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**LEE SMITH'S ORAL HISTORY.  
THE INVISIBLE MINORITY OF THE  
MOUNTAINS: THE CASE OF  
APPALACHIA**

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## **DEDICATION**

To my parents, who dedicated their lives to imparting their love of knowledge and education to me and who supported me in all of my life decisions.

To my brothers, sisters and friends, who believed in me when I did not believe in myself, who were always there to encourage and support me, and who knew I would succeed when I never thought I could.

To my students, who are the reason I seek to learn and gain more expertise in education and who look to me for leadership and guidance.

And lastly, to educators that go before me who dedicated their lives to knowledge and the growth of minds and encouraged me to reach, to seek farther than I thought was possible.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore and discover the Appalachian people, their history, minority culture, rich language and oral histories with a focused analysis of the novel *Oral History* by Lee Smith who is considered an authentic modern Appalachian writer, as well as, a New York Times bestselling author. Her novel *Oral History* shifts from first to third person narratively following and revealing the legacy of trials, disasters and successes of four generations of the Appalachian family of the Cantrell's from Hoot Owl Holler in the mountains of northern Virginia during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Cantrell family represents the typical family and life of the little known and mostly misunderstood minority culture upon which my research will explore and share with the reader. By using a narrative strategy approach, multi-layering voice and text analysis, along with my interview with the author Lee Smith, this paper attempts to demonstrate that the Appalachian people are a unique and valuable ethnic, cultural, and linguistic group. It will address questions of past and present life in Appalachia relating to ethnicities, dialects, folklore, economics, and how they have changed in recent decades. My paper will also suggest the reason why it is important to learn about these people and culture of Appalachia as a treasure to celebrate and preserve for all.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I. Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>I</b>
<b>II. Abstract</b> .....	<b>II</b>
<b>III. Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>III</b>
<b>IV. General Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>V. Biography of Lee Smith</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter I: Appalachia</b> .....	<b>10</b>
1.1. Introduction.....	<b>11</b>
1.2. Geography and Historical Aspects .....	<b>11</b>
1.3. Appalachian Cultural Development and Literature.....	<b>23</b>
1.4. Stereotyping of Appalachian Region through 20 <sup>th</sup> Century.....	<b>31</b>
<b>Chapter II: Narrative Analysis of Oral History</b> .....	<b>35</b>
2.1. Introduction.....	<b>36</b>
2.2. Narrative and Narrative Voices in Oral History .....	<b>38</b>
2.3. The Structure of the Narrative in Oral History .....	<b>44</b>
2.4. History, Culture and Setting in Oral History.....	<b>53</b>
2.5. The Tone and Language of Oral History.....	<b>58</b>
2.6. The Characters of Oral History.....	<b>60</b>
2.7. Commentary on Oral History Narrative.....	<b>66</b>
<b>Chapter III: Contextual Interpretations of Oral History</b> .....	<b>70</b>
3.1. Introduction.....	<b>71</b>
3.2. Oral History as a Celebration of Appalachian Culture and Language .....	<b>72</b>
3.3. Oral History’s Impact on Stereotyping and Cliché.....	<b>74</b>
3.4. Interview and Reflections on Oral History by Author Lee Smith.....	<b>82</b>
3.5. Major Points of the Interview on Oral History with Author Lee Smith.....	<b>96</b>
<b>IX. General Conclusion</b> .....	<b>100</b>
<b>X. Bibliography</b> .....	<b>102</b>

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## I. General Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to shed light on the Appalachian people, history, literature and culture. It will attempt to argue that the Appalachian people are distinct cultural group by analyzing stereotypes in the novel, *Oral History*, by the American writer Lee Smith and answer the research question why have Appalachian people been inaccurately portrayed and understood throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Meanwhile, comments are provided on possible interpretations of the text. There are several reasons why I chose *Oral History* as my text to analyze. First, in Algeria, as in the rest of the world and even in the United States, little is known about the Appalachian region, its culture, history, and unique dialect. My research is an attempt to explore these aspects of the Appalachian region in literature and fiction and how author Lee Smith portrays these aspects in her novel which the reader discovers assuming the following hypotheses:

1. Lee Smith's *Oral History* helps us gain appreciation of the Appalachian Culture. It reveals the disconnect between Appalachia and the main stream America
2. Lee Smith reveals misconceptions and breaks the pattern of misunderstanding by providing us with a broader view of Appalachian tradition, storytelling and folklore.

Author and educator, Lee Smith, is considered as the pioneer of Appalachian Literature and is credited with challenging the common misconceptions and stereotypes that this minority has endured for centuries and even still today. Secondly, Mrs. Smith is writing from firsthand experience being a native and educator of the Appalachia Region so she gives a unique perspective into the world of the culture with her usage of multi-layering of voices and colorful dialect in *Oral History*. The novel, *Oral History*, was published in 1983, and is considered her most noted and influential work. It has been instrumental in building interest during the past thirty years in Appalachian literature as a serious study in academic settings around the world as well as sharing and preserving the mountain dialect which was one of her main objective in writing the book. Thirdly, my aim is also to provide the reader with a more accurate view and information on the people, their unique dialect, and culture of the Appalachian Region.

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The analysis of *Oral History* will take into account several aspects of the work, namely its narrative voices with their multi-layering of ones, structure, history, culture and setting, tone of the language and characters. Before I begin my analysis, I will provide a biography of author, Lee Smith, to secure a background for the discussed work followed by the analysis within three chapters.

In the first chapter, titled Appalachia, I will introduce Appalachian historical, cultural and literary aspects that make it unique and distinct from the American main stream culture and literature. An additional section of chapter one will comment on the misconceptions and stereotypes of the region of Appalachia mainly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chapter two titled Narrative Analysis of *Oral History* is an analysis of the novel narrative that will provide the necessary information for the commentary on the narrative critical interpretations.

Chapter three of my thesis will be devoted to some interpretations of *Oral History* by various literary scholars. However, it will not be a simple overview of past and present criticism as the information obtained will be processed by the narrative while describing the various interpretations. Furthermore, I will evaluate each interpretation and compare them with the criticism in question. In other words, the interpretations will be assessed according to their actual understanding of the nature and mechanics of the discussed text. Moreover, the results will be contrasted with each other and a commentary on the interpretations of the novel *Oral History* will be made.

Chapter three also includes a personal interview I conducted with Lee Smith in Greensboro, North Carolina, USA in which she shares her reflections on life, culture, history and the stereotyping of the Appalachian region as well as her personal experiences and thoughts on the region and her reasons for writing *Oral History*. In the interview Mrs. Smith elaborates and answers questions about life in the Appalachia, her writings, the novel *Oral History*, and the Appalachian minority.

## **2. Biography of Lee Smith**

Being a native of the region, Lee Smith knows the Appalachian English and culture very well. The characters in her award winning novels give us a glimpse into the daily events and lives of the simple people of Appalachia. Being raised where she daily heard many of the regions' oral traditions, Smith is a natural storyteller and delights in sharing the old oral histories of her region of Appalachia. She believes that writing a story is not the same as telling one. Mrs. Smith feels there is something very special about the spoken word as it does not only share the histories of people and their past; but also the emotions of the storyteller as they tell their tales. As a proficient writer, Lee Smith has captured the emotions and cultural treasures in her novels; especially her novel *Oral History* which was published in 1983. *Oral History* is used in the curriculum of many American and Appalachian Studies programs around the world.

To learn about the early life of Lee Smith, is it better to look into the soul of Appalachia into one of her own. Mrs. Smith was born into a family of Appalachian storytellers on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1944. She grew up as one of four children of Ernest and Virginia Smith in Grundy, Virginia. Grundy was a small coal mining town in the Blue Ridge Mountains in the southern corner of Virginia. Her father owned a local dime store and her mother was a home teacher. As a young child, Lee Smith used to sit for hours on a wooden stool in her father's dime store watching the people of the town and region pass. Most evenings were spent like many other Appalachian children, sitting on her home's front porch for several hours as the family gathered to share their day and recall stories of their lives and the histories of her small town. Although many of the stories and songs were humorous and full of sadness, they filled Lee Smith's imagination with visions that would later find expression and life in her novels. This was a way to keep the oral history alive and share it outside the region. Elfrieda Abbe, editor of *The Writer* magazine, which received the 2002 Gold Folio Editorial Excellence Award in publishing and journalism, noted and described the oral histories of the Appalachia Region and their strong influence seen in the writings of Lee Smith. Mrs. Abbe stated that: "the richness of their layered



## *Biography of Lee Smith*

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stories and the combination of lore and history would lay the foundation for Smith's writing and give her one of the South's most distinctive voices." (20-21).

As long as she could remember, Lee Smith had wanted to be a writer and loved to create stories in her mind to share. When she was eight, she wrote her first novel sitting at her mother's desk, and began to sell her stories about her neighbors and the nearby isolated hollers by the age of nine. Throughout her young life she continued her writings. She attended and graduated from St. Catherine's High School in Richmond, Virginia then enrolled in Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia to pursue a major in English Literature. During her academic path, she struggled to assert her writer's voice. The difficulties were the result of her idea that to be a serious writer she must think of or write about important or dramatic events usually described in formal third person English. Mrs. Smith became very frustrated and disillusioned with her studies until she read the novel *River of Earth* by James Still. After reading the novel, she realized that her native Appalachian Mountains and her life were the solid and powerful sense of place and formed her identity as a writer. She was able to become a student of Louis Rubin who is well known as an accomplished southern scholar and writer. Mr. Rubin taught her the techniques and themes of accomplished Southern authors such as: Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and specifically William Faulkner. During this time as a student of Mr. Rubin, along with his guidance and encouragements, Lee Smith discovered herself as a writer. She realized that within her was a treasure trove of ideas and stories to write about from the struggles of simple mountain folk she had watched and listened to all her life. Lucinda H. Mckethan noted that Lee Smith had been greatly influenced by other Southern writers along with her early life in the mountain region when she said: "Eudora Welty, James Still, Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner became models for her developing awareness of the pull of the past and family, the art of storytelling and the function of voice and speech in delineating character". (374)

Throughout her writing career, Lee Smith has received eight major writing awards, including the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Award in 1995 through 1997, the Robert Penn Warren Prize for Fiction in 1991, and two O. Henry Awards in 1979 and again in 1981. In addition, she has received honors, awards, and grants documenting her literary

achievements such as, the Academy Award in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts & Letters in 1999, the Weatherford Award for Appalachian Literature in 1988, North Carolina Award for Literature in 1984, Sir Walter Raleigh Award for two of her books in 1983 and 1989, and the Lyndhurst Grant in 1990 and 1992. Her articles and stories have been published in numerous periodicals and anthologies such as: Redbook Magazine, The Southern Review, The New York Times, and The Atlantic Weekly.

