or traditional visits. Service providers need to be aware of and sensitive to the importance of 'being there' in times of celebration or grief. The definition of *family* may be much broader than social workers, pastors, and educators are aware of.

Knowledge of generational or cohort issues would be helpful for service providers. For example, two of the four women I interviewed had married veterans of the Vietnam War. This was not surprising after I learned from Veterans' Affairs that young men from West Virginia had served in greater proportions than any other state besides North Dakota. In the ranking of casualties, West Virginia had the largest percentage of any state's young men who died in that war.

The importance of religion and church attendance that emerged from this study should be of importance to both clergy and counselors. As a social worker I have personally heard of Appalachian clients' diagnosis for emotional disorders include an 'over-reliance or obsession' with religion. The knowledge and use of Biblical quotes is simply a part of Appalachian life that many service providers do not understand. Clergy from mainline denominations may assume that all Appalachians are Pentecostals and would not be interested in attending their churches, when in fact, it may actually be their preference.

In conclusion, it is important to keep in mind that Appalachians may be bi-cultural. In addition to having a vested interest in the suburban and urban areas they now live in, they may also have ties to a more rural and traditional way of life. Furthermore, Appalachia, like the rest of the United States, was and is racially and ethnically diverse. Multicultural education, especially in areas where large numbers of first, second, and third generation migrants reside, should include an Appalachian heritage as one that is worthy of celebration.

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