

# Keeping the Tradition Alive: The Passing of the Torch

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In a world where daily living is more impersonal and technical than ever before, few things have not changed—things we hope never change.

## Objectives for topic

To help participants:

- understand the meaning and importance of cultural and family traditions
- preserve cultural and family traditions from generation to generation

## Overview

West Virginia is one of 13 states defined by the federal government as Appalachia. (Parts of New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi are also in the Appalachian area.)

Native Americans inhabited the region long before settlers from the Old World showed up. Iroquois, Shawnee, Delaware, Mingo, and Wyandot tribes had villages along the Ohio River and its tributaries.

During the 1800s, there was a major discovery of Appalachia by local color writers and journalists of the day who saw much in the region to entertain and amuse the American public. Mountain people were viewed as hopeless but proud, desperate but industrious, noble first-generation frontier people, yet some how ignorant and degenerate. These contradictory stereotypes have grown to be perceived as fact through American fiction and other media.

The truth is that life in the wilderness and the continuing isolation of Appalachian people have made us different from most other Americans. The Appalachian value system that influences attitudes and behavior is different from the norm,

and similar to the value system of an earlier America. Some of our more important values are religion; family solidarity; individualism, self-reliance, and pride; love of place; modesty and being oneself; neighborliness; patriotism; and having a sense of beauty and a sense of humor.

Nowadays, Appalachian people both rural and urban, are more diverse than ever, but they share pride, values, and a heritage that make us distinct. You can't separate our history from the history of coal mining, oil, timber, and other extractive industries, and our own collusion in the colonialization of our land. After years of prosperity, most of these industries have left, leaving the landscape scarred yet beautiful, exploited yet underdeveloped. But we still have much to be proud of. Strong values of family, self-reliance, and pride have helped us back from hard times even though others have portrayed us in a negative manner. Appalachia is a land rich in natural resources, which has defined its historical course. Coal deposits and natural gas are found in this area. The region is heavily forested and water is abundant.

Despite its abundant resources and prime geographic location, Appalachia has existed for generations as a region apart, isolated physically and culturally by its mountains. The same narrow, winding roads that limited Appalachians' social and cultural horizons and their access to education, health care, and other vital services also discouraged new industrial development.

Due to this history and geography, people of Appalachia developed traditions and a culture all their own.

## Appalachian culture and traditions

Visible elements of our Appalachian culture continue to survive although much has been lost because of changing times and urban influences. These cultural

traditions include storytelling, homemade toys and group games, herbal and home remedies, and clogging (a form of dance where the rhythm of the music is beaten out with the feet). Useful arts include quilting, basketry, tool making, and music played on handmade instruments such as the dulcimer, fiddle, and banjo.

Foods eaten in earlier times included wild meats (venison, squirrel, rabbit, raccoon, fish, duck, beaver, doves, quail, turkey, and goose) and domestic meats (pork, chicken, beef, and lamb). Vegetables were fresh from the garden or harvested from the woods (poke greens, ramps, mushrooms, and dandelion greens). A main staple vegetable was the potato. Vegetables were dried for later use. These included a variety of beans; a popular one was called “fodder” beans. When vegetables and fruits were plentiful in the spring, summer, and early fall, time was spent making preserves, sauces, and fruit butters, along with pies and cobblers.

Breads were made daily—popular ones included Sally Lunn, crackling bread, potato breads, sourdough bread, and, later, salt-rising bread and yeast breads. Biscuits, cornpone, and cornbread were “quick” breads made to accompany meals.

Nothing could be wasted or thrown out. All parts of a butchered animal were used. A joke of the time was that all parts were eaten except the “squeal”. Lard rendered from fat taken from butchered hogs was used to flavor cooked foods. Still today, many people remember the tasty foods made with lard.

A homemaker’s day began before daylight as she prepared foods to feed her family. Three hearty meals (breakfast, dinner, and supper) were eaten by all family members. In addition to meal preparation, the homemaker’s responsibilities included growing foods, tending livestock (feeding, milking), rearing children, cleaning house, making soap, and washing clothes. The day would last late into the evening with reading the Bible, doing needlework projects, and spending time with the family. The next day, the process would begin again.

## Holidays

When we think of traditions, holidays come to mind—holidays focused around religion or celebrated events.

Food, festivities, and loved ones marked traditional holiday celebrations. It was the responsibility of the family elders—the keepers of the heritage and

traditions—to pass along the family legacy to their children. It was the passing of the torch, a message that the clock was ticking and it would be up to the children to preserve the family traditions and connect one generation to the next to keep the family together.

## Activity

Share information with each other regarding foods, recipes, and holidays from your childhood you remember. What traditions did you take to your own home? What traditions have your children continued?

## Language

Some people say our speech patterns go back to how people talked in the British Isles. Southern Mountain dialect is a sort of Scottish-flavored Elizabethan English and is directly related to migration patterns.