In the interview with Pat Arnow, Lee Smith clearly explains the contrasts of her experiences in a small coal mining town of Virginia with a deep and rich history impacted by the early Scots Irish settlers to that of the region with the large plantation systems found in the deep South where a history remained strong impacted by early English settlers. Each of these Southern regions had its own distinct histories, cultures, and English variations. Mrs. Smith is firm in her desire to clarify her writings' purpose which is to deal specifically with the oral histories, culture and language of the people of the Appalachian Region where she was born. She is proud to be known as an Appalachian writer and quick to point out the differences in Appalachian and Southern writers to any listener. However, this resolution or finding her soul and place as a writer did not come easily for her as she explained at one of her press conferences:

It took me a long time to understand that not a one of us lives alone, outside of our family or our time, and that who we are depends on who we were, and who our people were. . . . I come from a singing family, we go way back. I know where we're from. I know who we are. The hard part has been figuring out who I am, because I'm not like any of them, and yet they are bone of my bone. (Coley14)

Like many other Appalachians who leave and return, Lee Smith has a complicated but treasured relationship to her childhood home and its cultural heritage. Mrs. Smith is an Appalachian native who often writes about mountains she has not lived in for decades. She is a former town girl who remembers being fascinated all her life with rural holler culture and a diligent cultural observer with an amazement and curiosity for the most dramatic stereotypes of Appalachia. As the writers of her region, Mrs. Smith's literary relationship with the sub-cultures of the Appalachia of her childhood is more complex and ingrown than the light heartedness her narratives often suggest. This complexity is seen in

many writers from the Appalachian Region as they struggle with inner turmoil seeking their place in the literary world.

Lee Smith wrote many short stories and novels for over a decade before she focused on Appalachia as a viable and fulfilling setting for her works. She was asked in an interview why she did not set her fiction work in the Southern Mountain Region from the beginning of her career and she responded with: “That is because when I started out I thought the idea was to be sophisticated. To be a good writer, I thought, the idea would be to learn elegant language, write fancy sentences about an upper-class person.” (Herion-Sarafidis 11)

Lee Smith completed her first work of fiction in 1966 as part of her senior studies project and for a scholarship competition. The fiction work was titled, *The Last Day the Dog Bushes Bloomed*. It was chosen for The Book of The Month Club Writing Fellowship and she won the scholarship award. The work was published in 1968 as her first novel with good reviews. The novel’s story was set in a small southern town in the mid-century. It tells the story of nine-year-old Susan whose carefree days of summer slowly change into a time of innocence lost and childhood illusions shattered by events in the story. The reader will find light and joyous events in spite of its dark moments in *The Last Day the Dog Bushes Bloomed* and it is a wonderful example of the remarkable talent that has made Lee Smith one of the most popular American writers of fiction and Appalachian lore.

After her formal education, Lee Smith married poet James Seay and gave birth to two sons. Mrs. Smith’s husband and family were her focus with her writing set aside until 1971. During 1971, she published her second work of fiction titled, *Something in the Wind*. After moving to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, she attempted to write a humorous novel entitled *Fancy Strut*, it was published in 1973, and was set in an Alabama town during the time of its 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration. It is considered by many critics to be a comic masterpiece. Then, in 1974, Mrs. Smith and her family moved back to Chapel Hill, North Carolina and the move marked the beginning of her period of darker writings. One such noted darker work by Mrs. Smith is titled, *Black Mountain Breakdown*. The novel plot is the story of a timid and socially conditioned young girl in search of herself. When Mrs.

## *Biography of Lee Smith*

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Smith completed the novel, it took her five years to find a publisher. Many critics consider the novel, *Black Mountain Breakdown* as the body of work which assisted Smith in her search to find herself as a writer, to find her writer's soul. During the process of writing this novel, she discovered that the Appalachian Region, its people, and her past there could be a rich resource for the settings of her novels, as well as, it could provide her characters voices from real life challenges, disasters and triumphs.

Finally, finding her place as a writer Lee Smith was inspired and eager to proceed. She wrote and published her first collection of writings in a collection titled *The Cakewalk* in 1981. *The Cakewalk* collection of works contains all the stories by Mrs. Smith from 1978 until 1980 which had received the O. Henry Award or other literary awards.

In 1981, Lee Smith's life made a major change with the ending of her marriage to poet James Seay. To begin her new life she joined the Creative Writing faculty at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina, and became a mentor for many young writers. Her membership on the faculty contributed to the university's writing reputation and status among regional universities. Seemingly inspired with the change in her personal life and new job position, Mrs. Smith produced her fifth and most noted novel titled *Oral History* in 1983. *Oral History* won the Book of The Month Selection for 1983 and became an instant literary hit with a variety of readers across the United States. In the novel, *Oral History*, Mrs. Smith used narrative complexity, regional dialects and style with multiple first person points of view as she emphasized the rich historical and varied geographical regions of the Appalachia. What caused much attention by the literary critics was her rich usage in the novel of language using dialects and linguistic styles which came from her background in the mountains of the Appalachia. It was received positively by critics and reviews. One such positive review follows from the New York Times Book Review of 1983: "Deft and assured, Lee Smith is clearly drunk on the language of Appalachia, on its stories and its people. She is nothing less than masterly."

After writing and publishing her novel *Oral History*, Mrs. Smith soon completed her next novel titled, *Family Linen* in 1985. In this novel she attained another level of

## *Biography of Lee Smith*

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literary success by skillfully telling the story of a family facing and dealing with their violent past as they searched for answers and struggled to change and to heal.

In the following decade after her novel *Family Linen*, Lee Smith experimented with new literary and narrative forms in her writings. During her writing career she was always looking for the unique and new of writing. Mrs. Smith continued her writing with yet another novel titled, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, published in 1988 and written in the form of a series of letters.

Lee Smith continued her writings into the 1990's as she worked and mentored the young writers in the Creative Writing Department faculty at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Always energetic in her writing efforts and restless in her creative mind, she produced a two part collection of short stories titled, *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse and The Devils Dream*. Both collection parts were published in 1992 and their storylines share a multiple generational account of life adventures by a country music family.

Never seeming to tire, Lee Smith wrote and published her next novel titled, *Saving Grace*. This novel explored Smith's interest in religious aspects of the Appalachia Region and the strong influence of faith on her characters. It was published in 1995 and included descriptive chapters on the mountain religion and the events in the life of a snake handling preacher's daughter.

Her third story collection was titled, *The Bubba Stories*, and was published in 1993. It included one of Smith's autobiographical stories which told the story of a girl who makes up stories about her imaginary wild brother Bubba to impress her friends.

In 2000, Lee Smith retired from the Creative Writing faculty at North Carolina State University. However, she continued to write and a year later in 2001 her novel titled, *Good Old Girls* was published. *Good Old Girls* was later made into a musical which is still played and enjoyed in regional theatres. It gave her another bestselling novel and one of her brilliant moments of fiction. Literary critics wrote positive reviews for her novel and her work as a writer with such remarks as:

## *Biography of Lee Smith*

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What increasingly distinguishes Smith's fiction over a remarkable forty five year career is her ability to use regional details to enrich complex narratives not bound within regional common places of culture or geography. What make her one of America's leading writers are her generous humor, her empathy, for the struggles and endurance of women whose lives within families and communities represent compelling dramas of quiet heroism, her keen ear for the ways that speech reveals the inner spirit, and her insights into the ways that the past inevitably works its web over the present (MacKethan 375).

In 2003 she continued her writings as she published, *The Last Girls*, which became another bestseller and a nationwide success. It was inspired by a trip in 1966 which Lee Smith made with her college classmates to enjoy rafting down the Mississippi River.

Lee Smith's next novel was published in 2006 titled, *On Agate Hill*, chronicles the post-Civil War life of a Southern orphan girl, Molly Petree, who was the daughter of a slain Confederate soldier as she keeps a diary of events in the late 1800's and lives near Hillsborough, North Carolina. Hillsborough, North Carolina is where Lee Smith now lives with her second husband. She commented on life there in an interview, "I have had this cabin for 25 years, I am sitting up here on this mountain and there's not anybody here but me". (Abbee 20-21)

*Chapter One*

*Appalachia*

### **1.1. Introduction**

The Appalachian region of the United States has been a place of solitude, mysteries and new beginnings for many; a place of wondrous beauty with endless majestic mountain ranges covered with dense forests of green and teeming with wildlife and flowing waters since its formation millions of years ago.

Before the Europeans arrived to the Appalachian Region, it had been home and hunting grounds for thousands of years to various Native American tribes, such as, the Shawnee and the Cherokee who developed closeness to the mountains and the nature it held, and a strong oral history.

The creation of the mountain ranges of Appalachia is described in ancient Native American oral legends which are still shared as part of the Native American's oral history and religion.

