

KATIE LUNSFORD

## 9. FOXFIRE AND THE COMMUNITY

### *Making Real Introductions for 50 Years*

*Each time I sit down to write about Foxfire, I assume that, after fifty years, there can be nothing new to write. While considering this section, on a dreary day, I drove down Highway 441 through my hometown of Clayton, Georgia. Then, I saw something. Through a break in the fog, there was a group of low-laying clouds running between the ridges of Little Hogback Mountain and an adjacent hill. I marveled at this typical, everyday sight. I remembered the sunny early mornings in the summer when I drove north and watched a single layer of clouds, like puffy sheets, roll down the southern slope of Little Hogback. In this moment, I realized that my life is different. It is in moments like these when I am reminded that I am blessed with the privilege of being the fifth generation to grow up in this beautiful place. I remember that I am graced with roots, roots that I will pass down to my children, and I have a sense of belonging that people seek for a lifetime. My passion for Foxfire and its mission stems from experiences and realizations such as this one.*

*I spent four years in the Foxfire classroom at Rabun County High School from Fall 2009–Spring 2013. Each article that I composed and each article that I edited changed me a little bit. Foxfire honed my writing skills, my reading skills, and my appreciation for my home. In these four years, and in my work with Foxfire since my graduation, I have begun to recognize that Foxfire has served, and continues to serve, as a portal between Rabun County and the rest of the world. As I pondered this portal, I began to consider how Foxfire has affected my Southern Appalachian home and culture by serving as a connection between Appalachia and the globe. Each part of this chapter addresses Foxfire's profound and undeniable effects on its community.*

*It is with great pleasure that I have the opportunity to continue to contribute to the program which has given so much to me, both in my education and personal growth, and to remove myself from the throws of an Athletic Training major at the University of Georgia to compose this piece. I must admit that when asked to write this piece, I was intimidated, and that at times during the writing process I felt overwhelmed. In the end, though, I am glad that I have had the opportunity to compose another piece on my dear home.*

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#### INTRODUCING MEMBERS OF A CULTURE

For decades, this beautifully isolated part of the world was undisturbed. Life was peaceful. Within the county, people from one small community did not pay any mind to the affairs of the people in the next small town. There was too much work and not enough time to be worrying about the frivolities of others. Their lives were not considered anything special. Folks simply lived as they always had, making it harvest season to harvest season, canning all they could and living conservatively. Not until 1966, with the birth of Foxfire, did self-documentation of the Southern Appalachian ways of life begin. Since then, the organization has become an essential part of the community. Tens of thousands of pages of literature have been published on a global level in an effort to study and record the customs and ways of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. The effects of these efforts have been significant and permanent.

The first Foxfire class did not have the slightest inkling of the mark that was soon to be made after the first few magazines were published or of the international interest that would arise from publishing a magazine that documented life in Appalachia. The intention was simply to engage students in writing, a teaching style that is analyzed in the bulk of this publication. However, with the intention of primarily documenting the immediate community and culture, the majority of Foxfire's work has been focused in the community where Foxfire originated: Rabun County. The results within this community have been widespread.

With Foxfire's inception came the ability of the people in the community to recognize their own unique cultural characteristics. Within a culture, it is difficult to recognize the defining characteristics of the culture because they are the norm. To illustrate this idea, before ever learning that whittling was a trademark piece of the Southern Appalachian culture, I sat on the front porch steps as a child with my pocket knife, whittling away at whatever branch I could get my hands on, assuming that kids in Atlanta whittled the same as I did. My lack in recognition of my culture stemmed from the innocence of youth. Isolation, on the other hand, is what prevented the Appalachian natives of yesteryear from recognizing the uniqueness of their culture. Folks within the community were able to read the magazine and realize that not everyone in the world made sassafras tea or called ghosts "haints". They realized that their ways differed from the rest of the world.

As a rule, most cultures value their elders. Foxfire has taken this a step further, penning everything that could be learned from old-timers who had survived using knowledge that had been handed down from one generation to another and were happy to share that accumulated knowledge with the newer generations. During the 1960s when Foxfire began, a generation gap had formed. Younger people were flocking toward the city, abandoning the ways of their ancestors for city life. Combating this, Foxfire engaged students in documenting a dying culture and facilitated an environment for students to make connections with older generations.

