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The Mountains were Alive, with the Sounds of English

Other than a few park employees, no human beings reside in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park today. But when it was established in the 1930s, several thousand people were sprinkled throughout the area in small communities and in homesteads up creeks (*branches* as they're usually known locally) and rivers. They spoke one of the country's most distinctive, but often misunderstood, forms of English, a dialect their descendants have continued to keep alive in nearby fringes of the park.

Today visitors drive and hike the steep inclines of the Smokies and learn that outside Cades Cove and a few other places mountain people had only primitive trails and stream beds for travel in the early twentieth century. They can be forgiven for thinking that people were quite "isolated" from the outside world and that, as a result, their language and culture lagged far behind.

It's commonly thought that mountain speech was (and maybe still is) very old-fashioned — that it is akin to "Elizabethan English." This romantic idea has some truth to it, but it is certainly far from the whole or even the main story. Like Shakespeare, mountaineers traditionally pronounced *service* as *sarvice* and said *afeard* and *holp* for *afraid* and *helped*. But for many reasons their speech could never be mistaken for that of the Stratford bard. For one thing, they inherited many terms from Scotland, such as *residenter* "resident, old-timer," *skiff* "thin layer of snow," and *you'uns* "you all."

Actually, the main story is that mountain speech is more innovative than conservative — more of it is new than old. Mountaineers have been coiners par excellence of new and expressions. Some of these, quite predictably, involved items that early settlers found unfamiliar to their Old World background. A case in point is plant names, few of which were brought from the British Isles (or borrowed from the Cherokee, for reasons not easy to explain). One name that is well known is *hearts bustin' with love* (*Euonymus americanus*), called *strawberry bush* and many other things elsewhere.

Mountain speakers have long taken existing words and fashioned new ones out of them.

Sometimes this was by shortening them, producing *spllo* "homemade whiskey" (from *explode*, what the substance does in the head) or *hippoes* "an imaginary or pretended ailment" (from *hypochondria*). Words and parts of words were combined in novel ways, making *quituate* "to drop out of school" (from *quit* + *graduate*) or *endurable* "long-lasting" (from *endure* + *durable*). Or they were shifted from one part of speech to another, especially from nouns to verbs (*man-power* "to move by brute effort" or *meat* "to supply with meat," as in "One hog will meat us all winter").

Among the most memorable creations are fresh and earthy metaphors like *fly over a field and settle on a cow pile* "make a poor choice of a mate," *kick* "to reject in courtship," *cackleberry* "hen's egg," and *charge it to the dust and let the rain settle it* "to forgive a debt." There are vivid similes like *as ugly as a mud fence daubed with chinquapins*, *meaner than a striped snake*, and *as pretty as a speckled pup*. Animals are sometimes given names in mountain vernacular reflecting the sounds they make (*hoo owl* "hoot owl," *knee deep* "bull frog," *whistle pig* "ground hog").

In addition, mountain terminology sometimes, as the saying goes today, "has an attitude." This is seen in euphemisms like *woods colt* "bastard child" or even *gentleman cow* "bull." It expresses wry criticism of certain types of pretentious folks, as *trunk Baptist* "a Baptist who keeps his/her membership certificate in a trunk, i.e. is not an active church-goer" or *short sheriff* "a deputy who pretends to have more authority than is actually the case" (the term contrasts with *high sheriff*).

There's little doubt that mountain folks like to play with language and that they're good at it too. Some years ago a residenter told me that he called himself a *hillbilly* because his ancestors had lived in the mountains for generations and "talked like Bill Shakespeare." Who was I not to believe him?