The most prominent Native American culture was and remains today is, The Cherokee Nation. It is the Cherokee ancient legend that tells of the creating and formation of the Great Smokey Mountains of Appalachia by a giant buzzard or vulture which had been circling above the earth after a great flood. According to *Moonlit Road, Strange Tales of the American South* the legend says that “the giant vulture had been flying a long time over the flooded land and was growing very weary. When it reached the area of the Smokies where some land appeared above the flooded waters, exhausted he plummeted to the earth. Where he landed and where his massive wings touched the earth, the mountain valleys appeared under their heavy weight”. (9)

### **1.2. Geography and Historical Aspects**

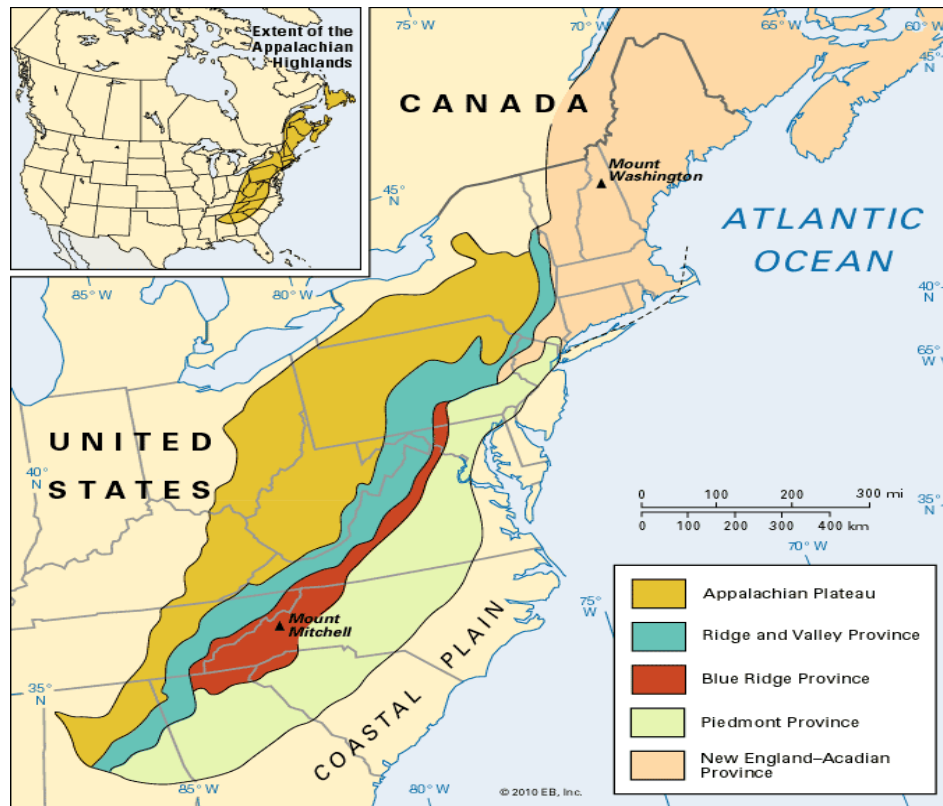
The Appalachian region encompasses a large rugged region running parallel with the Atlantic Ocean coastline on the Eastern coast of the United States, and contains the oldest mountain chains in the United States. As it is demonstrated by the following picture graph, this region stretches from the southern counties of New York State in the North, down into the northern parts of the southern states of Mississippi, Alabama and



## Chapter One: Appalachia

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Georgia. It includes a span of approximately 2000 kilometers and is covered with lush, dense forests with abundant water sources and wildlife.



**Map 1: Appalachia: [arc.gov/maps](http://arc.gov/maps)**

It includes several mountain ranges: the Great Smokey Mountains of the Tennessee Region and the Blue Ridge Mountain range and the Appalachian Mountain range overlapping in the other states of the region called Appalachia. Early inhabitants of this region were separated from the Eastern Coastal plain by a massive fall line which is a mixture of mountains, valleys, high ridges, and wide plateaus. The massive fall line and great mountain ranges contributed to its wilderness and the isolation of its inhabitants. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission,(ARC) this region of Appalachia touches 13 states including all of West Virginia, parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The Appalachia Region is home to more than 25 million people while covering 420 counties and almost 205,000 square miles. The Appalachian Region

## Chapter One: Appalachia

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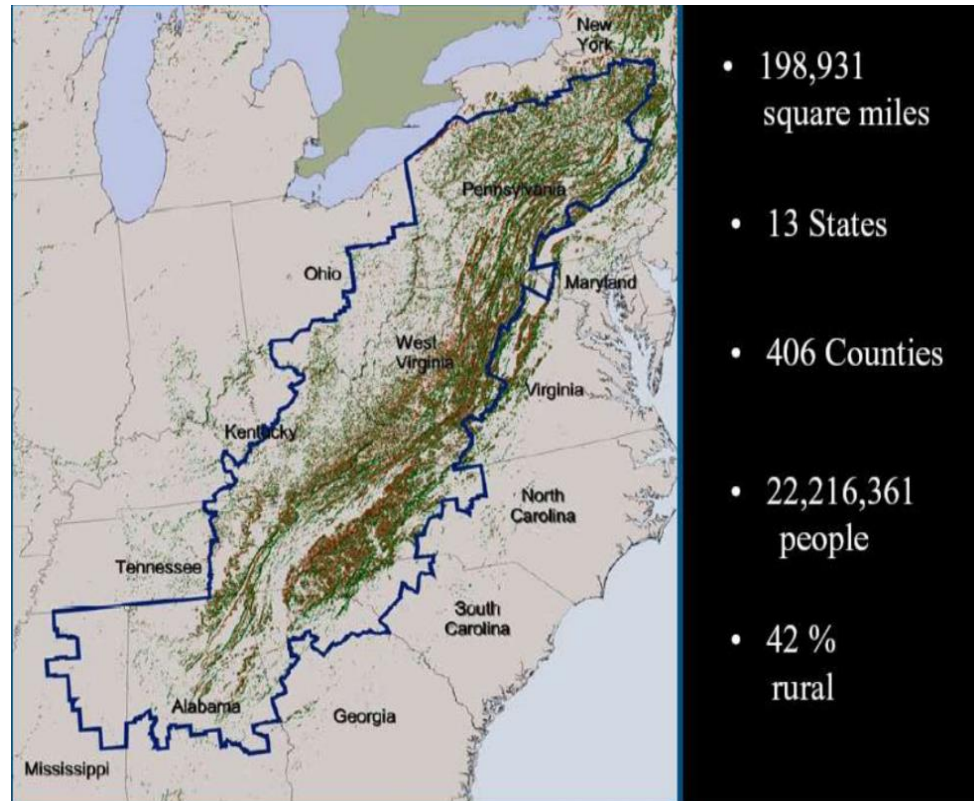
Commission Map published in October, 2008 below shows the Appalachian Region highlighted in green.



**Map 2: Appalachian States: [arc.gov/maps](http://arc.gov/maps)**

From its first discovery and still today, Appalachia has fascinated, mystified, and captured the heart of all who visit her. Much has been written about the great beauty and isolation of this region in the United States and its inhabitants, but much remains unknown and yet to be discovered.

The Appalachian chain, whose rocky links began to take shape more than 400 million years ago, binds the birthlands of two nations. Stretching from Newfoundland's Long Range Mountains to slopes around Birmingham, Alabama, The Appalachians cover nearly half the North Temperate Zone's width. To the highlands' weave of long ridges and valleys, the coastal plain adds a tracery of rivers and bay-scalloped shore. Seas cover half the plain, which forms the continental shelf; it drowned when glacial meltwater raised sea level. Between plain and mountains runs the Piedmont, where water power generated cities. Strung now along the fall line, they create another kind of chain that binds the region (Doyle 205).



**Map 3: Appalachian Mountains: [arc.gov/maps](http://arc.gov/maps)**

For centuries the Native American Appalachian cultures advanced and developed their oral history along with a very complex social structure and trade. They had their own spoken and written language, as well as, knowledge of the hand or sign language used to communicate and trade with other Native American clans or tribes on the Eastern coast of the United States. The Cherokee syllabary was invented by Chief Sequoyah, George Gist, of the Cherokee Nation and was developed between 1809 and 1824. At first Sequoyah experimented with a writing system based on logograms, but found this cumbersome and unsuitable for the Cherokee people (omniglot.com).

He later developed a syllabary which was originally cursive and hand-written, but it was too difficult and expensive to produce a printed version, so he devised a new version with symbols based on letters from the Latin alphabet and Western numerals. Chief Sequoyah's descendants claim that he was the last surviving member of his tribe's Scribe Clan and the Cherokee syllabary was much older than 1809 but no archaeological evidence has been found to verify this claim (omniglot.com).

## *Chapter One: Appalachia*

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By 1820, thousands of Cherokees had learned the syllabary, and by 1830, 90% were literate in their own language. Books, religious texts, almanacs and newspapers were all published using the Cherokee syllabary, which was widely used for over 100 years. Today the syllabary is still used among the Cherokee people and efforts are being made to revive both the Cherokee language and the Cherokee syllabary with Cherokee Language courses offered at many schools, colleges and universities.

The Cherokee Nation, as many Native American groups, felt the land was created for them by the Great Spirit and it was to be respected and cared for. The Great Smokey Mountains, The Blue Ridge Mountains and the Appalachia Mountains were not only a place to live, farm and raise families, it was also a holy place to keep as sacred. This is one reason why they fought so fiercely to protect and remain in the Appalachia region after the Europeans arrived and begin to slowly take traditional lands from the Native Americans. The Cherokee were skilled hunters of the vast forests, but were also skilled farmers who settled in villages with crops along the plentiful waterways of the region. In the Cherokee society the women were in charge of the corn crops giving them economic control over the staple of Cherokee life and an important place in the Cherokee social order. In her book, *U.S. History*, Krista Dornbush states that

Cherokee Nation had a division of labor in which male members would spend time away hunting game or engaging warfare while female members maintained the workings of the village. Females were responsible for rearing children, tending crops, and administering the laws and rules of the tribe. The Cherokees were matrilineal in tribal rights and responsibilities and social station were determined by the bloodline of the mother as opposed to the father. (47)

Cherokee men lived in the households of their wives and a man's heirs were his sister's children, not his own children. If a Cherokee man from one clan married a woman from different or neighboring clan, he became a member of his wife's clan and their children would be members of the wife's clan also. Older Cherokee women were respected for their life knowledge and wisdom. Often older Cherokee women were members on the Elders Council which had a great deal of authority and influence over tribal laws and actions.

## *Chapter One: Appalachia*

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Kinship and the Clan were all important to the native people of the Appalachian region. If a member of one clan or tribe was killed by one of another clan or tribe, this was a cause for war. War for the Native Americans was very different than what we view war today. The Appalachian Native Americans did not fight to conquer, expand their lands or to impose and force their religion or ideologies on another clan or tribe. Native Americans of the Appalachian region went to war to avenge the death of their kin.

The Cherokees saw people as either relatives or enemies. Their traditions allowed outsiders to be brought into the Clan. Captives taken in battle could be adopted into the Cherokee Clan. Moreover, captured Europeans and black slaves who had escaped into Cherokee country were many times adopted into the Cherokee Clans. Many European traders managed to join local tribes through marrying Cherokee women which assisted them in trade and travel through the vast dense forests and communicate well with different Clans. No matter what ethnic group or country you were from, once accepted and adopted into the Cherokee Clans, you were a member of that Clan and your children would be raised as Cherokee (Dornbush 47).

