

Appalachian Mountain Religion

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Background

The Southern Appalachian Mountains are steeped with deeply held, and individually personal, religious beliefs. The diverse influences upon the region during their settlement have blurred the lines between folklore, Christianity, and other belief systems. Settlers brought forms of Christianity with them into the mountains, but it did not look like the Christianity that had developed in the colonies. It came with mystic traditions, Granny Women, healing, and lore and married itself right into the American Indian traditions of the people they met when they settled the land.

As more common denominations grew and spread throughout Southern Appalachia, they did not develop without reflecting the unique mountain culture around them. What makes mountain religion so fascinating is the way the mountain culture permeates even the strictest, most fundamental-leaning bodies of believers while a biblical worldview inserts itself into the minds of skeptics and unbelievers.

This research sets out to identify how those cultural beliefs have become infused into mountain religion and what makes the various denominational churches of the region reflect each other and their cultural identity more than their broader national conventions.

Introduction

A surge of missionary efforts entered the Southern Appalachian Mountains in the late nineteenth century and grew especially strong through the twentieth century. These encounters are readily told throughout primary and secondary sources from the early and mid-twentieth century, but they were not the initial introduction of Christianity to the region. As German settlers entered the Appalachian region in the eighteenth century, so did the Moravian Brethren and other missionaries like the Lutherans and Mennonites. The eighteenth century also saw Scots-Irish Presbyterians making their way into the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

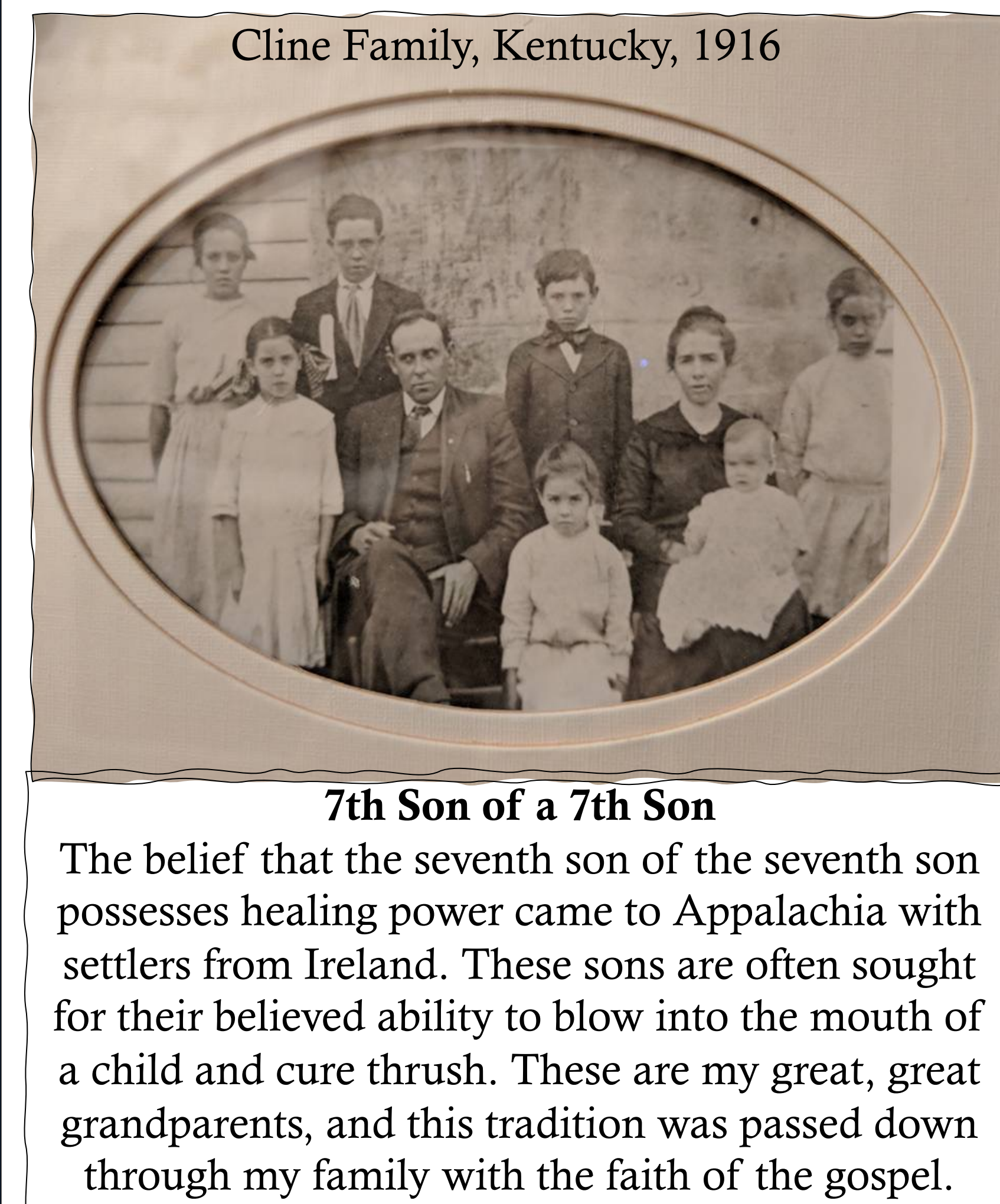
By the mid-nineteenth century, concern had risen over the mysticism that came with the some of the German beliefs and witchcraft was actively being preached against throughout what is now West Virginia. There seemed to be an inability to disconnect cultural practice and folkways for the purpose of conversion. The Scots-Irish settlers in the region had their own similar traditions and practices that alarmed the missionaries. Both groups had what came to be known as Granny Women who were often herbalists and midwives considered by many to be witches. Distinctly British, though, were the oral traditions and stories that embedded into mountaineer culture and helped give Southern Appalachia its well-recognized flare for storytelling.

