

West Virginia: How unique geography, nature, and seasons affect families, livelihoods, and activities, as seen through the eyes of WV author Cynthia Rylant

“It is the beauty of Appalachia that brought people to WV. It is that same beauty that keeps people here and brings others back time and again.” (Hoffman 71)

The only state to lie completely inside the Appalachian Mountains, West Virginia is known for its beautiful mountain ranges that appear to reach to the heavens. It is divided into three areas: Appalachian Plateau in the west, Ridge and Valley region in the east, and the Blue Ridge region at the tip of the eastern panhandle. The Appalachian Plateau contains large deposits of coal, oil, gas, salt, and iron ore. The Ridge and Valley region have rich soil used for farming, and the Blue Ridge region is full of apple and peach orchards (Hoffman).

Driving into the state, visitors might see signs that say “Welcome to Wild and Wonderful West Virginia”, “Almost Heaven”, or “We’re Open for Business” – all descriptions of daily life here in the Appalachians. Wildlife is abundant in the state, from whitetail deer to black bears, and they roam freely throughout the mountains, sometimes making appearances in state parks or bedding down in an attempt to avoid the avid hunters every fall. Driving the winding roads in the fall, as the sun rises behind the trees, the view of red, orange, and yellow leaves sparkling in the sunlight gives the appearance that one is driving through heaven, as though God painted the skyline. If the 4-wheel drives are in working order, then maneuvering the twists and turns of mountain roads in the dead of winter will grant you the opportunity to view freshly fallen snow, several inches deep, glistening off the trees and sparkling atop the mountains, awaiting patiently

the arrival of ski season. Deeper into the mountains, in small community towns, the coal miners of West Virginia are busy producing 15% of the country's coal as well as almost half of the coal that the U.S. sells to other countries (Hodgkins 38).

"Morning in these houses in Appalachia is quiet and full of light and the mountains out the window look new, like God made them just that day."

(Rylant, Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds)

In the early morning hours, as the fog rises slowly over the tops of the mountains, West Virginians are beginning their days – feeding the cattle and the dogs, starting up the trucks they use for everything from farming to daily transportation to hauling tons of coal from the mines; or you might find them sitting in a tree stand, waiting and watching for wildlife that will soon be dinner on the table, or checking the batteries on their headlamps before heading into the coal mines. Children rise slowly with the sun, helping out with chores on the family farm before heading off to ride bikes with their friends, a day in the classroom, or an afternoon of pumpkin picking or snowman building. No matter the time of year, hard work is a way of life for folks in the Mountain State. But that hard work is surrounded by family and friends in small communities throughout the state getting together for barbeques, church services, fairs and festivals for every season, and benefits that support their loved ones in the Armed Forces.

Children's author Cynthia Rylant was raised in a small town in West Virginia, deep in the mountains, by her grandparents. She has written many stories and poems that, in essence, describe her world growing up in a small community, where families relied on one another, neighbors didn't need fences, and everybody knew those around them, and their business.

General Delivery

We got our mail
 General Delivery
 at the Beaver Post Office.
 That meant our house had
 no number
 and no street.
 And we couldn't afford
 to rent a box.
 Just General Delivery.
 Still,
 it was nice
 being big enough in Beaver
 that folks could send you mail
 care of The Town,
 and you were known.
 (Rylant, *Waiting to Waltz: A Childhood*)

Towns such as Beaver found their start in the early 1800s with the booming of the lumber industry. The late 1700s had already brought an iron furnace at King's creek, and then in 1797, Elisha Brooks opened the area's first commercial salt operation from vast saline deposits left thousands of years earlier by a receding sea (Ash and Douthat). A salt well was drilled in the Kanawha valley in 1806 and this was followed by Sherman Karns sinking a 300-foot well in Burning Springs in 1860. He was drilling for rock oil (petroleum) and tapped the richest shallow oil pool the world had ever known. Towns such as Volcano and Petroleum sprang up overnight – the community of Sistersville was soon dotted with derricks (Ash and Douthat). After the war, prosperity began - railroads stimulated industries, which in turn increased the need for coal. Kanawha Valley, with plentiful resources like salt, became the site of many chemical plants - Nitro sprang up almost overnight in 1918 (Hoffman). Communities were forming around the state, popping up in areas where coal mines were plentiful, lumber yards had more work than workers, and apple trees and peach trees were in abundance. "When nature gave birth to West