For decades, Indians and traders lived in relative harmony on the Appalachian frontier, buying and selling goods and sharing the bounty of the land. However, for many people living in Europe, life was growing more and more difficult and oppressive. The open territory in the new world along with the chance at freedom and a fresh start was very inviting to people seeking freedom, independence and a piece of land to call their own.

Events in the 1750's in Europe created the first wave of new comers into the Appalachian mountain ranges. They came for many reasons but mostly to escape hard times, poverty, and religious persecution. The ancestors of modern day people of Appalachia came from Germany, England and Wales, but the groups that were to become most prominent in the mountains started their journey off the rugged coast of Northern Ireland, the Scot-Irish.

Speaking of her family who came from Antrim, Northern Ireland, Theodore Roosevelt's mother described the Scot Irish as: "a grim, stern people, strong and simple,

## *Chapter One: Appalachia*

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powerful for good and evil . . . relentless; they were of all men best fitted to conquer the wilderness and hold it against all comers”. (Michelin Green Guide Ireland 512)

Before the large number of Scots and Irish immigrated to the Appalachia region, they had faced years of battling King James I of England. The people of Scotland were fierce and loyal and fought against King James I of England for land they felt rightfully theirs and for independence from his rule and England (oxfordjournals.org).

After many years of conflicts, King James I grew tired of the rebellious Scots in the low lands and the cost of constant fighting. His counselors devised a plan to use the Scots as a hedge against the Irish who he also had difficulty controlling. In the 1690s King James I offered the Scots free farmsteads which belonged to the Irish in Ulster in the northern region of Ireland. He thought the Scots and Irish would be busy battling each other and give him less problems. The Scots took advantage of the king’s offer and moved to Ulster, Ireland. They settled on the farmlands and to the surprise of King James I they got along fairly well with the Irish. The Scots and the Irish mixed the best of the two cultures to become the Scot-Irish. For about a hundred years, the Scots and Irish cultures merged their phrases, their love of horse racing and the best qualities of both people.

After a century in Ulster, things began to change. The Scot-Irish started suffering increasing religious persecution, rising rent costs, and bad harvests of their main food staple, the potato. Tens of thousands of the Scot Irish moved in a second wave migration to the new world. This hybrid culture took root and flourished in the southern mountain wilderness of the Appalachian Region. The tough Scots-Irish were accustomed to hard challenges from life in Europe and under King James I rule so they came to the new land well equipped to be some of the first settlers to make a home in the mountains of Appalachia.

The sights and quietness of the mountains left a marked impression on all who traveled there. The atmosphere around the mountains gave them an eery, blue Smokey look which was new to the immigrants. Many early visitors to the Appalachia wrote of their first impressions and the sight of the Appalachian Mountains as they traveled there for the first time. One such explorer was Robert Fallam who was sent out by Virginia

## *Chapter One: Appalachia*

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Major General Abraham Wood in 1671 to discover the west for King Charles and for trade. He wrote his thoughts upon his first sighting and visit to the region:

When we got up to the Top of the mountain and set down very weary we saw very high mountains lying to the north and south as far as we could discern. Our course up the mountain was west by north. It was a pleasing tho' dreadful sight to see the mountains and hills as if piled one upon another". (Lewis Preston 17)

To settle and have a permanent presence in the Appalachia mountain region, one had to be strong and resilient. It was an isolated and rugged landscape but the new comers, the Scot-Irish, were prepared for it. They were not the only Europeans to settle in the region, but they were the strongest and had most influence on the region.

Along with the Scot-Irish settlers came the Germans who were known for their abundance of rules and focus on quality of work. They had rules for every aspect of life and were known for their quality of buildings and barns built out of material that would last. The Scot-Irish were the opposite as they were known to be more footloose and fancy free, loving music, hot tempered, and good fighters. When there was trouble with Native Americans everyone called for the Scot Irish because they were strong and skilled fighters; but during times of peace the Germans were happy not to have the Scot Irish anywhere near. It was said at the time, "when the English came to America they would build a church, Germans would build a barn, and the Scot Irish would build a Whiskey still" (Folklore). Before placing judgment on the Scot Irish, one must recall the harsh living conditions they suffered before coming to the Appalachia Region to understand their nature.

Life for the early settlers of the Appalachian region was hard but rewarding. To be successful all had to be resourceful and self-reliant. Whiskey making for drink and medicine was one of the skills that the new settlers brought from the old countries, along with traditional crafting like quilting, pottery making and metal working. They built and furnished their homes and cooked their meals as they always had, but the tradition closest to their heart and they treasured the most was their music. Music was important for it gave them hope, comfort as well as preserving their past, their oral history, and their traditions. It was an important part of all European settlers lives to invite neighbors over for "the

## *Chapter One: Appalachia*

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Gathering” to eat, sing, dance and play their fiddles and other musical instruments carefully brought over from their old countries. It was a time of celebration of harvest, life’s good moments and a time to create and build friendships in a harsh wilderness. The Scot Irish brought with them from Ireland and Scotland the fiddle or violin, flutes, hand drums and dulcimers which were small and easy to carry. The old fiddle tunes were greatly loved and passed along to younger generations. They adapted the banjo from the few African slaves who were brought into the mountains by some settlers and it grew in popularity for its lively beat.

The emerging communities of Appalachia were not very different from other American rural regions which were far away from their frontier origins. They were characterized mainly by their strong connection to God, community, family, land and hard work. During the Industrial period Appalachians were still living in small communities concentrated in valleys, hollows and up into coves. These scattered settlements were loosely integrated by transportation and communication systems. Each farming community was relatively socially and economically autonomous and self-sufficient, so crossing mountains to reach other communities was avoided if possible by Appalachians. What kept these separate settlements together was a common feeling of identity, values as well as the shared work. They traded supplies and shelter, they had small and independent congregations for their worship, and they were involved in community services. Appalachians became united by a sense of belonging and their love of the land and the place they lived in.

Appalachian economy during the industrial era was also similar to the economies of rural America in a way that it stayed pre-industrial; it was not commercial, semi self-sufficient farming despite the fact that some areas of Appalachia had farming for few external markets. Before the Civil War, few industries evolved in Appalachia but were not significant nationwide and even regionally with no effect on national economy.

As the issue of slavery was the dominant disagreement that led to Civil War, the war did not have an impact on Appalachia. The absence of slavery in the mountains was due to the geographical and economic conditions of the region. There was no profitable



## *Chapter One: Appalachia*

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farming based on slavery labor. Few slaves did exist in Virginia and Tennessee large valleys mainly in the field of the mining industry and brick mills of Kentucky (Encyclopedia.com)

The Civil War made many Northerners to come into contact with Appalachia; they were all surprised with its beauty, great mineral and timber wealth in time when post-Civil War northern America was growing and technological advances were rapidly changing the northeastern society. Businessmen reacted to the call of profits and writers, missionaries and teachers joined the industrialists to Appalachia and their contribution was of a great importance and their influence was as long lasting as the industrialists.

During this era of post-Civil War which was an era of industrial development and reconstruction, incorrect and not at all flattering stereotypes of the Appalachian Region started to be formed. They were ironically imaged as people still holding the late eighteenth century frontier heritage. Appalachians were described as savages, independent, proud, tough, rugged and violent, most of the time pictured as dirty and uneducated but crafty and practical. They were lazy, drank too much and produced large families.

Writers from the Local Color Movement, a kind of American Literature of the late 1860s, were mostly responsible for these Appalachian stereotypes. Through large audience journals, short stories, travel accounts and novels, they described Appalachians as more Elizabethans than Americans, a region of feuding, moonshining and a culture that had never been touched by modernization or progress. The people of Appalachia started to be seen in a negative view and in contrast with the progressive and the urban culture of America at the turning point of the twentieth century.

These new stereotypes and images of Appalachia resulted in a desire by many church and charity groups in the North East to improve the mountaineers' living conditions and boost the Appalachian culture through building new schools and implementing modern middle class values into the region. There were other groups, however, at that time which responded that action should be taken to culturally preserve the richness and uniqueness of the Appalachia region and Appalachia should be protected

for it has not been contaminated by the evils of modernization. Folklorists like Cecil Sharp travelled to Appalachia to record mountain ballads, folk crafts, as well as, dances. Unfortunately, their work was very bias and limited so it did not fairly reflect the reality and the diversity of the Appalachian culture, but a sole image that they created and perpetuated themselves.

Using economic uplifting through development and industrialization was a third response to the backward image that had been created for the Appalachian region. This response was thought to promote progress for the people of Appalachia since it was believed by outsiders that the Appalachians were unable to develop their own resources. These outsiders argued that coal and timber can potentially not only improve their lives but also contribute to the progress of the nation. It was decided by those living outside of Appalachia that an adequate transportation system was required within Appalachia region as a basis for its industrialization. Abundant minerals and timber would create demands for labor and meet the wild urban growth of America. The government agreed with this idea and during the two closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a large scale of railroad building was carried out. All of the Appalachian counties would be reached and thus all doors to the region's huge and rich natural resources were open to exploitation. Many since have said this was the aim all along to get the rich resources and not to assist the people of the region (britannica.com).

