

# CAPTURING APPALACHIA: BUILDING A COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHERS' WORK

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The Appalachian region, as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission, comprises the entire state of West Virginia and parts of Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Ohio and Pennsylvania (Appalachian Regional Commission, par. 1). Probably no geographic area of the United States has had such stark dividing lines drawn between those with differing versions of the truth about the region. Appalachia as a place has been depicted one way by those from the outside (e.g., the War on Poverty, the national media's descending on the area in the 1960s to document poverty, and numerous negative stereotypes shown in film and television). It has been depicted a completely different way by those who were born, grew up and lived there, and who instead seek to highlight the region's positive values, like simplicity, hard work, self-reliance, and the importance of handicrafts, traditional music and folklore. The work of photographers in Appalachia represents both of these perspectives. The sum total of their art presents a complicated, diverse region and is a significant resource in the collections of academic and public libraries.

One of the purposes of documentary photography was summarized nicely by photographer Arthur Rothstein:

"The purpose of documentary photography is to learn about life—how people live, work and play; their social structures and institutions; their environment. ...the aim is to move people to action, to change or prevent a situation because it may be wrong or damaging, or to support or encourage one because it is beneficial" (33).

The author uses the phrase "documentary photography" loosely here, as some photographers do not consider their work strictly docu-

mentary in nature. Contemporary photographer Shelby Lee Adams, discussed further below, says the need to initiate change is not what drives his art:

"From the beginning, I never felt the need to use photography to implement change. Certainly not change in the way documentary photography had served us before. This response comes from growing up in Kentucky and seeing how documentary/sociological photography hurt my people. During 'The War on Poverty' era, I saw my people shamed by much of the media exposure" (Adams par. 5).

Mike Smith, also discussed below, eschews the drive to use photography to bring about change:

"Contrary to the appearance, or style, of the pictures, I actually have little interest in documenting or recording anything, at least in the sense of fulfilling an agenda or mission. ... Beyond the human interaction that accompanies my work, that element, the visual resolve of each picture, is what is most compelling to me as an artist" (Smith ix).

Nonetheless, a good many of the artists who gained renown for their photographs of Appalachia do fall into the documentary camp.

The collected works of Appalachian photographers serve not only colleges and universities with Appalachian Studies programs, but also institutions that offer programs in art, art history, photography, American Studies, sociology, social work, business and more. In its role as the "public university," public libraries also typically collect the works of famous photographers for their service population. Additionally, public libraries with substantial Appalachian or urban Appalachian patron

bases may also collect books of Appalachian photography. Libraries seeking to have a nuanced collection of photographs of Appalachia would do well to collect not just the non-controversial titles, but also the work of those who have become lightning rods of criticism for their work.



Palmer, Earl. "Lincoln 'Bushrod' Cockram." ImageBase, Digital Library and Archives, University Libraries, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. <http://spec.lib.vt.edu/imagebase/palmer/full/ep512.jpeg>

In this article, I will summarize the work of the major photographers of Appalachia and some of the critical responses to their work. These collections of photographs have been published in book form typically by university presses and other publishers that cater to academic libraries. I will by no means include all of the photographers who have made Appalachia their subject, and I will not discuss the collecting of individual photographs, which usually are kept in special collections and archives.

#### EARLY PHOTOGRAPHS OF APPALACHIA

The U.S. Farm Security Administration (FSA) was a Great Depression program that sought to document conditions in the rural

areas of the United States. One of those areas was Appalachia. While the FSA photographers traveled to many parts of the United States, several did visit Appalachian areas. Walker Evans—who later became famous for his work with author James Agee—took photographs of coal towns in West Virginia and Pennsylvania in 1935. Other FSA photographers who documented mountain life include Ben Shahn, John Vachon, Arthur Rothstein, Russell Lee, and Marion Post (Speer xlv). A listing of their works is available from the Library of Congress' American Memory Project at [<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fabib.html>].

Pioneering photographer Bayard Wooten (1875-1959), born in New Bern, North Carolina, contributed photographs for six books. She exhibited in Boston, Chicago, New York, and New Orleans, and was financially successful at a time when not many women ran their own photography businesses. While not a social documentarian in the style of Dorothea Lange, Wooten was eclectic in the scope of her work, which ranged from wedding photographs to landscapes. Her work depicts a "bucolic and idyllic rural Appalachian world during the Great Depression that is largely devoid of industrial references, change or overly debilitating poverty" (Bezner 24). Her most famous photographs appear in the books (with author Muriel Sheppard) *Backwoods America* (1934) and *Cabins in the Laurel* (1935). Some critics have said that Wooten's photographs overly romanticized life in the Appalachians, and that when taken out of the context of the books they accompanied, would actually show an incredible amount of poverty (Watkins 233). A biography of Wooten and reproductions of her photographs appear in Jerry W. Cotton's *Light and Air: The Photography of Bayard Wooten* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998). See also *Documenting a Myth: the South as Seen by Three Women Photographers: Chansonetta Stanley Emmons, Doris Ulmann, Bayard Wooten, 1910-1940* (Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery and Reed College, 1998).