These are only some examples of ways that folk traditions continue to influence Appalachian life and mountain religion. As historians and sociologists continue to study the region, the stories that define the people and their ways of life have begun to emerge, lending a better understanding of the people, their history, and their heritage. This awareness was not available to those missionaries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Their encounters were shaped by the culture-shock of uneducated people surviving in abject poverty.

Methods

This research uses primary and secondary sources to identify how those cultural beliefs have become infused into mountain religion and what makes the various denominational churches of the region reflect each other and their cultural identity more than their broader national conventions.

Archives and interviews contain images and stories that have been analyzed for their content and perspective. Additionally, the stories that have been passed down as a part of oral tradition contain cultural insight that help view the people and customs through a contemporaneous lens.

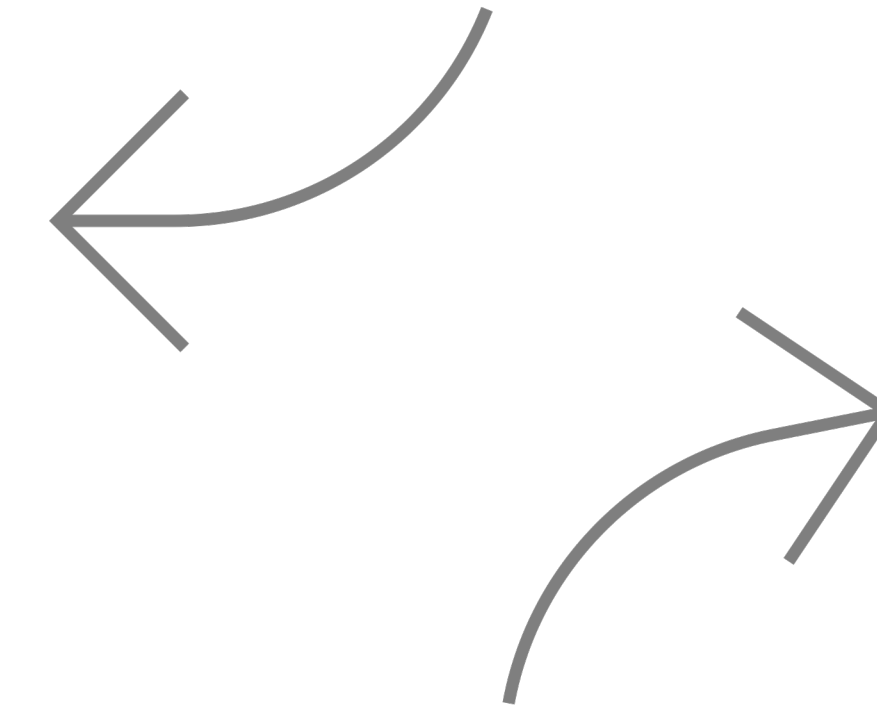


Cline Family, Kentucky, 1916

7th Son of a 7th Son

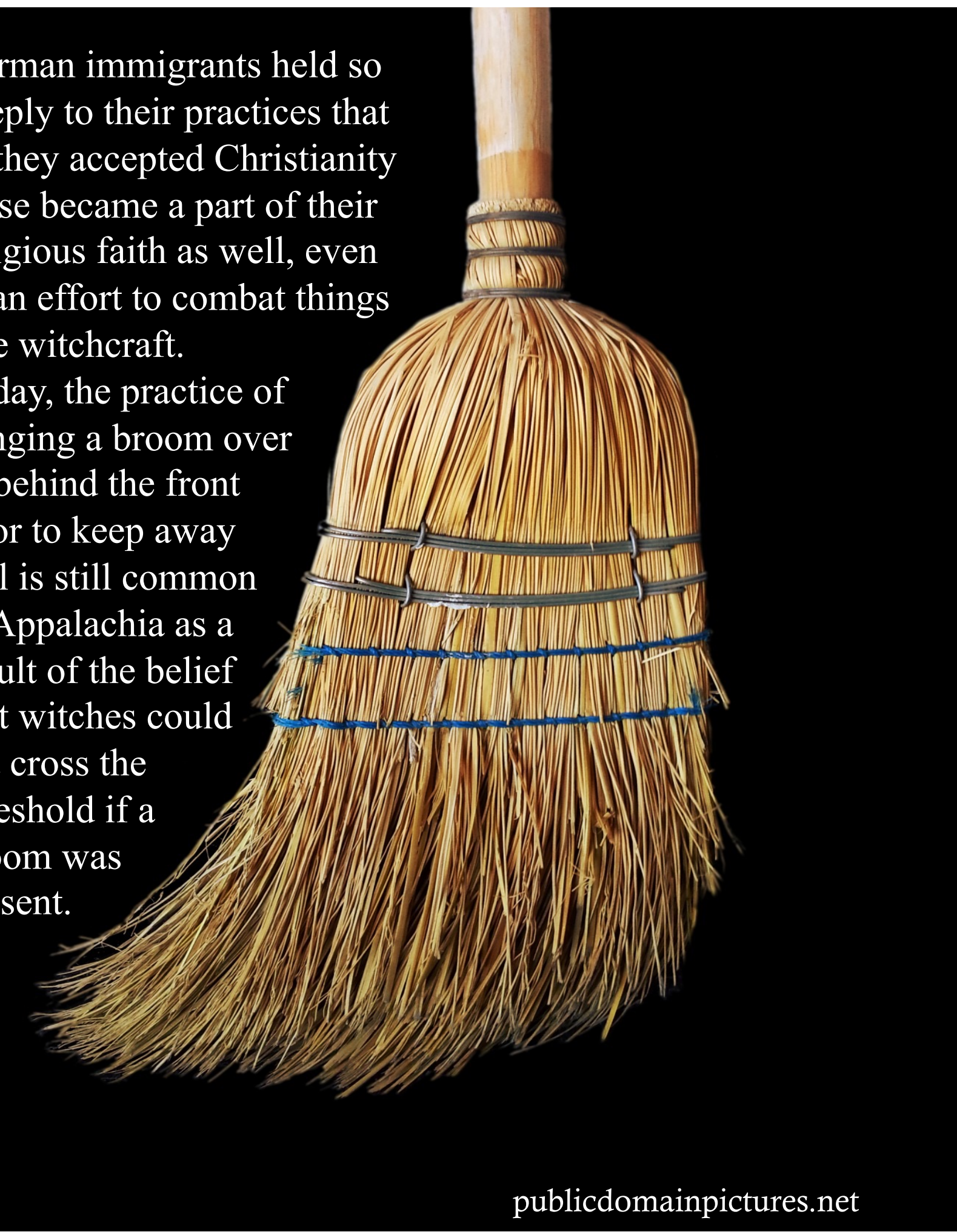
The belief that the seventh son of the seventh son possesses healing power came to Appalachia with settlers from Ireland. These sons are often sought for their believed ability to blow into the mouth of a child and cure thrush. These are my great, great grandparents, and this tradition was passed down through my family with the faith of the gospel.

Faith Healers and Folk Magic



Witchcraft and Mysticism

German immigrants held so deeply to their practices that as they accepted Christianity these became a part of their religious faith as well, even in an effort to combat things like witchcraft. Today, the practice of hanging a broom over or behind the front door to keep away evil is still common in Appalachia as a result of the belief that witches could not cross the threshold if a broom was present.



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Story retold by Loyal Jones to reflect the conflict between the missionaries and the mountaineers:

A missionary from up North arrived in the mountains eager to save souls. He drove up a back road and saw a mountaineer sitting on his front porch. He jumped out of his car and without saying hello said, "Brother, are you lost?"

"Why, no," said the mountain man. "I've lived here all my life."

"I mean, have you found Jesus?" the preacher asked.

"Well, I live so far back up this holler that I don't hardly ever get any news. I didn't know he was lost. You know, the Bible says He's up in heaven till the Second Coming."

