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Violent, Shiftless, Moonshining Hillbillies: Framing Appalachia Before the Hatfields and McCoys

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One of the enduring perceptions stemming from the infamous Hatfields and McCoys feud, in which rival clans from West Virginia and Kentucky waged intermittent warfare for nearly a dozen years, is that news coverage of the feud created a negative image of Appalachia and its residents that still exists today. That image of Appalachian residents as violent, shiftless moonshiners who would rather shoot a stranger than befriend him has bedeviled the region. Otis Rice, whose monograph *The Hatfields and the McCoys* (1978) is considered by many to be the seminal work on the feud, argues that big-city reporters used the feud, whether intentionally or not, to create an impression of the region:

> Correspondents from New York, Cincinnati, and Louisville descended upon the area and provided detailed accounts to their readers. Their report, often more sensational that accurate, shaped an image of Appalachian feudists that gained powerful hold upon the pliable American mind. Missionaries, educators, sociologists, and local color writers also discovered the southern Appalachians, which they saw as a region unique and distressingly in need of change. (p. 126)

More recently, in summer 2000 about 2,000 descendants of the Hatfield and McCoy families gathered in Pikeville, KY, for a reunion; an Associated Press account ("Famous feuding families unite," 2000) states, "East Coast newspapers sent reporters to cover the conflict, and mountain folk were often portrayed as illiterates who carried pistols and settled things with violence" (p. 6A). In the same Associated Press article, Ron Eller, director of the Appalachian Center at the University of Kentucky, was quoted as saying, "I think probably more than any other single event [the feud] helped to set the mind-set for many of the negative images that have persisted" (p. 6A).

However, claims of the lasting effect of feud coverage are based either on assumption or, at best, on newspaper accounts written only during the feud; that is, they do not place the news coverage in context of the larger picture of how journalists reported on Appalachia before the violence erupted. Waller, for instance, cites a number of newspaper articles in her book *Feud* (1988), but no issues published before the feud began. Similarly, Rice's examination of newspapers (1978) is also limited to the period after the feud had begun. Without a careful examination of the rhetoric used by newspapers about Appalachia in the period before the feud began, any assertion that newspaper coverage colored the way people think about the region is based on guesswork.

Did the image of lazy, violence-prone Appalachian residents exist before the feud made national news? The hypothesis is that newspaper and magazine coverage of Appalachia that created a negative stereotype of mountain folk came not because of the Hatfields and McCoys

feud, but actually as early as the 1850s. This study uses framing analysis to examine newspaper and magazine coverage of Appalachia in the decades before the feud began in an effort to determine whether news stories and articles were framed in a way in which the people of Appalachia were already being stereotyped as lazy, ill-tempered, and dangerous. This study is not an examination of what caused the feud; that topic has already been well covered. Instead, this study focuses on how perceptions of Appalachia were created by outside writers in the years before the feud gained notoriety.

Literature Review

Framing Analysis: The media do not serve as a mirror, reflecting all of reality. Rather, the media serve as a window through which media consumers see only a small segment of reality. That window frame through which media consumers see the world provides a rich venue for research.

Entman (1993) writes that frames focus on and highlight some aspects about the subject of communication, raising their importance Framing involves selecting an aspect of an event and making it more salient "in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Facts alone have no meaning of their own. It is only through being placed in some context through emphasis or focus as part of a frame do facts take on relevance (Gamson, 1989). To Gamson and Modigliani (1989), a frame is a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to reports about an issue. "The frame," Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992) write, "does not predetermine the information individuals will seek but it may shape aspects of the world that the individual experiences either directly or through the news media and is thus central to the process of constructed meaning" (p. 61). Frames are not selected by the media accidentally but actively as a way to allow consumers to interpret and discuss events (Tuchman, 1978).

