

[Revised version of an essay that originally appeared in *Now and Then: The Appalachian Magazine* 20.1 (2004), 1-4.]

Joseph Sargent Hall: The Man and His Work



Joseph Hall on a field trip to Cove Creek, North Carolina, to record mountain folk songs. Singers Zeb and Winfred Hannah are in the background. Photography by Mary Halloran c1939. Joseph S. Hall Great Smoky Mountains Original Recordings Collection (AFC 1987/035), Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

Joseph Sargent Hall (1906-1992), a great collector of Appalachian cultural materials and student of the region, was in many ways an enigma. A native of Montana who spent nearly his entire career teaching at an obscure junior college in Los Angeles, he by chance took a temporary job at the newly opened Great Smoky Mountain National Park in 1937. His main intention was to earn money to pay for graduate school, but the short-term

post led to a life-long passion for

documenting

mountain language

and lore. A trained

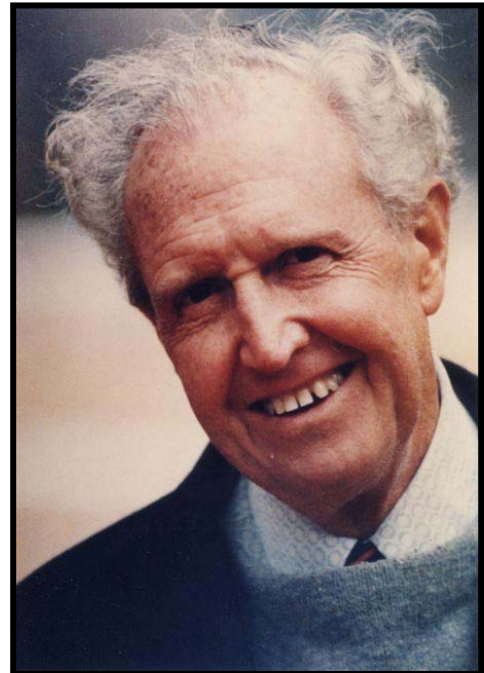
linguist, he never

presented a paper at a

professional

conference on his main interest, Smoky Mountain speech, nor did he ever attend a meeting of any kind on the region's culture.

He published three small books based on research in the Smokies



Joseph Hall, 1974.

through the unknown Cataloochee Press in Asheville, North Carolina, which he established himself to use local printers and distributors for his work. When he died over a decade ago in Oceanside, California, the only people in the Smokies who recalled him knew next to nothing about the man, yet he had made a detailed, permanent record of many of their parents and grandparents. He had amassed one of the largest, most distinctive collections on Appalachia in existence, one that will be used by generations of scholars, students, and lay people interested in the language, music, folk medicine, beliefs, and numerous other aspects of the culture of the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina. Yet in his own lifetime few in the field of Appalachian Studies knew his scholarship. What accounts for this man of contradiction?

After a year at the Sorbonne in Paris in the mid-1930s, Joseph Hall entered the doctoral program in Linguistics at Columbia University in New York City. Around the same time officials at Great Smoky Mountains National Park were completing land purchases for the park that had been inaugurated in 1934. They were debating plans for park development and what record, if any, should be made of the culture of several thousand people being removed from their property. Some advocated maintaining a few mountain homesteads and their inhabitants, perhaps in a living history museum. They believed that an uninhabited landscape would present a false picture denying that communities had thrived in the mountains for well over a century. Others thought that natural history should be the priority and sought to remove all traces of human habitation. They wanted to convert the Smokies into a nature preserve like all previous national parks. Local business leaders hoped the park would feature major highways, hotels, and other commercial developments. Advocates of each camp could not agree among themselves.

To document the culture being displaced, the Park decided to hire someone to begin collecting material, primarily on speech. Thus, in the spring of 1937 Roy Appleman, a historian with the National Park Service in Washington, called his friend Joseph Hall in New York. The three-month summer assignment he offered was to document the language of older mountain residents having leases to remain

after the government had purchased their land. For Hall, who had been contemplating a study of the speech of Oklahoma for his doctoral research, the opportunity was to be a dramatic fork in his life's road.

