The Most Misunderstood Region in the Country: Seven Lessons

Chad Berry
Physical geography has dictated settlement patterns and histories.

-Lesson #1
1795

generation 1
an Economic Frontier

- Rapid population growth
- Plenty of natural resources to exploit
- High economic opportunity
Until the Civil War, middling economic prosperity across much of Appalachia was relatively widespread.

-Lesson #2
1880
Generation 3
Acute economic challenges emerged when there was no viable economic frontier to which young people could migrate.

-Lesson #3
“Appalachia” is a social and cultural construct. And how and when it was constructed still influences the way we think of the region and its people today.

-Lesson #4
Kentucky Novelist

Site of birthplace and early home of John Fox, Jr., famous Kentucky author, born 1862, graduated from Harvard in 1883, died in 1919. Focusing on life in the Appalachian area, he wrote 12 novels and 45 short stories, including THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME, among the first books published in U.S. to sell one million copies, and TRAIL OF THE LONESOME PINE.

The Trail of the Lonesome Pine

By John Fox Jr.
Consequently, we have been taught to conceive of the people and region in a bifurcated way.

-Lesson #5
“Appalachia” serves a particular function in the U.S. If Appalachia hadn’t been constructed, another region would likely have been created to take its place.

-Lesson #6
“Beginning in the 1870s and 1880s, Americans perceived Appalachia as a strange place inhabited by ‘peculiar’ people. This perception…came not from…reality of but from the needs of middle-class Americans in industrializing America to project their own nostalgia for the past and fears about the future onto a people perceived as different. Appalachia became the ‘other,’ a place and a people to be admired, patronized, converted, taught, uplifted, disciplined, and sometimes even emulated.”

There is no such thing as Appalachian culture.

Cultures in Appalachia? Yes.

And all of those are a mixture of continuity and change.

-Lesson #7
“...[Y]ou cannot know a place without loving it and hating it and feeling everything in between. You cannot understand a complex people by only looking at data — something inside you has to crack to let in the light so your eyes and brain and heart can adjust properly.”