Framing is not monolithic. A single news story may contain several frames as reporters, editors and sources attempt to highlight aspects of events. By selecting whom to quote and what information those quotes convey, a journalist can actively frame a story (Tuchman, 1972). Gamson (1989) writes that there may be many "senders" in most news reports: "The reporter or anchor person suggests a story line in the lead and closing; the sources quoted suggest frames in sound bites or interviews. . . . For many events there may be more than one frame suggested, and one needs to ask questions about the prominence of competing frames in the same news report" (p. 158). A single sentence may contain several frames, or none at all (Entman, 1993). Frames are often unspoken and unacknowledged (Gitlin, 1980). Tankard (2001) states that the audience is often unaware that framing is taking place, writing that "Media framing can be likened to the magician's sleight of hand -- attention is directed to one point so that people do not notice the manipulation that is going on at another point" (p. 97). Selection of frames has a crucial impact on the way consumers of media reports see the world. As Pan and Kosicki (1993) write, "Choices of words and their organization into news stories are not trivial matters. They hold great power in setting the context for debate, defining issues under consideration, summoning a variety of mental representations, and providing the basic tools to discuss the issues at hand" (p. 70).

Few framing studies, however, have examined newspaper or magazine articles on a historical basis; most examine current or recent media coverage of issues such as politics, abortion or social movements within a relatively short period. In some of the few examples of historical

framing analysis, Ashley and Olsen (1998) examined print media framing of the women's movement from 1966 to 1986, Dow (1999) examined how television news framed the 1970 Women's Strike for Equality, and Ross (1998) studied framing of the Civil Rights movement in *The New York Times* from 1955 to 1961. Spratt (1997) studied print media framing of the 1918 flu outbreak, and Plaster (1997) studied how the *Ladies' Home Journal* framed discussions about the 19th Amendment. All of these studies, however, focus on specific events or issues, mostly in the 20th Century. In one of the few attempts to conduct framing analysis in 19th Century publications, Ratzlaff and Iorio (1995) examined coverage of political issues involving blacks in two newspapers in Wichita, KS, in 1894. Even though most historians accept the premise that journalism in the 1800s was less objective than today (for example, Emery and Emery, 1988, p. 363-364), no one has conducted a longitudinal framing analysis to determine how that subjectivity could have created enduring stereotypes such as the violent, shiftless, moonshining hillbilly.

The Feud: Some published work on the Hatfields and McCoys feud is anecdotal and appears to have been written to press a particular account of the feud (McCoy, 1976; Hatfield, 1974), while other publications are more scholarly and take a more analytical approach (such as Jones, 1948; Rice, 1978; Waller, 1988). All recount the developments that led to the feud, the violence that erupted on both sides of the Tug River between the McCoys of Kentucky and the Hatfields of West Virginia, and the eventual end of the feud. A common thread is all these works is that the stereotype of Appalachia as the home of uneducated, often violent "hillbillies" was started by newspaper coverage of the Hatfields and McCoys feud. Waller (1988) writes that news coverage of the feud helped to create a "general impression . . . of a mountaineer culture as not only lawless and violent, but unsuited to the march of civilization and progress" (p. 232). Jones (1948) cites "repeated newspaper publicity on the wickedness of the mountain region" (p. 66). Williams (1976) writes that national publicity about the feud helped to make "the negative stereotype of the hillbilly, with his period costume of slouch hat and jeans, a full beard, a rifle, a whiskey jug, and a demeanor that one of the Hatfield chroniclers of 1888 neatly characterized as dull when sober, dangerous when drunk" (p. 101). Waller (1995) writes that feuding in West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee "gripped the popular imagination and fastened on the people of southern Appalachia a cultural stereotype of violent irrationality that is still potent today" (p. 348). As evidence, Waller cites newspaper accounts of various Appalachian feuds as early as 1872. Similarly, O'Brien (1999) writes that "A popular perception of Appalachia as a poverty-stricken region -- with people inclined to violence, feuding, and clannishness -- may have originated in the 1880s" (p. 187). O'Brien also writes that violence surrounding moonshining, another stereotype of Appalachia, was a result of Appalachian residents seeking supplemental income at the same time the federal government began an emphasis on collecting revenue from alcohol manufacturers. Appalachian residents responded "the same way they had always done:" violently (p. 188-189).