In so small a place as Rabun County, family histories go way back, as do friendships between families. Most everyone actually knows one another. Foxfire only enhanced these relations. As mentioned previously, rather than students forming bonds with people their age, Foxfire fostered friendships that span generations. These cross-generational influences characterize some of Foxfire's most profound impacts on both the contact and the student. Contacts are able to share their knowledge and sew a seed in students as well as in the lives of everyone who reads their words. Foxfire President Ann Moore described this in the Foxfire 45th Anniversary Book by writing, "Just as my grandparents and parents inspired and influenced me as I grew up here, so have Foxfire's 'contacts' whom you've read so much about in the magazines and books."

Foxfire's mission to document Southern Appalachian culture has accomplished much more than teaching students interviewing and writing skills. The Foxfire method truly changes all those involved in the interviewing and writing process: contact, student, and reader. This cross-generational friendship truly impacts the student. Naturally, high school aged students are concerned primarily with themselves. Foxfire converts this egocentrism through cultural exposure. Each interview brings new knowledge and insight into the meaning young people search for in life. President Ann Moore acknowledged Foxfire's tendency to mold students' lives by writing this in the Foxfire 50th Anniversary Book:

The lifelong skills, determination, perseverance, and work ethic that my family instilled in me are also the same values that our elders shared, and continue to share, with our students. While interviewing the Foxfire "contacts" for the pages of the magazine and books, our students also learned the skills they needed to be active and participating members in their communities and workplaces. Not only did they learn those life lessons of persevering hardships and difficulties through strong faith from their elders, they also preserved a part of that heritage and culture for future generations.

Ultimately, students emerge from the Foxfire program with a sense of awareness and appreciation of the culture's past and present and the change that Appalachia and its people have experienced.

Furthermore, Foxfire gave the community a sense of purpose. Foxfire and the community were unified by a mission: to preserve the heritage of the region. Along the way, the aforementioned cross-generational bonds were formed. These hills bring together all those who call them home. The desire is to preserve and protect the values and ideals that our precious ancestors held so close to their heart. Foxfire acted as a cohesive, to bring a community together in one accord. While it is true that Foxfire has done a great deal of work in their immediate community, their efforts have not been limited to the boundaries of Rabun County and its neighboring areas.

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A high degree of cultural continuity is evident throughout Southern Appalachia. However, it is a large area with a great deal of variability in the culture. On several occasions, Foxfire students have travelled to different parts of these hills to document culture, dedicating entire magazine issues to other areas of Southern Appalachia. In 2009, Foxfire students took a trip north through the Smoky Mountains to Kentucky for several days to conduct interviews with coal miners from the area, giving attention to an area and a people not often considered on a global scale. Again, in the summer of 2012, Foxfire students travelled east into the mountains of Western North Carolina to document Cherokee Indian culture. Much like the Southern Appalachian ways, the Cherokee culture has been diminishing for several decades. Thanks to Foxfire, students were able to assist the efforts of the Cherokee Nation to preserve what was left of the tribe's traditions and stories as well as communicate with a group of people whose culture has greatly influenced their own.

#### INTRODUCING THE REAL SOUTHERN APPALACHIA TO THE WORLD

It goes without saying that Foxfire's home is a very unique place with even more unique people. As Foxfire began, the students saw value in what their elders could share with younger generations. Only, the effects of passing information touched much more than the lives of the students in the classroom. More than a mere byproduct of the documentation process, Foxfire's efforts stretched beyond Appalachia, reaching a world most students in the original Foxfire class had not given much consideration. Little did they know that their efforts would result in the presentation of the real Southern Appalachia to the outside world.

At the time of Foxfire's beginning, a back-to-the-land movement was taking place all across the United States. Foxfire struck a chord with participants in the movement. With mounds of information on how to live simplistically and independently, Foxfire sold thousands of copies of books and magazines. Change took root in the minds of everyone who read Foxfire's publications. All of a sudden building a log cabin wasn't such a far-fetched idea. Ways of life which had been lost to most of the world reemerged, bringing with them a new perspective on life. With this change of heart, the outsiders began to see the people of Appalachia in a new light.

