Hollow Economies?
Pre-Expulsion Agriculture in Corbin Hollow

Glenn Davis Stone  (Dept. of Anthropology, Washington University)
Richard Robinson  (Ekphratic Productions)

Systemic Failure of a Peasant Smallholder System – but why?

Natives Need Help In Madison Hills
Washington Post, 3 Dec 1932
Fennell Corbin settled in Upper Corbin Hollow in 1890s. Near Polock's Stony Man Camp (later Skyland). By 1920s, 7 households in the hollow, all kin.
“lost” Communities in Blue Ridge Hills

Washington Post, 3 Nov, 1935

New York Times, 19 Oct 1930

“lowest level of social development”

“subsisting off the grudging, unaided bounty of nature”
## Explaining the “Problem” of the Corbins

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<tr>
<th>Poverty of Mind &amp; Culture</th>
<th>Econ/Agricultural Vulnerability</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Problem = ahistoric cultural &amp; economic poverty</td>
<td>• Problem = economic decline in 1930s</td>
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<td>• “The basic fault lies in the character of the people themselves” (T. Henry, Washington Evening Star)</td>
<td>• Pollock (Skyland owner): they make their entire living from me</td>
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<td>• Backwash</td>
<td>• FERA report 1935 claimed they had no experience with farming</td>
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<td>• Genetic</td>
<td>• Horning (Shadow of Ragged Mountain): lacked mixed agricultural economy of other hollows</td>
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<td>• Gregg: unsustainable agriculture</td>
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While economists and development planners tend to fixate on how to pull supposedly self-provisioning households into market interactions, for those households economic sustainability is a matter of balance. The real problem for smallholders “is not how to get into the market, but how to stay — partly — out of it” M. Dove 2011:6 *The Banana Tree at the Gate*

— especially when the economy heads south.

## Corbin Hollow before 1928: Income

### Skyland Income
- Wage work in garden, cutting trees, clearing trail
- Selling baskets, fruit, garden produce, berries, flowers

### Non-Skyland Income
- Chestnuts (“in the fall of the year, [the Corbins] would pick up chestnuts to sell” (Ross interview))
- Bark
- Shoemaking
- Masonry
- Preaching
Corbin Hollow before 1928: Wild Resources

Bounty of nature was not grudging
• Chestnuts, wild game, fish, berries, etc.

Corbin Hollow before 1928: Agriculture

Hollow Folk claimed them be “subsisting off the grudging unaided bounty of nature” but noted all households grew maize and cabbage in fields up to 2 acres

Horning: some homes on rocky land, quotes Corbin child about not growing much, suggests they lacked mixed economy.

But:
• Harry Corbin (Fennel's grandson): "We had a right good garden up thar but it was rocky and hard to plow. We planted corn all through the rocks; that corn grew good. Rocks kept in the moisture from the rain and the heat from the sun. You could see the corn grow overnight."
• Sizer on plowing without draft animals: “One man usually guides the plow while two pull it. I have seen such plowing at Uncle Fennel Corbin’s. Uncle Fennel made an especially built man-plow ”
• Cleared fields not connected to houses; extensive farming often done at a distance
• Claims that Corbins didn’t farm much probably refer to cash cropping. Ross interview: “Did the Corbins do much farming?” C.R.: “No. They would have a patch of cabbage, a patch of corn, a patch of cabbage and beans, particularly, and - uh - they would dry beans and shell beans and corn.”

Orchards

*Corn, cabbage, beans, apples, wild + livestock*
Rethinking Vulnerability

Chambers 1989 vulnerability = “risks, shocks and stress to which an individual or household is subject” and “defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss”

- Widely used, e.g. Blaikie et al., 1994; Hewitt, 1997; Lewis, 1999; Cannon, 2000; Pelling, 2003; Bankoff, Frerks, and Hilhorst, 2004; Adger, 2006

But all farming households/communities are subject to some external shocks to which they could never have been insulated

- e.g. Chinese smallholders said to epitomize “sustainability” (Netting; Bray) but endured famines in early 20th C from conflict and in early 60s from Great Leap Forward