Shapiro (1978), however, acknowledges that some magazine articles in the 1800s focus on the "otherness" of Appalachia, of its peculiarities and distinctiveness -- its "local color." (p. 4). Although Shapiro discusses nonfiction magazine articles, he focuses on fictional accounts in analyzing the writing about Appalachia. Interestingly, Shapiro does not refer to the Appalachian stereotype in his discussion of the "otherness" of the region.

In his introduction to an anthology of articles about Appalachia from 1860 to 1987, McNeil (1995) states that writers from roughly 1860 to 1899 were discovering the region, or

writing about Appalachia as a unique place. Similarly, Billings, Pudup and Waller (1995) write that both fiction and non-fiction published between 1870 and 1900 "pictured ways of life in the highland South as vastly out of step, culturally and economically, with the progressive trends of industrializing and urbanizing nineteenth-century America" spawning "a distinct genre of local color fiction that both exploited and tried to explain the strangeness of mountain life" (p. 1).

Method

To determine whether the stereotype of the violent, moonshining Appalachian resident originated before the Hatfields and McCoys feud was widely publicized, this paper is based on a qualitative examination of nonfiction magazine and newspaper articles about the region during the period from about 1850 to 1888, when the infamous feud was first reported by the national press (Waller, 1995, p. 347). Modern-day Appalachia, as defined by government agencies such as the Appalachian Regional Commission, is a territory covering all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states, ranging from Vermont to Alabama (McNeil, 1995, p. 1). This study, however, focuses on the interior area of Appalachia, or the area encompassing West Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, Western Virginia, and the mountain regions of East Tennessee, Western North Carolina, and Northeastern Georgia, what scholars call Southern Appalachia or the Southern Highlands (McNeil).

Three sources were used to identify articles about this region. First, *Poole's Guide to Periodical Literature* provided an index of magazine articles from 1802-1892. Because *Poole's* indexes both fiction and nonfiction articles, each article that was indexed under any of several terms (Appalachia, the various states listed above, coal or coal mining, moonshine, and feud) were examined; only nonfiction articles were included in this study. Second, *The New York Times* index, which lists articles dating from 1851, was searched for references to similar terms. Excluded from this analysis are articles published during the Civil War that concerned military tactics, the progress of the war, or the issues of slavery or abolition. Finally, Shapiro (1978) includes an extensive bibliography of fiction and nonfiction magazine articles and books about Appalachia. This bibliography was used to find any additional nonfiction magazine articles about Appalachia that were not listed in *Poole's*.

This method found 31 newspaper and magazine articles about Appalachia that met the search criteria during the time frame before the Hatfields and McCoys feud began to gain notoriety. The author examined a small sample of articles using open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 62) to determine what provisional frames emerged from the data. Using those initial frames as a starting point, all articles in the study were systematically examined using Strauss and Corbin's inductive grounded theory approach (p. 23).

Frames

Three common frames emerged from the examination of these articles. First, many writers used a frame of Appalachia's natural, unspoiled beauty in describing their travel through the region. The people of Appalachia are described in this frame in terms of their socioeconomic status (poor), their lack of formal etiquette, and their language. Second, many writers framed their articles in terms of Appalachia as a rich, untapped bounty of natural resources waiting to be exploited by people from outside the region because local inhabitants are too lazy or stupid to

take advantage of the land. Third, a number of articles framed the people of Appalachia in physical or moral terms -- as malevolent, gun-toting mountaineers who are a danger to outsiders, or as moonshiners whose joys are drinking and fighting.