After arriving in the Smokies in June, he quickly found himself at home. He was an avid outdoorsman, early member of the Sierra Club, and hiker of California's high Sierras and other rough terrain, so he reveled being in this new mountain environment. But it was the people -- open-hearted and unpretentious, dignified and independent, articulate though often unschooled -- who most captured his attention. In that first summer of field work he interviewed but did not record, concentrating on becoming familiar with mountain people and their mountains. He filled four pocket notebooks with observations on expressions, pronunciations, and other details of speech. Because he was trained in the use of phonetic notation, he could quickly note many details of their language. Quickly he realized that a larger, more systematic study was called for, one that utilized the portable recording technology that was becoming available. So in June 1939 he returned for nine months with equipment in hand. He completed ten more notebooks and began recording in earnest, now with the intention of using the material for a doctoral dissertation on Smokies pronunciation. His equipment, transportation, and an assistant were all furnished by the National Park Service and the Civilian Conservation Corps. The staff of the former and the enlistees of the latter helped him locate speakers throughout the Smokies -- in Greenbrier Cove, Cades Cove, Cosby, Emerts Cove, Sugarlands, Cataloochee, Smokemont, Hazel Creek, and many other smaller, more remote communities.

In the late 1930s the CCC had twenty-two camps in the Smokies employing four thousand men to clear land and build the roads, hiking trails, campgrounds, fire towers, and other infrastructure that converted half a million acres into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which in time became the country's most popular. Using these camps as bases, Hall visited local people and recorded conversations, stories, music (traditional ballads, folk songs, hymns, and popular songs of the era), and square dances. At each camp men identified and often recommended "good talkers" in the neighborhood.

In his early work he used two recorders, a Garwick that produced aluminum discs and was operated by cables hooked to a pick-up truck battery and an Allied that made acetate discs and ran on a portable battery pack.

In those early days Hall came to know Smokies people intimately as individuals quite different from the stereotypes found in the writing of so many others who had sojourned there, including Horace Kephart, whose 1913 book *Our Southern Highlanders* Hall admired in many ways. At the end of his life Hall reminisced about those first months of work more than fifty years earlier:

I stayed at the CCC camps, which provided good food and lodging and were sources of information as to the people roundabout to interview and record. Each camp had a superintendent in charge of the work of the CCC boys, an NPS ranger, and a fireguard. Most of these personnel were formerly logging industry employees who knew their terrain well and the most likely informants. They usually had some unusual character in mind for me like Zilphie Sutton of Walnut Bottoms, Mrs. Clem Enloe of Tight Run Branch, and Jake Welch of Hazel Creek, beside all the other local folk. At each camp I would walk or hike to the homes of people or ride on a CCC truck going in that direction. Later the NPS gave me a pickup truck for this purpose and to carry the recording equipment ...

They also assigned a CCC enrollee to help with the driving, the equipment, and at times take part in the interview. As to lodging, I also lived for two or three weeks at the homes of several residents, like the Shultses of Emerts Cove, the Ramseys of Cosby, and the Leatherwood and Messer family at the White Oak (near Cataloochee). These good-hearted people were of course of enormous assistance as to the speech of the area and suggested important things to talk about.

In addition to the interviews with people there were my constant associations with friends I made along the way ... I lived in their homes, went to church with them (mostly Baptist, with one Primitive Baptist service). I worked in the fields at haying time, helped "wrap" tobacco, gathered and chopped wood for kitchen stoves, went hunting and fishing (with the Messer and Williams families of White Oak), attended special events like the Hall family reunion at Halls Top, North Carolina, enjoyed the festive fare amid formidable quantities of food, whole hams, pots of "roastin' ears," watermelons on ice in tubs, and so on. I attended a funeral of a close family kin [and] large reunions where whole communities had been displaced by the Park, always with dinner on the ground with loads of tempting food and with wonderful friends and kin to talk to.

The topics of the recordings were anything the informant wished to talk about. Men talked about their farm, their crops, their cattle, and hunting. Women liked to tell recipes or talk about their interest in weaving and quilting and the like. Sometimes a CCC foreman or ranger would suggest something like "Have Grady tell you how he trapped a groundhog in the Park nursery, how he had to trap twelve to catch the particular one that was eating the plants." There was general fun at such an incident. Or "have Mrs. Enloe tell about her fishing rights." When I met her at her house on Tight Run Branch, North Carolina, she asked, "Are you a little Park man or a big Park man?" Without an answer from me, she said, "big Park man or little Park man, you son of a bitch, I fish when I please, winter or summer. See that can of worms?" (They were then verboten in the park.) She showered me with praise when I gave her a peace offering, a box of snuff, and let me take her picture. She then told how her brother fought in the war (the Civil War): "He was on the Rebel side, and I'm a Rebel yit!" I could usually get a rise out of people if I asked them how they liked the national park. Usual answers were like "It's the worst

thing that ever ruint this country." One man of Hartford, Tennessee, said, "Before the park come in, I could shoot a rabbit or a possum whenever I wanted to. Now I don't stand no more show than a one-legged man at an ass-kicking!" But these crudities were not typical. Most people were polite and cooperative and could see that the recordings were made for study and preservation as a historical record of aspects of Smokies life.