The exasperated evangelist said, "Are you a member of the Christian Band?"

"No, I'm not, but there is a Bill Christian lives about three miles on up the road."

"What I'm trying to find out is, are you ready for the Judgment Day?"

Well, when is it?"

"We don't know about such matters. It might be next week or it might be next month. We just don't know."

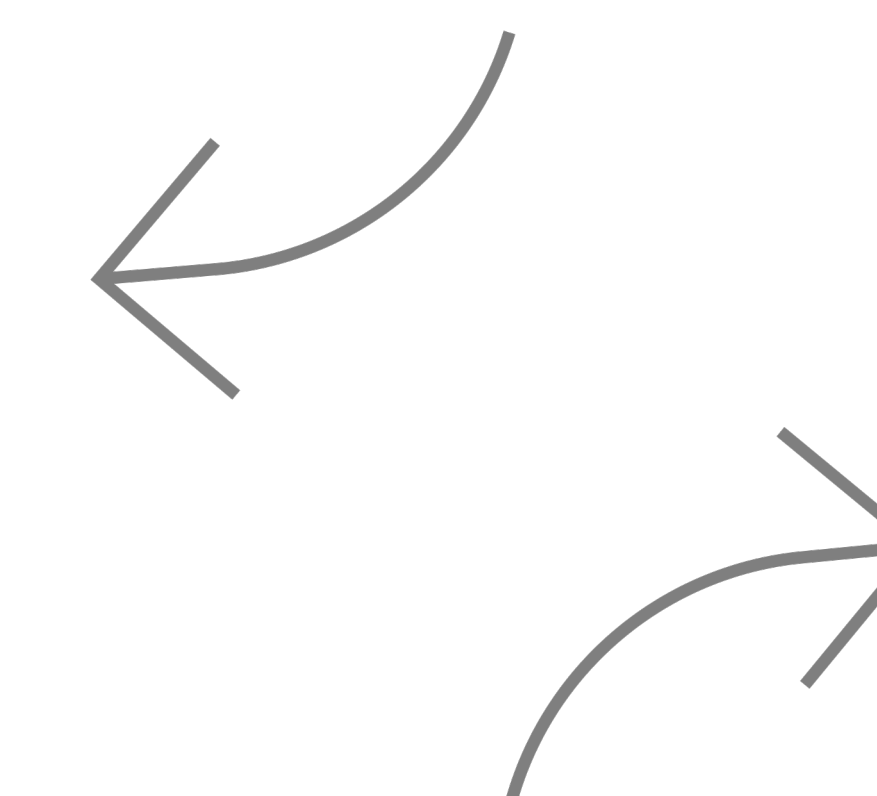
So the mountaineer said, "Well, when you find out, you let me know, 'cause the old woman will probably want to go both days."