The reason our people still speak as they do is that when these early Scots and English and Germans (and some Irish and Welsh, too) settled in the Appalachian area, they virtually isolated themselves from the mainstream of American life for generations because of the hills and mountains. So they kept the old speech forms that fell out of fashion elsewhere. In the days of the first Queen Elizabeth, the highest ranking nobles of the realms of England and Scotland employed many of the same words and expressions. Have you heard any of the following? If so, you have experienced language from generation-to-generation—our cultural tradition.

**Backset** - a relapse - “I was getting better from the flu but now I’ve took a backset.”

**Board** - table - “The food’s on the board.”

**Bum** - the buttocks - “She’s getting so fat she’s a regular fatty-bum.”

**Poke** - a paper bag - “Be sure to put my groceries in a poke.”

**Redd-up** - to set in order, to clean up - “I’m going to redd-up the kitchen.”

**Smooch** - to kiss - “Ma gave me a big smooch.”

**Skift** - a light fall of snow - “There was a little skift of snow on the ground this morning.”

## Activity

Can you recall words, phrases, expressions, and sayings that you heard in your home as you grew up? Share with others in the group.

## Music

“Folk songs” are songs that have been preserved in oral tradition through generations. They belong to the people. Folk songs were almost never sung to any accompaniment. Singing was part of the daily lives of the people, and they sang as they went about their work. It was not for entertainment but because it felt good to sing. Many long winter evenings were spent being entertained by songs and stories told by parents and grandparents. Popular folk songs included “Billy Boy,” “Shady Grove,” “Barbara Allen;” Spirituals: “All God’s Children Got Shoes,” “Ezek’el Saw the Wheel,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot;” and gospel songs: “Amazing Grace,” “Church in the Wildwood,” and “The Old Rugged Cross.”

## Activity

Find the words and sing one of the above songs. When did you first hear or learn the songs? Are these songs your children/grandchildren have heard?

## Resources

Hale, Helen. *Country Cooking*  
Allegheny Press,  
Box 220, Elgin, PA 16413; 1985

Maurer, B.B. *Mountain Heritage*  
Morgantown Printing and Binding Company; 1974

[Http://www.civicnet.org/webmarket/appcult2.html](http://www.civicnet.org/webmarket/appcult2.html)  
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The task is to hold onto the spirit of tradition yet reinterpret its meaning for contemporary use.

## Passing the torch

I have two indelible memories of the first and only time I cooked the family Thanksgiving dinner. One is how truly awful the food tasted—the turkey was dry, the string beans irreparably mushy, the pumpkin pies store-bought. The other is of how my mother, along with all the other family elders, pretended not to notice.

If you knew my mother, and the other over-50 folks to whom I am related, you would know how significant this is. As a rule, they have no pity on the rest of us. They come from the old school that says the only way a daughter/son/niece/nephew will learn to do something right is to be told when and how he or she has done it wrong.

So, last year, when they all sat down to dinner and not one of them so much as mentioned the paper plates, the mismatched stemware, and the everyday silver, I was certain their collective shock had rendered them speechless.

But when my mother—the family matriarch, the woman who has never set a holiday table that didn’t come straight out of the pages of *House Beautiful* (exquisite china, a white line tablecloth, sterling flatware polished to a gleam that very morning)—surveyed the table and pronounced it “lovely,” I wasn’t just baffled, I was chilled to the bone. And it didn’t stop there. Calmly, coolly, as if she were saying, “Please pass the gravy,” my mother turned to my only male cousin, Tony, and asked him to carve the turkey. A hush fell over the table. No one moved.

Ignoring the paper plates is one thing. But asking my cousin to carve the turkey is like asking Milli Vanilli to sing the National Anthem. If my family has one sacred Thanksgiving tradition, it is that my uncle, Tony’s father, carves the bird. It is a task he always performs with great fanfare and anticipation and has never entrusted to anyone, not even the year his carving hand was in a cast because he’d cut his finger off with a saw. “Great idea,” my uncle said to my mother, as he passed his son the knife.

Who were these people? What had they done with my real family? What was happening here?

A rite of passage that, I later came to realize, was the only explanation. That Thanksgiving, something was being passed on—from mother to daughter, from father to son, from one generation to the next. It was the reason behind my mother’s sudden and inexplicable announcement that she would no longer be preparing our traditional Thanksgiving feast. Now I see her decision was never about who cooked the bird. It was about pushing us from the nest.

My family elders, the keepers of our heritage, had deemed the time right to begin passing on the family legacy. They had decided it was time to tell us, their sons and daughters, that one day soon the responsibility of gathering the family together, of keeping it close, would be ours.

When my uncle passed his son the knife,  
he really was passing the torch and sending  
us all a message: The clock was ticking. Soon,  
it would be up to us to preserve the family  
traditions—my father’s oyster casserole, my aunts’  
cobblers, my uncle’s skill with a knife—that have  
connected one generation to the next and, most  
important, provided the essential roots and  
rhythms of our lives.

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