Virginia, she endowed it with a wealthy inheritance of underground resources.” (Ash and Douthat 46) James M. Cain, author of “These United States” was quoted as saying, “In WV, it (coal) is the staff of life. The state is a huge layercake, hacked into great slices by the elements; the slices are mountains, the layers are rocks, and the filling is coal.” (Hodgkins 27)

The coal mines have been a great resource and a great heartache for the people of West Virginia. Thousands of families are employed because of this natural resource that the Mountain State was blessed with, but there is also much controversy over strip mining and the damage it causes to hardwood forests. This is topped with the ever-growing restrictions being placed on mines due to mine safety issues as well as EPA regulations and the attempts to make coal a cleaner resource. Booker T. Washington spent a short time working in the mines as a young man and said, “...I do not believe that one ever experiences anywhere else such darkness as he does in a coal-mine...” (Hoffman 45). But that darkness is still the only source of income for many West Virginia families, and has been for many generations.

Children, such as Cynthia Rylant, growing up in coal mining communities, see first-hand the long hours and hard work involved in this industry. She began her children’s book *When I Was Young in the Mountains* by saying, “...Grandfather came home in the evening covered with the black dust of a coal mine. Only his lips were clean, and he used them to kiss the top of my head.” But this was never seen as something negative to WV children. Unfortunately, throughout history, folks in the Appalachian Mountains have been given a negative stereotype that has been difficult to circumvent. According to Hoffman, “Most West Virginians bristle at the prejudiced view some outsiders have of them. Too often they are characterized as uneducated and unsophisticated. They are called hillbillies. To many, just the word hillbilly brings up an image of a barefoot, rifle-toting illiterate - the Hatfield half of the Hatfield-McCoy

feud.” (Hoffman 77) Roggenkamp goes on to say, “Appalachians have been permanently stunted by grinding poverty, moonshine, family feuds, idleness, inbreeding, foolishness, intolerant religious beliefs, bigotry, and either moral degeneration or eternal childishness. Stereotypes have come to represent “all that is essential about Appalachian peoples” in the minds of many non-Appalachians (Roggenkamp 198). Of course, that is the view of outsiders looking in. Rylant “invites readers to reinterpret Appalachia, to see beyond the deceptive external image and to perceive instead the great “interiority” of the mountains.” Appalachia is a place that one must learn to see “inside”, or more deeply than the stereotype would allow. (Roggenkamp 193) To others around the country, West Virginians basically have two dominant stereotypes: good country folks and white trash hillbillies; many times they are fused into one.

”The men and women and children who live in Appalachia have no sourness about them and though they are shy toward outsiders, they will wave to you if you drive by in your car whether they know your face or not...Most of them are thinkers, because these mountains inspire that, but they could never find the words to tell you of these thoughts they have.”

(Rylant, Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds 21)

Rylant talks about walking to the johnny-house (outhouse), pumping water from the well, and heating water for baths; something a native of New York City has most likely never done in their lives. But she wasn’t talking about hardships or negative times in her life; on the contrary, she was talking about the simplicity of her life, something many West Virginia children can relate to, even in this day and age. She also talks about sitting on the porch swing in the evening with dogs laying around her and watching the stars; this is something my own children can describe in detail as well. (Rylant, When I Was Young In The Mountains) Something I have

always told to my own children is this: You start and end with family – make the most of your lives with them. I believe that Rylant also felt this way about her own life and her own family. Her descriptions of a family reunion in *The Relatives Came* is an almost exact image of what I experienced as a child myself: “you’d have to go through at least four different hugs to get from the kitchen to the front room.” Family members simply spend time together performing simple tasks that reinforce a sense of community; tending the garden, fixing “any broken things they could find,” eating and sleeping and breathing together in one big room. Again, in the eyes of Appalachians, Rylant is simply describing good country folk who love their families and enjoy spending time together. According to Reggenkamp, Rylant’s books “work to restore the integrity of Appalachia as a place of “interior” values, a setting that symbolizes family, personal integrity, emotion, intellectual curiosity, unconditional love, and community, in spite of the long history of the hillbilly stereotype.” (Roggenkamp 211)

“The children love all the seasons. They go down by the creek or into the woods or up the dirt roads with their good dogs and they feel more important than anything else in these Appalachian mountains, and probably they think often of God since they know the clouds and trees better than anyone. They have seen what God can do.”