The coal mining industries were what finally brought a late industrial revolution to the region of Appalachia. Capitalists, who were mainly outsiders from middle and upper middle class background, started huge coal companies and managed to lobby and manipulate the weak local state political systems for their benefits and most of the time not caring about the local people's welfare or the impact on the environment. Workers who remained poor had to leave their traditional family lands and bring their families to new company towns which had mostly Appalachians, southern African Americans and immigrants from the East coast. Along with the coal industry, forestry, timber industries as well as textile mills started to become industrialized in the region. The Appalachian industrialization impacted the whole region in a negative way in the long run. Even during its booming days the coal mining industries did not bring any real development to the

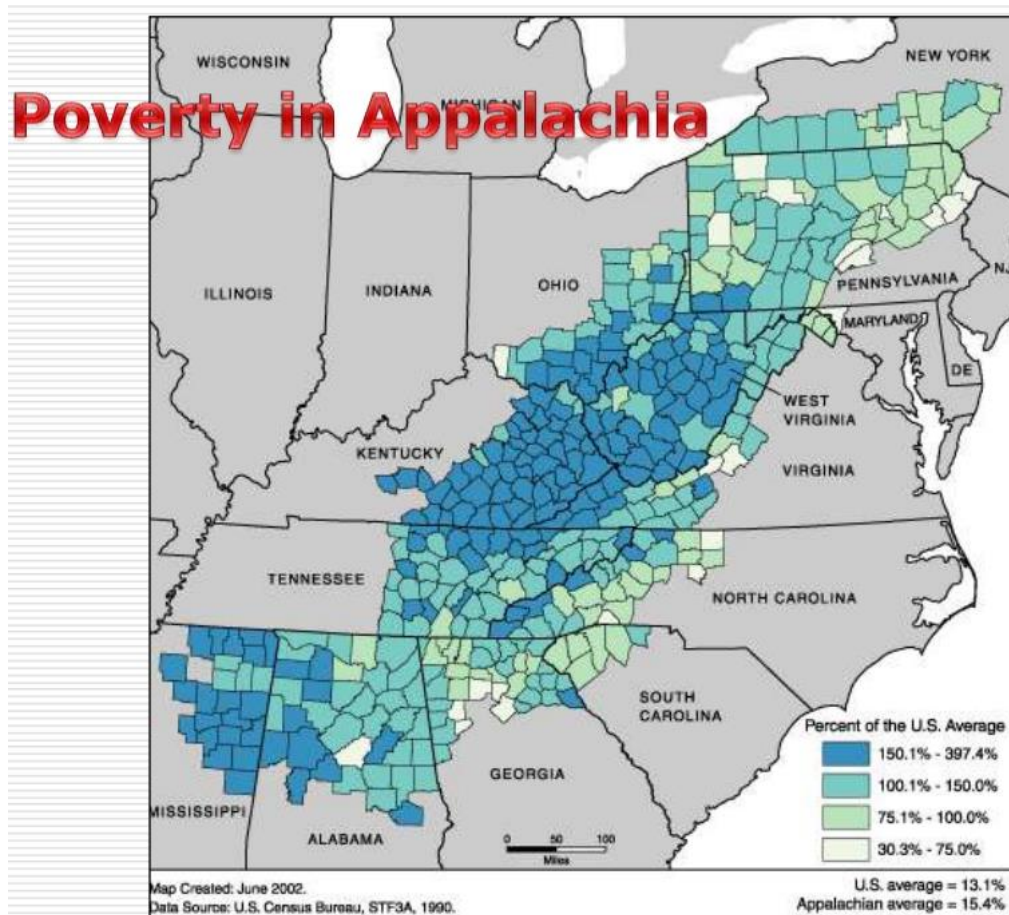
## *Chapter One: Appalachia*

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region or improved the Appalachians' lives. It just took out the coal, timber, and clean waters and ruined the natural resources once treasured by the Native Americans and early settlers.

The aftermath of the Second World War was a turning point in the history of Appalachia. Many young Appalachians, upon their returning home from their wartime experiences overseas found no economic opportunities in their region and started to leave in search of a better life. The consequence was a great migration from Appalachia to Northern and Midwestern states. During the decades of 1945 to 1965 almost 3.5 million Appalachians left for the major Midwestern cities like Chicago, Indianapolis, Columbus, and Detroit in search of a brighter economic future which resulted in creating large subcultures of Appalachian migrants in these cities.

The 1950's Appalachia experienced a time of extreme poverty though the rest of the country was in a general economic prosperity. In 1963, President Lyndon Johnson encouraged the Appalachian Regional Development Act to pass through Congress as he renewed a kind of national attention to Appalachia after his visit to West Virginia while campaigning for the democratic presidential nomination back in 1960. The Act dealt with the federal funding of secondary education programs, highway systems, tourism industries as well as timber business. Federal programs created some small areas of prosperity but the federal government war on poverty generally failed in the Appalachian region. One positive and important result of this war on poverty was the emergence of a strong sense of regional identity and belonging by the people of Appalachia, as well as, a more accurate and fair image of region of Appalachia when writing or talking about its people, history and culture. The 1960's national protests brought a feeling of pride among the mountaineers and marked the beginning of the Appalachian Renaissance.



Map 4: Poverty in Appalachia: [arc.gov/maps](http://arc.gov/maps)

### 1.3. Appalachian Cultural Development and Literature

For decades, geologists, economists and geographers have emphasized the influence of the land and mountain regions have on the people who live in Appalachia. The mountains provide forest harvesting, some areas for grazing and soil for farming even where the growing season is short. The whole region possesses an abundance and rich variety of natural resources which has drawn people and captured their loyalties despite the isolation of the region with its limited access of wagon roads, railroads or paved highways. Horseback and horse drawn sleds were used the most for transportation in the mountainous areas of the Appalachian region until recent years (Dornbush 63). Outsiders have never fully understood the region or its people. One reason is the people of this region are fiercely protective and private. They are slow to trust those from the other side

of the mountain much less those from other regions or countries. Outsiders and so called experts who have traveled to the region are quick to judge and form an inaccurate opinion. One such visitor stated that the topography showed the region to be devoted by nature to isolation and poverty. Fortunately, in recent years more accurate studies and statements have been made about the region such as those by W.K. McNeil in *Appalachian Folklore and Popular Culture* published in 1989. He says: “Outsiders have repeatedly generated distortions about the region and its people. Many have defined Appalachia, more so even than the broader region of the South, exclusively in terms of poverty.”(Conway 40)

President Lyndon Johnson’s Commission launched a national War on Poverty in Appalachia in 1964, just as in a fireside chat, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had three decades earlier proclaimed the South the nation’s number one economic problem. “In spite of misconceptions, economic problems, and a tragic history, the South and especially Appalachia have remained distinctive for their cultural resources and natural beauty.” (Wendell 360)

Today, those who research the Appalachian people, their culture and oral histories through anthropological, historical, and ethnographic evidences discover the real understanding of the material poverty and the rich abundant resources of the region. The confusion and paradox was partially the result of the contrasting world views of the early English colonizers and the Scots Irish who populated the region. Among the variety of early European immigrants who sought a home in the New World, the English settled mainly on or near the coastal ports and plains, whereas, in the late eighteenth century the Scots Irish and other English speaking Celts immigrated to the area of the region known as the backcountry. The Scots Irish comprised about 65 percent of the population of the region and had a very different view of life and nature than the English settlers. They were the most influential group with rich oral histories, traditional stories, and music that left a strong cultural imprint seen even today. The cultural differences between the English and the Scots Irish settlers were added to by old European class structures and contributed to numerous conflicts and problems between English planters and Scots Irish frontiersmen.

The English held strong values of hierarchy, stiff order, writing, wealth, efficiency, speed in action, control of territory and capitalism conflicted with the Scots Irish strong values of confederation, creativity, eloquent oral arts, passionate spirit, quality craftsmanship, individualism, generosity, and egalitarianism. The Scots Irish characteristics were misinterpreted by outsiders and economic developers who saw them as disorganized, illiterate, impetuosity, and lazy. These misconceptions and misunderstanding of Scots Irish settlers brought the rise of terms such as redneck and hillbilly used for most people of the Appalachia Region by those outside.

Much of the colorful and rich Appalachian literature from the Back country Scots Irish was overlooked or remained unknown by outsiders. Much of the literature based on this Appalachian region has focused on the English settlers and tells the story of the planters. Sadly, most early literary writings the Appalachia Region portray inaccurate stories of the just plain folks, the mainly white rural people of the hills and mountain country. Often these folk have been stereotyped either as the television version of the wonderful Waltons or the negative movie portrayed Deliverance deviants (Robertson 63). William Faulkner did write a few stories that revealed the real life of the non-plantation rural South and even hinted at the mountain culture. Characters created by William Faulkner such as, Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Snopeses and Ratliff in the *Hamlet* and the McCallums in *The Tall Men* tell the story of the Appalachians who took the Great Wagon Road into the Piedmont and up into the Appalachian hill country with some finally ending up in Mississippi. These characters and stories inherit some of the mythic qualities of the Scots Irish settlers through their rugged individualism and eloquent storytelling arts (Robertson 64).

The Scots Irish helped to establish a vibrant culture across much of the non-plantation south. Old traditional ways have been slow to change in the mountains probably due to remoteness in the mountains compared to the Piedmont region which had had more outside contact. Old World Celtic traditions still seen and used today in contemporary Appalachia include the forest grazing of cattle and pigs; small individual farming over industrial farming; and a tradition of gathering for church suppers, reunions, house parties, country store, or fiddlers' conventions.

There remains in the mountain people a strong commitment to kinfolk, a passion for freedom and the land to sustain it, a fair justice system involving settling conflicts as a matter of personal right and duty. The Appalachian fine crafts grew out of traditional Scots Irish needs which include metal working, wood carving, basket weaving and their oral histories spoken in local lore and *Jack Tales* or sung in lovely ballads of life and love.

As the Appalachians' lives changed upon arriving to the Appalachian region from Europe, so did their religious practices. The Scots Irish settlers who arrived to the region were mostly Presbyterians by faith. In search of religious freedom, the Old Side Presbyterians became Calvinists, or they drifted away from organized religion altogether with some returning to a pre-Christian spirituality inspired by the old Celtic ways. Diverse and distinctive independent churches and sects were seen throughout the region until they settled into a few large groups such as the new Presbyterians, the Methodist and the Baptists seen in the time of the Great Awakening.

Life for the newcomers was difficult and they retained their traditions as a way to find comfort and solidarity in their new homes. Oral history and the telling of folklore, especially through instrumental music, song, and narratives, provided a way to preserve and bind the people of the region.

For many years the folklore and music of the region has been of interest to scholars and folklorists. Folklorist Richard M. Dorson stated that "he considered the southern Appalachia region to be Folklore's natural habitat and the region of the United States which was most customarily linked with folklore" (87). Cratis Williams, a long time scholar of Appalachia, identified three periods of Appalachian literary history (MacKethan 41). The first literary period was the pioneer literature dating from the earliest journal and travel accounts through settlements up to 1880. The second period identified by Williams was between 1880-1930, and the third literary period was the 1930s through 1960s. Recent scholars have added a fourth period from the 1960s to the end of the twentieth century the first three identified by Cratis Williams.