Another early photographer of Appalachia was Paul Buchanan (1910-1987), a native of Hawk, North Carolina. Beginning in his teenage years (the late 1920s) he began taking portraits of the people in the four-county area where he lived. The "Picture Man," as he was called by local people, walked or drove around

the four North Carolina counties for the next 30 years, capturing people primarily in individual or family portraits. They are “posed, formal pictures. He didn’t tell his subjects what to wear or hold” (Hawthorne 7).

Buchanan’s work can be seen in the book *Picture Man: Photographs of Paul Buchanan* (University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Because Buchanan was a native of Appalachia, his subjects immediately accepted him. This is in stark contrast to the work of Doris Ulmann (1884-1934), a New Yorker whose subjects would demand to wear their Sunday best in photographs. However, Ulmann also “painstakingly selected and posed her subjects, often having them dress in old, quaint clothes” (Hawthorne xv). She liked to photograph elderly people because she found them more interesting visually. She wrote in *The Appalachian Photographs of Doris Ulmann*:

“A face that has the marks of having lived intensely, that expresses some phase of life, some dominant quality or intellectual power, constitutes for me an interesting face” (Ulmann no pp.).

A more recent book that contains Ulmann’s photographs is the aforementioned *Documenting a Myth*.

Earl Palmer (1905-1996) of Cambria, Virginia, spent 50 years roaming the southern Appalachians. His subjects include vernacular architecture, material culture, traditional customs, portrait studies of individuals, and some landscape/natural scenery shots. Jean Haskell Speer (xxviii) describes Palmer’s photographs as “serene and seductive, enticing the viewer to see Appalachia as a land of majesty, mystery, and changeless beauty.” The so-called “new Appalachia” evolving in the latter half of the 20th Century was something Palmer avoided in his photography. “If there is any modernization in a scene,” Palmer told Speer, “I pass it up. Color and drama departed with modernity” (Speer xxix). Palmer also adds captions to his photographs that sometimes use quotes in the colloquial speech of his subjects. A selection of 120 Palmer photographs appear in Speer’s book, *The Appalachian Photographs of Earl Palmer* (University Press of Kentucky, 1990). More than 640 of Palmer’s photographs are viewable in the digital archives of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University at [<http://imagebase.lib.vt.edu/browse.php>]

## CONTEMPORARY APPALACHIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Tim Barnwell, a native of Madison County, North Carolina has spent approximately 30 years taking photographs in the mountains around his birthplace. His books contain oral histories written by the subjects of his photographs or transcribed from interviews, part of his attempt to “spend as much time as possible with each person before making photographs—learning about them and hearing stories from their lives” (Barnwell 13). Barnwell’s subjects include religion, landscapes, food production, tobacco production, business and handicrafts, the people and the land. Most of the photographs in his book, *The Face of Appalachia* (W.W. Norton, 2003) date from the early 1980s, but a more recent collection, *On Earth’s Furrowed Brow* (W.W. Norton, 2007) features shots from 2000 and later. Barnwell works as a commercial and fine art photographer in Asheville, North Carolina.

While the photographers discussed thus far present a fairly unambiguous and uncontroversial portrait of Appalachia, some contemporary artists have garnered their share of criticism. Eastern Kentucky-born Shelby Lee Adams presents a counterpoint to the idyllic work of Palmer and Barnwell. His three collections of photography, *Appalachian Portraits* (1993), *Appalachian Legacy* (1998) and *Appalachian Lives* (2003), center on people in the area where he grew up. In fact, generations of some of the same families appear in all three of his books. Adams spent much of his childhood summers in eastern Kentucky, near Whitesburg, on his grandparents’ farm and began photographing there in 1974. While Adams constructs (or “stages”) some of the photographs, the subject’s lived experience is always kept firmly in mind (Nickas 157). Vicki Goldberg, writing in the introduction to *Appalachian Lives*, calls the photographs “an uncommon blend of humanity, reportage, and art, an Appalachia most of us thought we knew seen through eyes that tell us that maybe we didn’t know it so well after all” (xvi). Critics of Shelby Lee Adams assert that his photographs reinforce the enduring stereotypes of Appalachia: poverty and violence among them. Julia Ardery, a *Lexington Herald-Leader* critic, lambasted Adams’ work as:

“greasy guys showing off their snake-handling scars, girls with vacant stares and a retarded fellow standing at the kitchen table in a diaper ... With their spooky lighting, their fake flowers, heaps of dolls and

open caskets, Adams's photographs come close to representing Appalachia as one big horror show" (qtd. Milroy R3).