The twenty hours of recordings Joseph Hall made before the war stand as the first permanent record of Smokies language and music, one of enormous historical significance. He interviewed several people born before the Civil War, the oldest in 1843, only a generation or so after communities were founded in the Smokies. He returned to collect further material in the summers of 1940 and 1941 and in later years periodically until 1976 to take notes, make a few recordings, visit old friends, and attend reunions. It was fortunate that he made his early recordings when he did. World War II was looming, and the CCC, through which Hall had made indispensable local contacts, was soon being phased out. It was disbanded for good in the summer of 1942. When he next returned to the Smokies in 1949, many of his speakers were dead.

Hall was an excellent listener and accepted people without preconception, qualities easily detected by mountaineers who were well known -- and often well justified -- for their wariness of outsiders. Romanticism did from time to time enter his perceptions and his writing, because he came to idealize mountain people for their self-reliance and other qualities. But he never lost scholarly perspective, discounting early in his work, for instance, the Elizabethan origin of mountain speech as an illusion: "Great Smokies speech is not Elizabethan English transplanted to America."

His doctoral dissertation on the phonetics of Smoky Mountain English, based on his early collecting, was published in 1942. Six decades later it remains the fullest study of Appalachian pronunciation. Yet within a year of publication a hostile review of it was to lead him never to publish

technical work on Smokies speech again. The unfavorable evaluation appeared in the leading linguistics journal of the day, written by a young scholar at Yale (the chief rival to Hall's alma mater, Columbia) who was a proponent of the "more scientific" and "methodologically sound" Linguistic Atlas approach to research that was based on the premise that the speech of individuals and regions could be compared only by asking the same set list of specific questions everywhere. The reviewer had little sympathy for Hall's beguilingly simple, practical, and much less formal methodology: to ask broad, open-ended questions and let his speakers talk on whatever topic they had expertise or interest in. History has vindicated Hall's approach of eliciting lengthy, uninhibited responses (some accounts of bear hunting, for example, were eight to ten minutes long). It was far more suitable for collecting unself-conscious grammar and pronunciation. However, the attack caused Hall, an exceedingly self-effacing man, to lose confidence in the value of his work for linguists. When he returned to the Smokies after the war, his research interests shifted largely to folklore.

However, there was no diminishing his enthusiasm for mountain life. In the 1950s he recorded former residents of the Smokies playing traditional music, telling folk tales, and discussing witchlore, folk medicine, ghosts, superstitions, and party games. He published short articles on these topics in folklore journals, but in all this work his contact was with ordinary people, not other scholars working in Appalachia.

Commissioned by the Park Service to preserve the speech of a people being dispersed, Hall found a vigorous traditional culture that was changing, but by no means disappearing. Because it defied his expectations in many ways, he became something of a missionary on its behalf. Dismayed by negative images of mountain people so often found in the writing of others and the picture of mountain society as "deprived," he determined to show them as they were, idiosyncrasies and all. The best, most respectful way to do this, he decided, was to have them present themselves. So he compiled *Smoky Mountain Folks and Their Lore* (1960) and *Yarns and Tales from Old Smoky* (1978), two books of photographs and

sketches of mountain natives telling anecdotes of mountain life, especially stories of hunting, woven together by an account of Hall's own field work mainly from pre-War days. A third volume, *Sayings from Old Smoky* (1972), was an extensive glossary of words, phrases, and proverbs excerpted from his recordings and notebooks.

Hall retired from teaching in 1972 and spent much of his final years organizing his Smoky Mountain material. He never relinquished the hope that it would someday interest language historians, folklorists, and other students of mountain life. He deposited copies of his recordings, unpublished manuscripts, and other archival material in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. He also began work on a culminating expression of his devotion to the mountains and their people, an extensive glossary of Smokies speech based on his extensive private collections spanning several decades.

In the mid-1980s it was my privilege to begin correspondence with Hall and to visit him in California in 1990. Upon his death shortly thereafter, I inherited his library and collections. In accordance with Hall's wishes that they find a permanent home near the mountains he had come to love and be made available to future generations of researchers and college students. These have been deposited in the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University, forming a special collection in his name. Hall also gave me custody of his glossary, which I spent a dozen years expanding to a comprehensive work with the title, *A Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English*, which was published by the University of Tennessee Press in 2004. This volume and the Joseph Hall Collection at ETSU will secure Hall's legacy as a premier scholar of traditional southern Appalachian life. The field of Appalachian studies has known a handful of individuals whose work commands pre-eminent recognition for documenting the region's culture. Among these stalwarts Joseph Sargent Hall is surely one.