To explore the above four identified literary periods further, we begin with the first, the pioneer period. During the pioneer period of 1600s, the Scots Irish who were

strong and rugged people, made their life in the new world as trappers and traders. They made early explorations of the mountain ranges, befriended or fought with local Native Americans, and began to establish a diverse frontier culture. They also began to document their adventures which have been a valuable tool for looking to the past and discovering their life during this time.

The colonial period followed the pioneer period when settlers from Scots Irish backgrounds encountered new crops, food sources and craft such as; tobacco, corn, herbs, and woodcrafts. These new food and crafts were learned from the friendly Native Americans of the region who had long lived upon the land for centuries. They helped the settlers and even intermarried with some of the settlers. As game became scarce from over kill and the clearing of lands during the eighteenth century, more Scots, Irish, Welsh, and other settlers began to practice subsistence farm and forest agriculture. Most of them wanted large family gardens and range lands, not plantations or huge cash crops. One crop settlers learned about from the Native Americans was corn. Corn was an abundant food crop and could be converted to an alcoholic liquor then easily transported to sell to get much needed cash for family staples such as salt and coffee which they could not grow themselves.

German immigrants soon joined the early Scots Irish settlers in the Appalachia region. They were a close group who maintained their language and religious faith and were admired for their work ethics. The German settlers made hewn log cabins, practiced a more settled farming, used fabrics that were homemade and dyed, known for their lovely quilts, and carved designs front and back on their gravestones. Most Germans settled in the Shenandoah Valley and the Piedmont, establishing communities in Staunton, Virginia, and Winston Salem, North Carolina.

Most immigrants to the Appalachian Region were from Europe but a small number were Africans slaves and free men. They brought with them some of their native traditions in songs and oral tales such as: the banjars (banjos), *The Tales of Brer Rabbit* (Brother Rabbit), and basket making, among other traditions.



## *Chapter One: Appalachia*

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While the plantation and frontier peoples had conflicting political ideas and interests before the Civil War, in the Appalachia Region the Scots Irish, German, African, and other immigrants crossed social, class, culture and racial borders to create music and harmony in daily life. Musicians shared instruments and music to create new sounds and rhythms such as; playing the traditional Scots Irish fiddle (violin) and dulcimers with the African American banjos and the German accordion. They produced a new lively sound enjoyed by all. They still kept their traditional ballads from the old countries but enjoyed the new music as well. As the generations passed and this peaceful cultural exchange continued, it became standard to all to emphasize community more than ethnicity.

Along with its musical histories, the people of Appalachia Region treasured their oral tales and shared them with all. Many authors and journalists such as George Washington Harris and Mark Twain, to mention a few helped document and preserve the lively, colorful and humorous tales of tricksters, ring tailed roarers, and legendary heroes of the region. Famous characters in these tales were Daniel Boone and Davy Crocket. *Sketches and Eccentricities of Colonel David Crockett of West Tennessee* by James Strange published in 1833, described a folk hero who could run faster, jump higher, squat lower, stay under longer, and come out drier than any man in the whole country. The real Davy Crockett who was known as straight shooter (one who always told the truth), felt he needed to set things straight so he responded by writing his own autobiography, *A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett* published in 1834, with corrections on the first book. It also served as publicity for his Presidential campaign. Being upset after losing the election for President Crockett declared, “You may all go to hell and I will go to Texas”.(62) He left his home and went west to fight with Texas against the Mexicans. He lost his life at the Battle of the Alamo, in Texas.

The early oral histories of Appalachia Region included folklore with humor, life adventures or heroic actions. Popular ballads like, *Gypsy Laddie*, *Jack Went A Sailing*, *Butcher Boy*, and tales like, *Jack and the Heifer Hide*, and dance songs like, *Roustabout and Sugar Hill* actually revealed a lot about the hearts, minds, and challenges of the region. Unfortunately, despite little investment in slavery or the large plantations, many

## *Chapter One: Appalachia*

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people of the Appalachia region were drawn into the Civil War. They were forced to choose a side influenced by family ties or political ties to the lowlands.

After the Civil War in the years from 1880 to 1930, native Appalachian authors such as, Mary Murfree, who used Charles Egbert Cradock as her publishing name, John Fox Jr., and Elizabeth Madox Roberts wrote historical romances about the Civil War, moonshining, and family feuds of the region. Their novels became very popular during this time when there was a growing interest in the United States in the Appalachia region culture and music.

Interest and growing information continued into the twentieth century of the Appalachia region its culture and people. Four books by early twentieth educators gave a new more accurate view of the region from an academic perspective. They offered new information on the Appalachian culture and life, provided data which was used by environmental determinists, folklorists and ethnographers studying the region. The book, *The Spirit of the Mountains* by Emma Bell Miles, published in 1905, stressed the role of Appalachian women as repositories of tribal lore, tradition and song, medical and religious learning.

Horace Kephart's wrote *Our Southern Highlands* in 1913 which discussed the stereotypes of moonshiners and mountain feuders with truth of the Appalachian men who acted responsibly farming, hunting, woodcraft, and other outdoor traditions. These two authors made careful distinctions in the types of mountain people like: the wealthy "valley people", the middle class average hillmen, and the lower class scrabbling branchwater folks.

Along with these two authors was the research on folk songs by Olive Dame Campbell. Her research was greatly helpful to music collectors Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles. They traveled throughout the Appalachian region to gather 1,600 songs from 1916 to 1918 documenting a time in history that is called by music scholars the *Golden Age of Balladry*.

John C. Campbell wrote, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* in 1921. It surveyed the geography, history and culture of the Appalachia Region. He was the

## *Chapter One: Appalachia*

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founder of the Campbell Folk School in 1925 in Brasstown, North Carolina which is well-known even today and continues his work.

The people and their culture in the Appalachia region have been misunderstood since the early settlers. Many educators and missionaries from the north sought to change, educate, and tame the peculiar differences of mountain people, to make them like the rest of the country. However writer and Appalachian enthusiast, Cecil Sharp in 1916 wrote to them in a letter advising them: “I should leave them as they are and not meddle. They are happy, contented, and live simply and healthily, and I am not at all sure that any of us can introduce them to anything better than this.” (Conway 43)

During the early years of the twentieth century, professional ballad collectors and other folklore scholars traveled to the Appalachia region to record and listen to the people to capture a culture. They helped to expand, contextualize, and deepen the portrait of the Appalachian mountain folk by allowing them to share in their own voice their rich culture. This venture as given the world a new treasure. The work of collecting continues today.

During this same period, Henry Ford and other conservative entrepreneurs supported fiddlers’ conventions and recorded mountain folk music. The folktale of the African American railroad worker, John Henry, had become a popular old time mountain banjo and later guitar and bluegrass song. His tale was one of a hero who stood against the threat of industrial exploitation and having strength to endure. He was a hero for all mountain folk as they faced pressures from the coal industries.

During the period of 1930 to 1960, Appalachian born writers such as, Thomas Wolfe, Jesse Stuart, James Still, James Agee, Harriette Simpson Arnow, and Wilma Dykeman transformed previously inaccurate stereotyping texts into accurate literary information, folklore, and texts into facts about a unique culture and people as they included their first-hand knowledge and local values against outside overzealous modernity and people of other regions that did not understand or know the real cultures or peoples of Appalachia.

These writers took a different path than other southern writers. Unlike Faulkner’s symbolic romances which had deep roots in the local communities of the Deep South, the

Appalachian fiction shares the lyrical, open ended autobiographical journeys of simple, ordinary people. Writer Thomas Wolfe was a popular writer of this period. He wrote *Look Homeward, Angel* in 1929 which was a personal novel about his childhood in the small North Carolina mountain town of Asheville. In his novel he renamed Asheville, Altamont. Wolfe had a strong dislike for commercialism and urban ugliness and often complained about it. He once wrote a note to his mother to complain about the village virus of: those people who shout “Progress, Progress, Progress when what they mean is more Ford automobiles, more Rotary Clubs, more Baptist Ladies Social Unions”. (Conway 40)

The classic Appalachia region literary period was from 1930 to 1960. The literature of this period was greatly influenced by the mining wars of the region. Writers wrote novels documenting the conflicts, changes and economic struggles faced by the people. The novels described the resistance to the timber cutting and mining companies. They tell of the great out migration of laborers who had to leave their homes in the mountains to seek work in the Piedmont region. Many found work in the furniture factories, textile mills, and later in the Midwestern auto factories. Other Appalachian writers during this period wrote about the endangered mountain culture, farm life and forest life and the causes of their endangerment.

#### **1.4. Stereotyping and Truth of Region through 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

In *Oral History*, Lee Smith attempts “to undermine the various Appalachian stereotypes but she is hesitant to correct or state the reality or correct stereotype because she feels that a story is always the teller’s tale and you never finally know the way it was.” (Arnold 347). Instead, Smith has a skillful way of complicating, as well as, clarifying the stereotypes by first invoking and then individualizing them. In developing her characters she skillfully draws the reader to see more clearly the characters and the culture they come from. Dorothy Hill in her writing of the author states that “Mrs. Smith tends to handle, play into, and shrug off Southern stereotypes with humor and narrative detail rather than simply negating them”. (147)

Lee Smith’s own experience as a Southern Mountain Region native helps to give her a qualified view of an Appalachian writer for her contemporary audiences. Some

literary critics occasionally complain that Mrs. Smith writes about a region and people that she no longer lives among and characters that come from a different social and cultural class than her own social origins (Coley 241). However, Lee Smith's *Oral History* is enriched not only by her experience, but also by preceding depictions of Appalachia in literature, by the image of Appalachia in the popular imagination, and by her extensive research. To effectively examine the social worlds Mrs. Smith creates so vividly in her *Oral History*, it is important to first identify her position or place in relationship to her material along with placing her works of fiction within the larger arena of historic images of the Appalachian Region in literary and popular imaginations.