Another recently published collection of Appalachian photographs firmly in the documentary photography genre is *Coal Hollow: Photography and Oral Histories* by Ken and Melanie Light, the fourth volume in the Series of Contemporary Photography by the University of California Press. Taken in West Virginia, the eighty-one black and white photographs aim to document the "human and environmental damage that the coal industry inflicts, and continues to inflict, on the people the industry left behind" (Beik 153). The book also contains oral histories of a snake handler, a retired coal miner, a mayor and a former justice of the West Virginia Supreme Court among others. While Beik calls the photographs "beautiful," "evocative," and "striking," reviewer Barbara J. Howe says the photographs highlight "every stereotype one

might have of a West Virginian," saying "the sun rarely shines here on the old, tired, poor, dirty, overweight, haggard people" (122).

Mike Smith, Professor of Art at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee, has been photographing that area for 20 years. His collection, *You're Not from Around Here: Photographs of East Tennessee*, bears some similarity to the work of the photographers already mentioned, in that his subjects are landscapes, portraits, still lifes and buildings. However, Smith stands out because his photographs are in color. Describing his methods, Smith says, "I usually travel the back roads, winding through the hills and hollows until, literally lost, I see or smell something good" (viii). A thread of Southern Gothic runs through some of the photographs, with plastic doll heads nailed to a telephone pole and the bones of raccoon limbs nailed to a barn wall. In the introduction to *You're Not from Around Here*, Robert Sobieszek says that Smith "has tenderly and sympathetically captured a region's salient facts and provided us with a sense of its essential experience." Reviewer Carol Ellis, however, says that Smith falls short at avoiding stereotypical depictions of Appalachia with "weather-beaten people, the dilapidated shacks ... in what can only be considered a narrow slice of East Tennessee" (973). *You're Not from Around Here* was published in 2004 by the Center for American Places in association with Columbia College Chicago.



Adams, Shelby Lee. "Vertie Slone's Porch." 1987. Photograph. Collection of Shelby Lee Adams. Originally appeared in Adams' collection "Appalachian Lives," Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003.

Less controversial in content, perhaps, are the photographs of Rob Amberg and Kenneth Murray. North Carolinian Rob Amberg published *Sodom Laurel Album* in 2002, a collection of photographs taken in Madison County, North Carolina. Amberg moved to the area in 1973 and, though an outsider, literally worked his way into the confidences of local people. The book comes with accompanying text by Amberg outlining his relationships with Dellie and Junior Norton, the main subjects of the book. Dellie Norton also contributes text, talking about her life in Sodom Laurel. Critic Cary Fowler calls *Sodom Laurel Album* "captivating" and "a work of remarkable depth and sensitivity" (107). Amberg has also published *The New Road: I-26 and the Footprints of Progress in Appalachia* (University of Georgia Press, 2009) and *Glimpses of the Rural Carolinas* (Spirit Square Center for the Arts, 1992).

Photojournalist Kenneth Murray's *Appalachia: A Day Before Yesterday* is a retrospective of his work, published in 2008 by the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services at East Tennessee State University. This most recent book covers photographs released in Murray's first two books, as well as completely new ones. While the primary subject matter is the life of the coal miner and the mining disaster in Hyden, Kentucky in 1970, it also depicts faith healings at Holiness churches and river baptisms (Blair par. 7). His previously released books were *Down to Earth: People of Appalachia* (1974) and *A Portrait of Appalachia* (1985), both published by the Appalachian Consortium Press in Boone, North Carolina.

#### DIVERSE PORTRAIT

Appalachian photographers provide a wide-ranging, diverse portrait of an area that continues to capture the imagination of outsiders. While not all of the photographers mentioned above are strictly documentary photographers, their work is an important key to understanding Appalachia. That understanding should

be informed by a study of the differing viewpoints of artists, from Paul Buchanan to Shelby Lee Adams, from Doris Ulmann to Tim Barnwell. The work of these artists is an excellent case study in why libraries should collect items that offer access to differing viewpoints; doing so produces a balanced collection and ultimately, a better-informed student or citizen.

For a listing of other books by Appalachian photographers please see these two excellent bibliographies on the Internet: Ohio University Libraries Pathfinder, "Appalachia: Photographs and Pictorial Works." Web. 27 November 2009.

West Virginia University Libraries. "Marie Tedesco's Selected Bibliography, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University." Web. 27 November 2009.

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