Anyone who takes the time to know the Southern Appalachian natives understands that they are incredible people. Nevertheless, to this day, stigmas follow the people of this area. Several publications and movies used the people of Appalachia as a scapegoat of their jokes and made it all too easy for people to make assumptions about Appalachia, perceiving hill people as ignorant and useless. Snuffy Smith and Li'l Abner are just two examples of cartoons where stereotypes of mountain people are used for humor. Snuffy Smith was a comic character depicted as a drunken moonshiner, and Li'l Abner was described as a dim-witted hillbilly, both casting a less than desirable perception of Appalachian people. Perhaps the most

well-known derogatory production was the movie *Deliverance*, which speaks for itself. These erroneous creations portrayed to the world that the people of Appalachia are ignorant, worthless people. In opposition, Foxfire has done a great deal in the way of changing the negative perception of Appalachia, so often cited by Hollywood and others.

With the publishing of the first Foxfire book in 1972, the world took note of a different aspect to these mountain people. One of Foxfire's most famous contacts, Aunt Arie Carpenter, was special to say the least. Walking down Main Street in Franklin, North Carolina, anyone who was not acquainted with her would have seen a "typical" woman of the mountains: a little old lady in an ankle length dress, her hair pulled back, carrying a walking stick. But upon talking to her or reading her words it becomes apparent that that little old lady has more to say than what meets the eye. Thru Aunt Arie, Foxfire was able to express that even though mountain people did not have many earthly possessions, they had bountiful intangible wealth. Aunt Arie was quoted in interview, saying, "They want me t'sell an'move away from here, but I won't do it. It's just home- 'at's all" (*Foxfire Book*, 30). Referring to the land again, "I say I don't want'a sell it, an' they just looked up at me s'funny. Said, 'What would I do with all that money?' You know, I don't care nothin' about money much" (*Foxfire Book*, 27).

Yet another contact that changed how people view Appalachian people was Kenny Runion. Always adorned in what could be considered at the very least unorthodox clothing, Kenny was an odd-looking fellow, easily judged and brushed to the side by "normal" society. But Kenny, full of wisdom and beauty, taught people about what truly matters in life. Mr. Runion taught people all over the world life lessons through quotes like these:

Me? I'm just goin' through this world th'best I can. Don't bother nobody. Don't bother nobody. I work out what I get; just getting' through the best way I can. I don't claim t'be good, but I'm just doin' th'best I can. 'At's about all anybody can do, aint it? (*Foxfire 2*, 392)

People ain't thankful no more. They don't 'preciate what they got. And ever'body's in a hurry. Where they goin'? Where they goin'? Back then you could meet an ol'feller with an ol'ox wagon an' he'd stand there half a day if you wanted t'talk. Stand as long as you'd talk. You meet a feller now, he'd run over y'. Where's he goin'? Just ain't got no patience. (*Foxfire 2*, 380)

Since 1973 when *Foxfire 2* was published, the world continued to change at a phenomenal pace. In the midst of this chaos, anyone can learn from Kenny's thoughts and see the purity of thought that prevailed in Appalachia.

Further than just showing the world the genuine nature of Appalachian people, Foxfire has made changes within the community to help correct inaccurate stigmas. The Mountaineer Festival has not always been operated by Foxfire. In an effort

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to generate more tourism, the Chamber of Commerce, who previously ran the Mountaineer Festival, played up cultural traditions, sometimes at the expense of the pride of natives. Often times the event would have pieces that forthrightly made a mockery of the people of Appalachia. Yet, when Foxfire took over the planning of the Mountaineer Festival, the event became a celebration of the culture as well as a tourist attraction. It began to allow local people to come together and accurately depict the culture, while still attracting visitors from all over the map.