The Appalachia Region seen in Lee Smith's *Oral History* is primarily centered on the mountains and towns of the Virginia coal-mining country where she grew up. Mrs. Smith does set some of her writings in other Appalachian sub-regions, such as North Carolina and north Alabama, but she focuses mostly on settings that reflect the mountains, culture, and people of her youth. These cultural aspects and points of view quite often provide narrative consistency seen in the novels texts as they follow characters across state or regional lines. An example of this is in her novel, *Saving Grace*. The story is set in numerous North Carolina and Tennessee rural churches and towns. The two sub regions are culturally connected by Mrs. Smith through their protagonist's association with charismatic churches practices which Mrs. Smith uses in her texts to consistently link the rural mountain cultures and characters in the story. In her novel titled *The Devil's Dream*, the character, Katie Cocker, leaves the mountains to travel through several sub regions of Appalachia. She travels to genteel Richmond in Virginia, honky-tonk Louisiana, the hip California, and then to contemporary Nashville in search of stardom. Wherever she travels she always identifies herself as a country singer, performing the music from her cultural inheritance from her family she left behind in the mountains. All through the writings of Lee Smith we see her continued focus on the coal-mining region of Appalachia which reflected the mountains, culture and people that she knows best.

Scholars have noted that there are different degrees of economic and social differentiations within the sub regions of the larger Appalachian Southern Mountain Region (Coley 452). This view by scholars is in contrast to the popular perceptions by

non-academics of the Appalachian Region as homologous. Horace Kephardt acknowledges in the introduction to his 1913 ethnography, *Our Southern Highlanders*, that his text and research did not focus specific people or town residents in the Appalachian Region Southern Mountains, but rather on the all people of the region which he called, mountaineers. He did this to erase any divisions or separations by internal social distinctions. Cratis Williams' doctoral survey focused on the mountain literary traditions up until the year 1961. The survey identified three distinct socioeconomic groups that had developed within the region by the 1920s:

Town and city dwellers – The survey found that the Appalachian residents in towns with a population of citizens over 1000 in number were similar in many aspects as those in other U.S. towns. Most had relatives in the rural areas but were anxious to separate themselves from what the outside thought were the less desirable characteristics of the traditional mountain culture and the given label of mountaineer. According to Williams, though close to their country cousins in the ethical aspects of their culture, they have modernized their manners, speech, dress, homes and habits of life.

Valley farmers – The next and largest group were farmers. Most of the farming, prosperous rural residents lived in the river valleys, near main highways, or large creek mouths. This farming group shared the traditional aspects and ethical and ethnical homogeneity with the rest of the mountain population, but they were different from the third class as they typically enjoyed a more generous material and social life.

Branchwater mountaineers – The third distinct socioeconomic group has been most often portrayed in early to mid-twentieth century fiction, and is often depicted as the only group of mountaineers. These small landowners, tenants, and squatters often lived high in the mountains, in coves, on mountain ridges, and in inaccessible remote regions. They were also found throughout the other classes. As their name suggests, most of this group lived along small creeks instead of rivers or larger creeks as the valley farmers. In Lee Smith's *Oral History*, these people resided in mountain hollers or hollows, which were narrow valleys with a small creek between the mountains. The people in this group greatly resented the unflattering depictions of themselves found in most print.

## *Chapter One: Appalachia*

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Lee Smith used the 1921 research study by John C. Campbell titled, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* in her research for her novels *Oral History* and *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Coley 251). Campbell's ethnography was one of the few early publications to recognize the variety in the various population groups in the Appalachia Region. His survey encouraged Mrs. Smith expands her research of social and economic differentiation in the sub regions of Appalachian Region.

*Chapter Two*  
*Narrative Analysis of Oral*  
*History*



## **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter is devoted to research into the novel's character narratives by using the qualitative approach with narrative analysis. My research seeks to discover and give an understanding to the narrative voices and the complex layering of the characters in *Oral History* by author Lee Smith. I also want to reveal their importance and purpose to the story and setting. As a writer, Lee Smith masterfully weaves the narrative with multi layers of voices and a variety of perspectives to create an intertwined picture of a family, a regional culture, its people, and a linguistic treasure.

The complex narratives and character development in *Oral History* is done by using the third person to first person, then back to third person voice at the end, each with distinctive perspective and its own place in the complexity of Appalachian society. Each character voice helps to add to a mental image in the reader's mind of the region, the culture and action happening in the story. As one reads, Appalachia becomes a real place and the lives, interactions and voices of the characters help to build on the picture.

The prologue of the novel is written in italics and the narrator promptly introduces the characters and setting to the reader. Author, Frank Soos, writes that the aim of the novel's narrator is "to quickly establish the values of the world, in this case contemporary Appalachia that her characters inhabit. Our narrator is in omniscient form to let us know that what's going on in Hoot Owl Holler is just fine, thank you" (20). As the story unfolds and develops, the reader is surrounded by the real life situations, the voices and thoughts of the Appalachian people and their minority culture. Appalachia becomes a real place and the lives, interactions and voices of the characters build on that image, thus resulting in each reader's perception of the region and review of past stereotyping (Brooks 5). Lee Smith wished that each reader would discover for themselves the truth about the region, people, and its culture as well as its colorful language.

The epilogue, like the prologue, is typed in italics and returns back to the third person narrative that the novel began with. It returns to Jennifer Bingham's narrative interaction with

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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her relatives as she ends the project she began at the first of the novel. At this point in the novel the real feelings of the relatives and the weak and close-mindedness of Jennifer is revealed to the reader. Jennifer's aunt, Ora Mae Cantrell, finally reveals to her that she does not like her uninvited intrusion into their lives or her condescending attitude towards them which is obvious to all. Ora Mae sends Jennifer's uncle Al up the mountain to get her tape recorder left in the old house then she warns her to "take it and go on, and don't you ever come back here no more with no tape recorder because if you set it up there, you'll likely hear what you don't want to hear" (Smith 28). Ora Mae is referring to a family secret from the past from which she has been protected from by her father. Jennifer responds to Ora Mae's sharp warning by saying, "I don't understand what's going on here." (28) This response by Jennifer tells the reader that she cannot see her own ignorance and naivety. She has dealt with her relatives with an outsider's preconceived idea and lack of open mind for her project assignment. This idea led her to see them as, "really very primitive people, resembling nothing so much as some sort of early tribe. Crude jokes and animal instincts, it's the other side of the pastoral coin."(28) Jennifer leaves puzzled by the exchange with her aunt and blinded by her outside notions of the region and its people.

By implying imaginative images of Appalachia found in the mountain literary and oral traditions, academic resources and current popular imaginations, Lee Smith accurately mirrors popular and elite class attitudes towards the region. She has also included some aspects of the working class and popular country music to give balance to her view of the region.

This skillful way of presenting the Appalachian people, culture and region by Lee Smith will appear to everyone who reads the novel, *Oral History*, to form a unique perception of the region and review their past ideas or stereotyping of the region and its people. It is the hope by the author Lee Smith, that each reader will discover for himself/herself the truth about the region, the people, and their culture.

I will begin this section with general ideas about the narratives and voices, and end up later by elaborating more specific details on each one of them.

## **2.2. Narrative and Narrative Voices in *Oral History***

Shortly after its publication in 1983, the novel *Oral History* received noted awards like the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Award in 1995 through 1997 and the Robert Penn Warren Prize for Fiction in 1991. In addition, Lee Smith has received honors, awards, and grants documenting her literary achievements such as, the Academy Award in Fiction from the American Academy of Arts & Letters in 1999, the Weatherford Award for Appalachian Literature in 1988, North Carolina Award for Literature in 1984, Sir Walter Raleigh Award in 1983 and 1989, and the Lyndhurst Grant in 1990 and 1992 for her skillful usage of multi layering of character voices and complex narratives. Her skillful usage of these tools along with her first-hand knowledge of the culture created a view into the culture and lives of the characters and the region they live in as the plot developed. *Oral History's* storyline and narratives skillfully and gently takes the reader into the lives and narrative interactions of a previously mysterious minority population. It reveals to the reader historic misconceptions and replaces them with reality and truth. Each viewpoint and voice is important in the structuring of the many and varied layers of the story (Brooks 6). An article by Paula Gallant Eckard entitled, *The Prismatic Past in Oral History and Mama Day*, shares a reason why Lee Smith used multiple voices in her novel. Mrs. Eckard wrote, "Through the narratives of different characters, the rich Appalachian past of the novel is conveyed in the recitation of stories, folklore, and legends as they pertain to Hoot Owl Holler and the Cantrell family" (11). Suzanne Jones, another writer and critic shared her opinion in her paper, *City Folks in Hoot Owl Holler: Narrative Strategy in Lee Smith's Oral History*, which says that Mrs. Smith's usage of different perspectives indicates that she is just as interested in the varying perceptions of Appalachia as she is in the actual place and its people. (111)

With her skillful usage of multiple personal thoughts and variety of distinct perspectives, Lee Smith gets the reader's interest and creates in his/her mind a sense of creditability and believability (Brooks 7). Frank Soos wrote in his article, *Insiders and Outsiders: Point of View in Lee Smith's Oral History* that "our challenge as a reader is to take on the question of a seemingly outrageous belief in a sometimes magic but always mystical world in the face of our

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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own deeply rooted faith in the logic and rationality of our own systems of truth.” (7). Each reader of *Oral History* discovers his own unique thoughts on the people and region from the narratives and story (Brooks 7). This is why the novel is so unique and popular.

The narrative line of *Oral History* begins in the present third person voice and with the character voice of Jennifer Bingham. She is a naive college student working on an oral history project inspired by her infatuation of her college professor. The college project leads her to Hoot Owl Holler in the mountains of northern Virginia. She is there to visit and study relatives whom she has never met or known about. Unfortunately for her and her relatives, any discoveries in Hoot Owl Holler are hindered by her preconceived ideas of the region and her stereotyping of her relatives and people there from the outside environment. (Brooks 7)

After the reader is introduced in the present to Old Hoot Holler upon Jennifer’s arrival, Lee Smith smoothly shifts the point of view so that the reader moves from the third person perspective of the present time to a first person voice from the past. The voice of the past is that of Granny Younger, old wise healer to the community, who informs the reader of Jennifer’s great grandfather and the Cantrell family history. She also shares with the reader the Cantrell family legacy which includes a curse.