(Rylant, *Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds* 19)

West Virginia is also unique in that it has four distinct seasons – spring, summer, fall, and winter – and all the seasons have a direct impact on activities throughout the state. While the concept of a standard four seasons is taught to every child, not every child gets to actually experience them. Fortunately for the children of West Virginia, each season brings on new activities and new scenery around the state. WV has a rich cultural background in music and art,

and folk festivals are held each year, including fiddling contests, ballad singing, and the handcrafting of furniture and instruments (Hodgkins 47).

"...and they will look forward to summer so they can work outside among the sunflowers, repairing their fences: and they will look forward to fall so they can rock on their porches and stare toward shimmering painted mountains: and they will look forward to winter so they can build their fires and watch hollows fill up with snow, safe till the next year begins..."

(Rylant, Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds 22)

Painted mountains – an image that can't be described with words alone. Back to school, picking apples, stirring apple butter, pumpkin farms, and hunting season encompass the fall months in West Virginia. Every September the WV Oil & Gas Festival is held in Sistersville and Volcano Days is held just outside of Parkersburg; both festivals began to remember the oil boom and what put them on the map. Fall will also bring you the Country Roads Festival during the 3rd week in September at Hawk's Nest in Ansted, the Mountain State Forest Festival in October in Elkins, and the Apple Butter Festival during Columbus Day weekend in Berkeley Springs. Rylant writes, "In November, people are good to each other. They carry pies to each other's homes and talk by crackling woodstoves, sipping mellow cider...In November, at winter's gate, the stars are brittle. The sun is a sometime friend. And the world has tucked her children in, with a kiss on their heads, till spring." (Rylant, In November) Good country folks with a love for their neighbors is the image that is conjured up in one's head when reading these children's books.

Onto winter, with more beautiful scenery, Rylant describes: "Winter in the country is so quiet. The snow slows everything down. Birds are silent and serious. Dogs stay in their warm

houses. Children want cocoa and blankets.” (Rylant and Goode, Christmas in the Country)

Snow + mountains = skiing. Ski resorts are a lucrative business in West Virginia. Natural snowfall each year enables the resorts to open earlier and stay open longer than many other resorts in the country. On the negative side, snow in the mountains can also be crippling, especially to the older generation. Winding roads in the mountains can be impassable for days at a time when a large snowstorm hits the area. Snow days can be a hot topic for school administrators who are working to bring better education to Mountain State students. But Rylant points out, ”Children love snow better than anyone does, and they never complain as they pull on their red boots and mittens and make plans to catch wet flakes on their tongues.” (Rylant, Snow)

But the winter months also bring along Christmas, one of the happiest times of the year for children around the world. Given the rural nature of the state, some children in West Virginia have the privilege of cutting their own Christmas trees each year from their own back yards. Rylant describes Christmas in the country: ”My grandfather always got our Christmas tree from the woods behind the house. Off he’d go with his ax...Grandfather always brought home a tree that was a little too wide or a little too tall...But we loved that tree and couldn’t wait to turn on the lights at night. It was the prettiest thing we had...And all that day (Christmas) there were aunts and uncles and cousins knocking at the door, neighbors dropping off pies, and dogs barking at all the commotion and waiting for leftovers.” (Rylant and Goode, Christmas in the Country) It’s a time for family, plain and simple.

Spring and summer bring new life into the mountains. Baseballs are thrown, but ballfields get flooded. Bikes come out of the buildings, fishing poles get dusted off, and children become harder and harder to put to bed. “In the summer many of the women like to can. It seems their season. They sit on kitchen chairs on back porches and they talk of their lives while

they snap beans or cut up cucumbers for pickling. It is a good way for them to catch up on things and to have time together, alone, for neither the children nor the men come around much when there is canning going on.” (Rylant, Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds)

”West Virginia’s good for what ails ya. People have believed it for centuries. Generations from the time of the red man to today have been mysteriously attracted to the mountains for physical and spiritual rebirth and for relaxation.” (Ash and Douthat 88)

“Country roads, take me home” is the beginning of a song known by all West Virginians. But it’s also a testament to the lives they have built in and among the beautiful mountains they call home. A lifestyle created by the unique landscape and geography that only this state has to offer; strong traditions and tight core values that bind families together. That is what you will find at the heart of West Virginia and in the writings of authors such as Cynthia Rylant who are proud to call West Virginia their home, and will always stick to their roots no matter how hard the tree sways or how far the leaves blow.

“When I was young in the mountains, I never wanted to go to the ocean, and I never wanted to go to the desert. I never wanted to go anywhere else in the world, for I was in the mountains. And that was always enough.” (Rylant, When I Was Young In The Mountains)

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