Recent interest in multi-hazard dynamics and cascades


Multi-Hazard Dynamics
Cascading Shocks from the Book of Job

- 1920s Chestnut blight; effect on food, income, and game
- 1928 Virginia Public Park Condemnation Act
- 1929 Depression
  - Skyland wages decline
  - Basket sales decline
- 1930 Drought dried up mountain springs, corn yields drop 70% statewide
- 1930-31 Bailey Nicholson killed by falling tree, Sam Corbin’s wife dies
- 1932 Worse summer drought. WaPo reported Corbin Hollow’s staple crops of cabbage and potatoes had been wiped out; “hog pens and chicken houses...[were] emptied by forced sale to recoup drought losses”. Unusually cold December brought to those in Corbin Hollow “the keenest privations of their lives” (Wa Post 1932).
- 1933-on Park impacts on economic activities
  - Hunting
  - Making splits for baskets
Agricultural Change Theory
Hollows as a non-Boserupian landscape

Peasants can normally meet various shortfalls by taking on more — and more drugerous — work (Chayanov; Durrenberger)
More labor into farming by intensifying at cost of higher marginal labor costs (Boserup; Netting)

But Boserupian intensification rare in Appalachian mountains
Stoll: Appalachians lacked the knowledge to intensify
Gregg, Yarnell, Otto: mountaineers couldn’t afford inputs to intensify.

But neither lack of knowledge nor lack of cash is a convincing explanation; there are classic cases of Boserupian intensification by farmers with no more education, intelligence, or cash for inputs than Appalachians (many e.g.’s in Smallholders)

But some landscapes are non-Boserupian; attempts to intensify increase risk

Pudup: unlike alluvial bottoms, hills require shifting cultivation.

Hollows as non-Boserupian Landscapes

- Extensive (forest fallow) cultivation of maize (main crop) especially efficient; 16 person-days produced 19 bu/acre on hillside fields (Nicholls, 1937)
- Forest fallow protects from frosts as air currents generated between “deadenings” and woods created protective dews and fogs (Gregg, 2010; Otto, 1989)
- Burning was unusually effective at fertilizing leached mountain soils (Otto, 1989)
- Intensive methods unusually difficult in hollows; steep hillsides impeded plowing and delivering manure
- The steeper the terrain, the more “non-Boserupian” it was for farmers, and Corbin was the steepest and narrowest of the occupied hollows in the area.
- Corbin Hollow also had shortage of pasture for livestock for manure

So agricultural intensification was of little use in dealing with economic downturns across mountain Appalachia, and especially so in Corbin Hollow.

(The “man-plowing” in Corbin and Dark Hollows was a small and probably desperate step towards intensification.)
Devastation of Multiple Hazards

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<th>Wild</th>
<th>Agriculture</th>
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<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Blight</td>
<td>Droughts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lost wage work</td>
<td>Park bans hunting</td>
<td>Non-intensifible</td>
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<td>Baskets banned</td>
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Relief?

Entitlement Failure

“Humanitarian” Interventions Compound the Problems

Pres. Hoover donates barrels of “flour”
"Flour" = cornmeal
Some government wheat but Hoover opposed, preferred local charity, cornmeal

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Corn as Emergency Food

PELLAGRA

Beall Degerminator, 1900: nutritionally hollow and cheaper cornmeal

Pellagra epidemic mainly in South (textile towns, institutions)

Disease's nutritional etiology obscured by Eugenicists in "medical fraud of the century"

ZINC DEFICIENCY

Phytate, which is present in staple foods like cereals, corn and rice, has a strong negative effect on zinc absorption from composite meals.

Dementia Dermatitis Diarrhea (Death)
Pellagra “dementia”: irritability, poor concentration, anxiety, delusions, stupor, apathy, depression, confusion, memory loss, psychosis, distorted perception, hallucinations

But **anyone** who was poor and/or marginal could have been institutionalized and sterilized in Virginia after 1927; no psychiatric abnormalities were needed.

But dementia symptoms from subclinical pellagra were present and likely played a role in designation of mental defectiveness.
Multi-Hazard Histories

Failure of external resources
• Internal safety nets shredded by outside action
• Inability to intensify agriculture

Entitlement Failure
• Food aid > pellagra
• Journalists
• Social Workers (Sizer, Strickler)
• Physicians (Priddy, DeJarnette, Sexton)
• Courts
• Scientists (anthropology, psychology, biology)