Frame	Number	Percent
Travel	22	71%
Natural resources	12	42%
Hillbilly	15	48%
N=31 (percentages > 100% because some articles contained multiple frames)		

Travel Frame: Twenty-two of the articles in this study, or 71 percent, were framed as essentially travelogues telling readers of the rugged but beautiful wilderness of Appalachia and its unspoiled inhabitants An article in *Catholic World* magazine, for instance, recounted the story of two young men who moved to West Virginia, cleared some land of trees, and began to farm ("A farming experiment," 1885). Then young men, in telling their story in the form of a long letter by one of them, describe at one point the view from their mountaintop home: "our view extends many miles and is simply grand -- equal, it seems to me, to any in the world" (p. 530). A writer in the *New York Times* ("East and middle Tennessee as a summer retreat," 1867) describes the mountains of East Tennessee and Western North Carolina in glowing terms: "The clouds in which these mountain streams are often buried supply with water the ice-cold springs which flow forth on the edges of the summits. Below them the streams of these mountains add to the beauty of the scenery by the roaring rapids and wild cascades" (p. 1). *Southern Literary Messenger* offers this account the Western Virginia mountains:

> How glorious the panorama! We snuff [sic] the pure mountain air, redolent with the perfurme [sic] of the grape blossoms, hanging from the vines, whose rank, luxuriant growth are binding together these huge forest trees, and whose clasping tendrils so overspread the shrubs and brush, and undergrowth of the woods, that it is in some spots one dense mass of foliage, through which even heaven's sunbeams cannot penetrate ("The mountain scenery of Virginia," 1863, p. 569).

Similarly, the people of Appalachia are described in these travel articles as simple, childlike, rugged and natural, good in character but poor and uneducated. In some, they are simple people willing to offer their meager homes to strangers for food and lodging:

> As a class, they are able-bodied, large-hearted people, rude in speech, brave in act, honest in their friendships. They may know nothing of the conventionalities of society, but they will exhibit the 'small, sweet courtesies of life' -- as they understand them -- with an abandon of generosity that makes one 'feel at home' ("Cumberland Gap," 1872, p. 282).

"Notes from lower Virginia" (1867) describes the Appalachian people:

> It is really pitiful to go through such splendid fields and see nothing but log houses, half of them with log chimneys, cracks 'chinked' with mud. No whitewash, no attempt at anything but the barest existence. Childlike, simple but kind-hearted, passionate, the people greet you with respect or pass you in silence (p. 1).

The account of the farming experiment published in *Catholic World* ("A farming experiment," 1885) describes Appalachian residents as living in "miserable shanties" and as having "a deplorable lack of education" (p. 527). One scene in *Scribner's Monthly* ("The great south," 1874) describes the typical family encountered in Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee: "The people . . . were tall and robust; their language was peculiar; and their manners, although courteous, were awkward and rough. The gaunt, yellow-haired women were smoking" (p. 521).

In summary, the travel frame depicts the people of Appalachia as poor and uneducated but willing to open their doors to strangers.

Natural Resources Frame: Twelve of the articles in this study, or 42 percent, were framed as Appalachia as a bounty of natural resources, such as coal, timber, and land, available for exploitation by outsiders. An article in *The New York Times* ("The two Virginias," 1873), questioned why Appalachian residents do not attempt to exploit their own resources:

> Large sections of Virginia and West Virginia contain fine mineral deposits, in great quantities; yet the owners live and die without opening a vein to develop their own natural wealth. . . .There is great promise for the commercial future of West Virginia in an outside population can be induced to enter and improve the country. The State has great wealth in coal and iron completely undeveloped. (p. 1).

Another *New York Times* article ("Inducements," 1857) about Lewis County, Virginia (now West Virginia), predicts "it would be a perfect godsend to thousands in the City of New York if they could come here, where they would find cheap, fertile land" (p. 1B). *Scribner's Monthly* ("The great south," 1874) advises readers that in the mountains of Western North Carolina, "There's no danger of overestimating the mineral wealth of this mountain country; it is unbounded" (p. 526). All the region needs is "the magic wand of the capitalist waved over it to become one of the richest sections of the Union" (p. 525). Why should outsiders be the ones to develop the resources? As *Scribner's Monthly* reported, Western North Carolina residents have no interest in developing these natural resources, looking at "mineral hunters" with "coldness and contempt" (p. 527). *Appleton's Weekly* ("Cumberland Gap," 1872) predicts, "Whatever may be the peculiarities of the locality, social or otherwise, the time cannot be far distant when the whole of this wild region must yield to the march of improvement, and pour forth the treasures of mineralogical wealth now latent in its soil" (p. 282).