For anyone from this area who leaves their home and mentions where they are from, it is still all too common to bear the brunt of a joke, referencing some inaccurate, preconceived notion about all of the people of Southern Appalachia. Indirectly, Foxfire instills pride in the members of its community. With all that I have gleaned from reading Foxfire's publications, meeting contacts who are truly beautiful people, and being a member of this culture, I understand that my home is very valuable. Foxfire has perpetuated my love for my home and has taught me to defend the honor of Appalachia and its people against the hateful stigmas as I journey out into the world. Foxfire has helped to prove the worth of the people of Appalachia against adversity that began long ago and continues to work diligently to showcase a precious community to the world.

#### INTRODUCING THE WORLD TO SOUTHERN APPALACHIA

As discussed above, there have been significant efforts by Foxfire's to present Southern Appalachian culture to the global community. Conversely, it is necessary to examine how Foxfire's contact with the rest of the world has influenced Appalachia. With the recognition that accompanied the "Foxfire boom", people flocked to Rabun to see for themselves how this part of the world really was; they wanted to see if people like Aunt Arie Carpenter and Pearl Martin really existed. Sure, by 1966, even here within the enchanted walls of the Southern Appalachian Mountains, the world was becoming more accessible. Homes all over the county had color TV and indoor plumbing. People were farming less and grocery shopping more. But even still, this was an area set in the past, left behind by the rest of the world. This intriguing notion demanded an emic observation of what changes have come from the contact triggered by Foxfire with a world outside these hills. In reality, there are both positive and negative aspects to outside influence on Appalachia, and each deserves their own discussion.

Foxfire has stimulated Rabun County's economy since its beginning through drawing people to the area. With the Foxfire museum came tourism from all over the world, with the intention of coming to know this beautiful place with its fascinating people. Each year Foxfire holds the Mountaineer Festival, attracting people from all over to Clayton, GA and providing local businesses with a small boost in the fall of the year. Then, each spring, Foxfire holds a weekend of Living History Days when hundreds of people are drawn to Black Rock Mountain to glean an idea of the

ways of life of mountain people before the days of modern convenience. Still again, Foxfire holds an annual celebration of folk art, known as Folk on the Mountain, on the museum's mountainside property. Art connoisseurs from a smorgasbord of backgrounds are attracted up the side of Black Rock to examine the folk art that seeks to express Southern Appalachian history.

Folks who take interest in Southern Appalachia come from a variety of different walks of life. On any given day, a diverse population of visitors comes through the Foxfire Museum Gift Shop on their way up the mountain, asking questions about the history of the area and the culture. Tourists bring with them their own culture, showing Foxfire students and members of the community pieces of what lies beyond the home they have always known. Thus, in a way, Foxfire has provided a type of cultural enrichment to members of the community through the audience that it attracts.

The cultural exposure that Foxfire has facilitated also provided a reference for natives. Through contact with other cultures, Appalachian people are more able to appreciate their culture, as with my whittling example earlier. In essence, Foxfire allows members of the community to see the contrast between their own Appalachian culture and other cultures that they are exposed to and thus come to understand the value of their own culture.

There is, however, what can be considered a negative side to the exposure that has made its way into the depths of these hills. Over time, mixing cultures may have caused a loss in cultural characteristics. Examples of these losses have been as basic as dialect. While reading Kenny Runion's words, there are obvious similarities to modern Southern Appalachian dialect. However, there are considerable differences, where the mountain language of old has assimilated in part to Standard American English. Still, more differences are seen in technological advances, where plain living has given way to a modern, fast-paced way of life. Cell phones are as common in Appalachia as anywhere else now, connecting owners with the entire planet and easily reversing the effects of the serene mountain environment and isolation of the past.

In summary, Foxfire has had a localized effect on the community from which it came and a far-reaching impact on the world outside of the walls of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. Through introductions made within the culture itself and between Southern Appalachia and the outside world, Foxfire has made a lasting mark on its community, and it isn't finished yet. The Foxfire Magazine is still being published at Rabun County High School, and it continues to document the ever changing ways of life in Appalachia. In addition, a new digital magazine has begun at Rabun County Elementary School, called "Foxfire Today." Featuring interviews with contemporary Appalachians, this magazine is created and edited by fifth and sixth graders. Foxfire began as a small ember, glowing in our little corner of the world, but it has ignited a passion for this culture among our community and beyond. Foxfire still glows!

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#### REFERENCES

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