

My sister-in-law still can't understand why I rant, rave, and grit my teeth every time she says AppaLAYcha. I'm usually pretty tolerant of people's linguistic preferences. I don't care, for example, whether my neighbors say you'uns, y'all, or you guys. And I've even caught myself saying hello instead of hidy on certain formal occasions. But when it comes

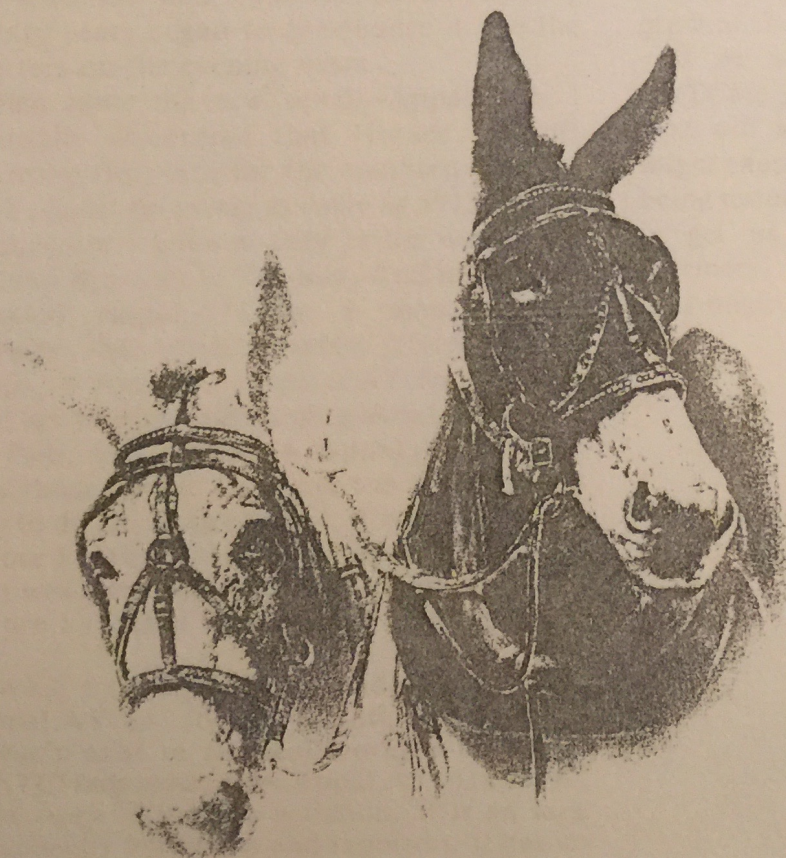
to the pronunciation of *Appalachia* and *Appalachian*, I admit to being a fanatic. Unfortunately, most people (including my sister-in-law) receive my complaints with a shrug and a patronizing look that unmistakably say "so what's the big deal?"

The big deal is this: The pronunciation of *Appalachia* is a political problem.

## A Rose by Another Name is a Damned Brier

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Most dictionaries agree that the name of our mountains is derived—however illogically—from the Apalache Indians of northern Florida. This same tribal name gave us—more logically—Apalachicola.

Dictionaries also agree that the third vowel in both of these names is a short *a*, as in *latch*. Yet almost from the time Appalachian was first applied to the mountain range, dictionaries have been consistently inconsistent in rendering its pronunciation. Not only do they disagree with one another, but some dictionaries have even changed the pronunciation with each new edition.

The reason for this confusion is obvious. Lexicographers don't visit East Tennessee.

When I was growing up in Bristol, on the Tennessee-Virginia line, it was a small town, but it wasn't isolated. We had TV, daily papers, and a large number of tourists driving through on U.S. 11. The first time I heard AppaLAYchan, I was twelve years old. In all my twelve years, I had never heard it pronounced that way, and I thought it was pretty funny that a reporter on national television would make such a dumb mistake.

But pretty soon I heard it again, then again. Before long, some of my neighbors and relatives who had said AppaLATCHan for fifty or sixty years began to pronounce it like the reporters on the evening news.

Then came the new word—Appalachia. I eventually discovered that Horace Kephart was using this term for the southern Appalachian region (in print) as early as 1913, but as a youngster I knew it only as the name of a town up the road in Virginia. And it was pronounced AppaLATCHa. I soon learned, however, that when outsiders referred to the region, it was *always* AppaLAYcha.

I kept hearing and reading about the poverty, filth, and disease in AppaLAYcha, and how those people were just too dumb or too lazy to do anything about it. It was a long time before I realized they were talking about me.

It was a much longer time—years, in fact—before I realized they were *not* talking about me.

What I finally came to understand is that AppaLAYcha does not exist. At least, it doesn't exist in the real world. The AppaLATCHans exist; even AppaLATCHa exists. But AppaLAYcha is a fiction. It is an idea created by politicians and reporters. It has no

more physical reality than Edgar Rice Burroughs' Africa or Ray Bradbury's Mars.

But the fiction serves a purpose. Just as the fiction of the backward black race served to justify their exploitation, and the fiction of the backward American Indian allowed the government to nearly eradicate their culture, so does the fiction of backward AppaLAYcha put mountain people at the mercy of politicians and other furriners.

There has been a lot of talk about preserving mountain culture, and about mountain people gaining more political control over those people and institutions that have all too often made decisions for us, then told us about it later. But how can we hope to win any cultural or political victories if we don't even have enough pride to pronounce the name of our mountains the way it has been pronounced for decades? How can we hope to stand up for ourselves on important issues when our own pronunciation reminds us that the politicians and the news media are always right?

Every time we say AppaLAYcha or AppaLAYchan, we are strengthening that fictional image of poor, dirty, stupid, lazy hillbillies, both in our own minds and in the minds of outsiders. The effect is subtle, of course, and gradual, but very real.

If we all suddenly resume saying AppaLATCHa and AppaLATCHan, the effect of that will also be subtle and gradual, but it might cause us to feel just a little more pride in being mountain people, and it might eventually get us a little more respect from the furriners.

It might even help me talk to my sister-in-law.