In one of the harshest articles, a *New York Times* report about the mineral riches of West Virginia says of the shiftless residents:

> They need to be startled out of their droning drawl in talking. They want money, badly. But their greatest want is enterprise, and I believe an immigration of miners, farmers, graziers and so on from the North would be both welcome to them and of the greatest possible advantage to both parties. . . . ("Notes from lower Virginia,"

1867, p. 1).

In summary, newspaper and magazine articles that focused on natural resources often framed local residents in a negative light, as either too lazy or too stupid to improve their lot in life. In almost every article, the wealth of natural resources are seen not as a potential benefit for local residents, who were described as uneducated and uninterested, but as an opportunity ripe for exploitation by outsiders.

Hillbilly Frame: Fifteen of the articles in this study, or 48 percent, included or focused on a frame of Appalachian residents as violent, gun-toting, moonshining hillbillies. A classic article, cited by many (Billings, Pudup and Waller, 1995, for instance) as the first significant account of the people of Appalachia, was written by Will Wallace Harney and published in *Lippincott's* under the title "A strange land and a peculiar people" (1873). This article, an account of travels through Eastern Kentucky, describes the local residents as "characterized by marked peculiarities of the anatomical frame. The elongation of the bones, the contour of the facial angle, the relative proportion or disproportion of the extremities, the loose muscular attachment of the ligatures" (p. 431).

Harney's account, however, was far from the first to indicate the people of Appalachia had undesirable traits, either physical or moral. A brief *Harper's Weekly* article ("Hunting for stills") as early as 1867 is accompanied by a drawing depicted the U.S. Cavalry troops seeking illegal stills in the mountains; in the drawing, they are questioning a woman standing in front of a ramshackle shack and smoking a corncob pipe (p 811). Another *Harper's Weekly* article ("Illicit distillation of liquors," 1867) reports that moonshining has become "an immense business," with illegal stills "located in the midst of an impenetrable jungle of laurel brake" (p 773). And what of those who drink this illegal liquor? An article in *Scribner's Monthly* ("The great south," 1874) recounts at length a traveling group's harrowing encounter with a group of menacing, drunken moonshiners:

> Riding on in haste to find a blacksmith, we were suddenly surrounded by a threatening mob of half-drunken mountain men clad in rude garb, some mounted, some on foot, but not one of them friendly faced. . . . There were bad and drunken faces among the men; two or three hands were clutching stones, plucked from the wet roads, and the circle gradually narrowed in toward us (p. 517).

In this account, the travelers try to escape on horseback with the threatening mountaineers following "doggedly" (p. 517). The travelers are eventually forced to stop and answer some questions from the mob. Faced with certain attack, the travelers are rescued by another man. "He was sober, and producing from his pocket a flask of 'moonshine' whisky invited us to drink. The secret was out. We evidently had been mistaken for a party of revenue officers, on a mission to seize some of the concealed stills in the gorges and caves of this wild region" (p. 518). The drunken mob disperses and the rescuer tells the travelers the men meant no harm. "'But ye can't always tell,' the man added. 'A man wants to keep his eye out in these regions when the boys 've been drinkin'" (p. 518).