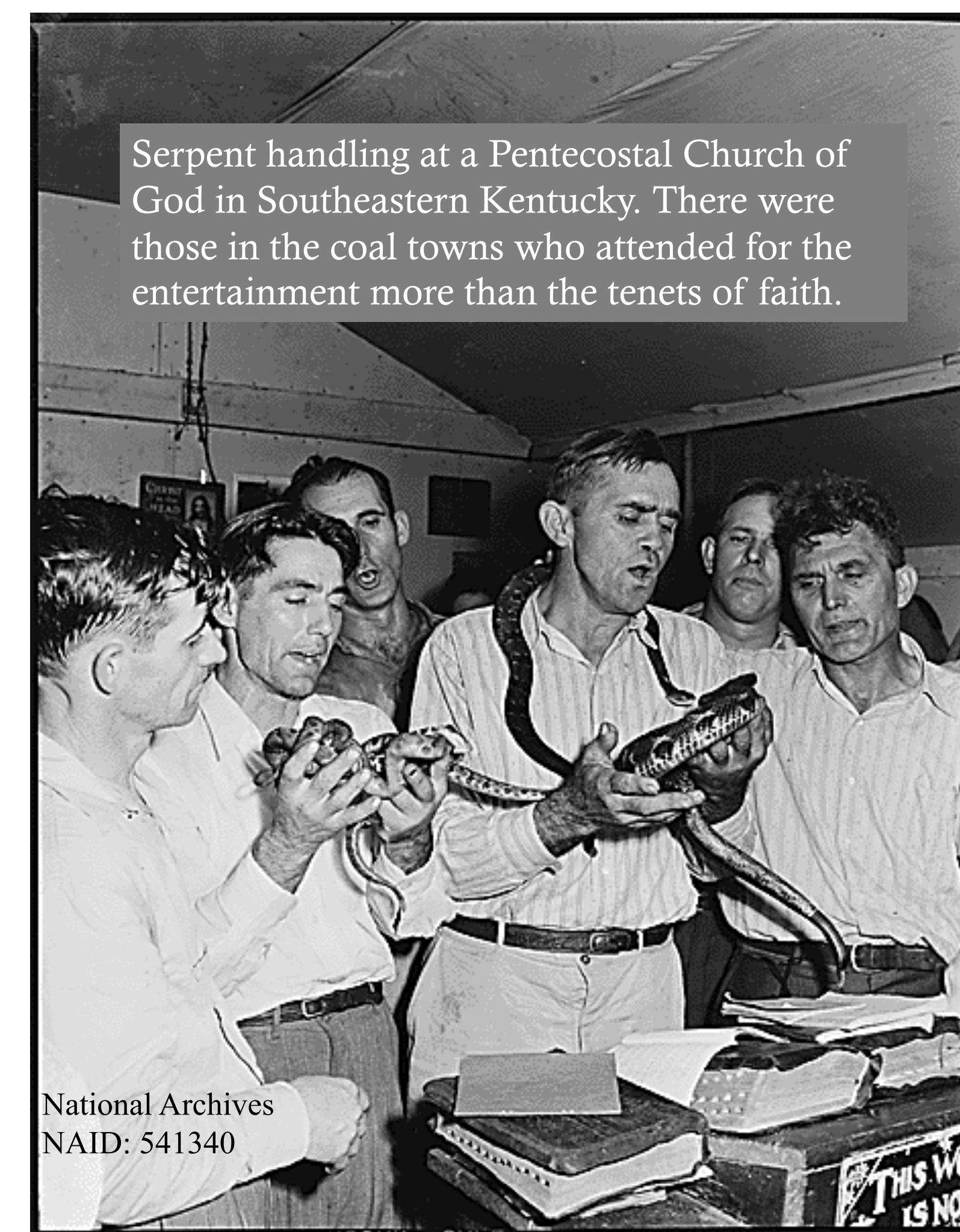
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Jack Tales came over from the British Isles and grew easily in the oral traditions of Appalachia where they took on the views of the region and the task of putting the devil in his place.. These tales of a mischievous boy, Jack, who could always trick and outsmart the devil are just one example of how Satan is seen as the great adversary and the faith to defeat him shows up in lore and legends just as it does in Church.

Oral Traditions and Storytelling



Extreme Religious Practices



Serpent handling at a Pentecostal Church of God in Southeastern Kentucky. There were those in the coal towns who attended for the entertainment more than the tenets of faith.

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Conclusion

It stands to reason that a people whose society was based around more than a century of oral tradition and a meticulously forged set of core beliefs would continue to both accept and reject elements of other cultures as they see fit, thwarting and confounding the efforts of missionary figures. Missionaries were not met with people who had never heard the gospel, they were met with people who had accepted primarily protestant Christianity by incorporating it into their traditions and folkways.

This is not to say that there were not successful missionary efforts. The mountain churches portrayed in books, movies, and other media are a direct result of missionary efforts into the area following the Great Revival at the turn of the nineteenth century. That series of camp meetings starting in Kentucky saw Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists infiltrate the area and spread quickly. As these more common denominations grew and spread throughout Southern Appalachia, they did not develop without reflecting the unique mountain culture around them.

Some of the distinction between denominations in the mountains and those outside the region may be the result of the Calvinism that still persists in Southern Appalachian churches. Loyal Jones concludes that there are elements of Calvinism like fatalism that speak to the economic condition and general circumstances of the Appalachian people creating unifying principles of importance across denominations. Themes like humility, modesty, independence and fending for oneself, personalism in relationships including that of a Savior, familism seen in the hierarchy or patriarchy of the family and church, and a reluctance to confront others or publicly criticize family have roots in Calvinism that exist beyond the denominations subscribing to their theology because they fit the situation and status of the people.

This concentrated blend of diverse influence, superstition, primarily protestant Christianity, and mountain traditions fused to make the various denominational churches of the region reflect each other and their cultural identity more than their broader national conventions.

Future Work

A challenge with understanding the culture of Appalachia and the impact on religion is its limited historiography. Appalachia is only now in a revisionist period of history that started in the late twentieth century. As revisionist history continues and primary sources are objectively analyzed and rediscovered, a clearer picture of the anomaly that is Appalachian Mountain religion will likely emerge. Moreover, as the barriers that have historically isolated the Southern Appalachian region continue to be torn down, the future of mountain religion is a story waiting to be told.

References

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