Harper's New Monthly Magazine published a nine-part series in the 1870s about a group of travelers exploring the mountains of eastern West Virginia. While residents are generally

portrayed kindly in this series, the author often relates anecdotes or uses descriptive terms that cast mountaineers are lacking in education and social skills, frequently carrying guns, and generally being less than desirable companions. One article in this series ("The mountains, VII," 1873) relates the group's encounter with a mountain family: "Leaning against the doorjamb is a squalid old man, mute and motionless as a statue of stupidity, his glassy eye apparently fixed on a dead pig lying just in front" of . . . "a dingy, contorted and dilapidated" cabin (p. 674). When questioned about why he did nothing about the pig carcass, one of the travelers says, "Well, the pig had only been lying there since last night. He didn't know what it died of. It was the hot sun that swelled it up; and as it didn't bother him, he didn't care" (p. 675). Later, the mountaineer and "the women" provide a meal of "parboiled squirrel in the greasy dish" (p. 675) and then tell the visitors they must sleep four to a bed.

Other descriptions of Appalachian residents are equally unflattering. "Wild groups collect in cabin doors, staring strangely at our cavalcade. People don't know where anybody lives, nor how many miles it is to any where [sic]. Women slam the doors in our faces, wolfish dogs howl at us, and elfish children flee at our approach" ("The mountains, VI," 1872, p. 347). . . . Appalachian residents are gun toting and ignore the law. Several are described as wearing "omnipresent gray slouch hat, minus rim" ("The great south," 1874, p. 536) and being "costumed like our ordinary mountaineers, and armed with rifles and knives" ("The mountains, VII," 1873, p. 671). "These mountaineers don't regard game laws, but shoot when they see fit" ("The mountains," VI, 1872, p. 359). A *New York Times* article ("The two Virginias," 1873) characterizes the probable reaction by a West Virginia resident to a stranger repairing a dilapidated fence: "If they would not shoot him as an intruder, they would be inclined to do so" (p. 1).

A number of magazine articles are accompanied by drawings depicting local life. Invariably, the men are shown as thin to the point of emaciation, with long, scraggly beards that don't hide their weak chins, wearing slouch hats, and carrying rifles. Women are often depicted as doing domestic work or attending church surrounded by a brood of small children. The men of Appalachia have "an utter lack of emulation and ambition. They care neither for better homes, schools, nor churches, nor even for better clothes or more money" ("Poor white trash," 1888, p. 584).

In summary, articles depicting the people of Appalachia often use details from what we now call the hillbilly stereotype. They are often drunk on moonshine, and when they are, they are often violent. Physically, they have the long, narrow faces, often bearded, under the omnipresent slouch hat. They regularly carry guns and ignore the laws about when they can use those weapons.

Conclusions

As this framing analysis shows, the stereotype of the Appalachian hillbilly as a moonshine-swilling violent illiterate wearing a slouch hat and carrying a gun did not originate with reporters from national newspapers recounting the Hatfields-McCoys feud. Instead, those images of Appalachian residents were written as early as the 1860s, long before the feud gained newspaper headlines.

Some literature about stereotyping (for example, Mio and Awakuni, 2000) indicates that cultural stereotypes can originate from media coverage of specific events, such as the Rodney King riots (p. 58). The framing analysis in this study, however, suggests that some stereotypes do

not originate from coverage of a single event or even a series of related events, such as the Hatfields-McCoys feud, but rather are the result of years of coverage; the hillbilly stereotype is the result of time, not events. National interest in and coverage of the feud may have brought the stereotype into greater focus, but that coverage did not create the image of the Appalachian resident. Further, this framing analysis found both good and bad characteristics associated with Appalachian residents. In the hillbilly frame, the people are seen as menacing, and in the natural resources frame they are seen as shiftless, but in the travel frame their lack of education is portrayed as childlike innocence. National news coverage of the feud obscured the ";good" stereotype, but it also did not create the "bad" stereotype.

This study also expands the concept of media coverage framing analysis by looking at longitudinal coverage during a nearly 40-year span. Previous framing studies that examined media coverage from the past have focused on specific, limited-time events. Rather than focusing on how the media framed particular events, researchers might do well to expand their studies to look at how the media cover ideas over time; historical framing analysis is vast, uncharted territory.

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