Granny Younger, who many readers consider to be the most informative and interesting voice of the novel. Lee Smith presents her first person perspective which also includes many of the regions cultural aspects. Granny Younger uses an oral narrative of wisdom of age and experiences from an insider's perspective in order to, as post-modern critic Paula Gallant Eckard says, "Evoke the past" (122). Granny’s community status as midwife and healer gives her an intimate view into the heart of the community (Brooks 10). As Granny begins her narrative she says, "I know moren most folks and that's a fact, you can ask anybody. I know moren I want to tell you, and moren you want to know" (Smith 27). These words by her immediately signal the reader that some things need to be discovered which are hidden and creates interest into what other things Granny may know and reveal. The reader will also remember the words of Ora Mae warning that Jennifer would see and hear more than she

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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wanted. With similar words from Granny and Ora Mae, the reader realizes the warning is intended for all outsiders who would come to Appalachia (Brooks 11).

As the novel begins in first person voice, Granny Younger's narrative shares with the reader the historical background of the Cantrell family and the curse said to be tied to the family. Granny begins the historical tale with Almarine Cantrell as a young boy always wishing for something he did not have. Granny tells the reader, "Almarine allus wanting something who knows what? and that's why he kept staring out beyond them hills" (31). Longing is a motif throughout the novel. Narrative voices tell the reader of Almarine's longing and the longing of Dory which caused her death. The difference between Almarine's longing and Dory's is that Almarine was able to seek his. Being a male he was able to leave Black Cove and go into the outside world. He returns five years later but would not tell anyone about his adventures outside. Almarine had changed his view of Appalachia and his home upon his return. Granny Younger described his dedication to the land upon his return by saying, "Truly this holler is so much a part of Almarine that he doesn't think of owning it, not any moren a man would think of owning his own arm not yet one of his legs" (32). This description by Granny represents a true insider's view of the Appalachian region to the reader. Almarine's daughter, Dory, feels differently as she feels trapped and isolated in Hoot Owl Holler. She dreams of something different and this dream pushes her attraction for the outsider, Richard Burlage. Sadly for Dory, her interaction with Burlage leads to feeling of hopelessness and further isolated in her own community.

As one reads the narrative of Granny Younger historical layers of the Cantrell family as well as the region and culture are revealed. She shares stories of the lumber company coming in, traditions about marriage and burial, healing remedies and mountain superstitions among others. Her narrative has a mixture of realistic situations in Black Cove and situations that cannot always be fully explained. One story Granny shares is about Almarine's first wife Emmy Harris. It was a real marriage but it had an unexplainable, supernatural element. In the community, Emmy Harris was said to be a witch. Granny shares with the reader her meeting one day with Emmy who Granny felt showed her as a witch: "Red Emmy turned her head away

from her kissing one time, once only, and looked at me directly where I was hid. The lightning flashes right then and I see her face and it is old, old. Red Emmy stares me right in the eyes and she spits one time on the rainy ground" (52). Granny's account of the incident at the marriage gives the reader an uneasy feeling and makes the reader puzzled over the truth of Emmy.

When Granny Younger tells of the marriage day, Smith captures the aspect of storytelling that allows embellishment which is very much a traditional part of the Appalachian oral culture. Most of the information Granny shares about Emmy Harris being a witch are not what Granny has seen with her own eyes, but her imagination creating the scene. Granny assumed that Almarine must have been bewitched to have married Emmy Harris. According to writer, Gabrielle Cliff Hodges in *The Introduction to Tales, Tellers, and Texts*, "It is hard for the factual to exist without the imaginative" (3). Granny based her thoughts and story on hearsay and her imagination which are commonly used to make stories more interesting.

The last portion of Granny Younger's narrative in the novel serves two purposes. The first purpose is to show the first direct interaction between insiders and outsiders when Dory's mother Pricey Jane comes to Black Cove with her gypsy uncle and his gypsy band for the first time (Brooks 14). Almarine who had cast out Emma Harris because he also thinks she is a witch, quickly falls in love with Pricey and marries her. The community is concerned about Almarine taking an outsider as a wife. "Squirrel, he is trying to talk Almarine out of it" (Smith 60), and when that doesn't work all the residents of Black Cove run off "to be the first to tell it iffen they can" (61).

After her marriage Pricey Jane assimilates herself into the culture of Appalachia. Pricey Jane's assimilation imitates the assimilation of Smith's own mother, which Smith speaks of in an interview with Claudia Lowenstein, "My mother was considered an outsider though she lived there for sixty years. I remember at her funeral another old lady came up and said to me, "Well, you know, Gig was a mighty nice foreigner" (88). This statement by Lee Smith, along with her tale of Pricey Jane, leads to the assumption that an outsider can never become an insider in Appalachia. Pricey Jane seems to have succeeded except for the fact that when she

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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and her son died from drinking dew poisoned milk, it was something a true insider would never have done knowing what the results would have been.

Pricey Jane's assimilation may have been easier and possible because she is not "entirely a foreigner" (Smith 63) as Granny Younger explained. She had grown up in a place very similar to Black Cove. She had joined the gypsy band after her parents died for she needed a way to live. The only thing that was truly gypsy about her "was them big gold hoops in her ears" (64).

The gold hoop earrings are important for they are passed down through the Cantrell family and become a symbol of dreams to the family or a good luck charm. The symbolism of the earrings began when Pricey Jane gave them to her little girl, Dory. Granny Younger being the local midwife brings Dory into the world at the end of her mother's story and figuratively brings her into the reader's world when she tells the Cantrell history up to the time of Dory's birth. Granny's last lines in her narrative are "Name her Dory. Hit means gold" (68).

Dory Cantrell is the focus of *Oral History's* plot, and Granny Younger's narrative has brought Dory to the attention of the reader and their understanding after she provided the Cantrell family's history.

With Jennifer's role in the frame story as a naïve and close minded college student, Lee Smith suggests that there remains one more element of Appalachia to be taken away by outsiders (Brooks 7). Suzanne Jones explains, "An academic exploitation of the hills which, though different from that of loggers, miners and mill owners who invaded Appalachia earlier in this century, is still abusive. Like these outsiders, Jennifer is out for her own gain, even though unlike most of them she is unaware of her own motives" (103). Outsiders who influence native born into them doubting their home, culture and region can do the most damage and ravaging of all.

Exploitation of the Appalachian region is exemplified when Richard Burlage's written narrative appears in the second section of *Oral History*. Richard, an outsider, travels to Black Cove for his own selfish motives (Brooks 16). He thinks in a self-righteous way to join "all those pilgrims of yore who have sought, through their travels, a system of belief — who have,

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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at the final destination, found also themselves."(97) Suzanne Jones explains the similar superiority and set thinking of Richard and Jennifer. How they both "came to Hoot Owl Holler with ideas of Appalachia that prevented them from seeing the place, its people or themselves clearly" (106). Richard is seeking, as the characters in *Black Cove*, for something better and for satisfaction with his life. He feels there must be more to life than what he has experienced in his hometown of Richmond. Ironically, after searching for something more and to find himself in Hoot Owl Holler, Richard leaves more confused and disappointed about his identity, "I am a sinner, bound for hell; I am a saint, purified by love; I am only a fool....I will come back here and marry her....I shall never marry, I shall become an artist" (Smith 166). The confusion, disappointment along with the events in his narrative all center on his relationship and treatment of Dory. Here again we see that Dory is the focus, the heart of the novel *Oral History*. Sadly, Dory never has the chance to tell her story and remains much of a mystery to the reader.

Richard Burlage travels to Black Cove to take the position of school teacher. In the novel, symbolically this professional and educated position represents opportunity for Richard and the people of Black Cove. Richard believes he is on a sort of mission to share the power of education as well as find healing for himself. His mistake is that he fails to see the truth about the lives for insiders of the Appalachia region, nor does he take time to truly experience their life there in Black Cove (Brooks 16). Richard wrote in his journal that,

"The food there is abominable. No wonder that these people, often handsome and hardy in youth, sicken and die so soon! Despite the Justices' great hospitality ...I am resolved to obtain a bed tick and a few other items of convenience and sleep right here in this school room during the school week, largely in order to fend off my own imminent starvation."  
(115).

Sally is a powerful female character with which to end the novel. Corrine Dale states: "Sally emerges as the most positive voice in the novel... because she does not accept limitations on experience" (195). She is able to reconcile her sexual self with the matriarchal oral language, and she is the only character who seems to have realized that you can't escape where you come from; you can't forget about the past. Her final words in the narrative tell her husband, "That's the past. It's nothing to talk about now. Now it's you and me. It's what happens after this"



(Smith 278). A person must incorporate his or her past, his or her personal dreams and the expectations that others hold for him or her. The combination is necessary for a fulfilling, integrated life, a life such as Sally's.

While Sally and Granny Younger are important voices from powerful women in the narrative structure of this novel, the remaining voices from women are short and somewhat undependable. The other women who share their oral narratives include Rose Hibbits, Mrs. Ludie Davenport, and Ora Mae. Each of these three women has aspects of their lives which lead the reader to question the reliability of their narrative, but at least their voices are heard. The main character, on which everyone's story focuses, Dory, is never given a voice of her own. Why would Smith make these other characters questionable and exclude Dory's voice? Paula Eckard claims that Smith's reason is to use women's voices in order to constitute the force of the "Other" (121). The three weaker women's narratives illustrate how within their own culture women can be "others," often cast as outsiders by those nearest to them.

### **2.3. The Structure of the Narrative in Oral History**

The story structure in *Oral History* skillfully and calmly reveals to the reader the lives and interactions of a previously mysterious and unknown minority population. It allows the reader to see historic misconceptions and stereotyping, and then starts to replace those with reality and truth (Brooks 3). Lee Smith accomplishes this realization in her novel by her masterful usage of multiple narratives and viewpoints, and inserting a large and varied samplings of cultural aspects through Granny Younger and other voices. Every perspective and narrative voice is important to building on the various layers of the story.

*Oral History* is written and constructed as a frame story which consists of four life stories along with prologue and epilogue. In a frame story various life stories can develop and overlap thus creating a continuous narrative for the reader. Mrs. Smith gives her characters distinct dialects and grammar which accurately reflect the mountain environment where they lived and skillfully ties and blends the multi voices to create a smooth flowing and solid story structure.

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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The Appalachian region has been throughout its history and remains today a region of complexity and multi-cultural layering. Lee Smith skillfully creates a narrative structure which mirrors this complexity and cultural layering. Smith's *Oral History* novel as a frame story is told with four main sections along with thirteen minor character voices with distinct points of view. The narrative structure has multi-layering points of view which include one first person narrative in journal form intertwined with four person narratives using third person narrating. In addition there are seven persons using first person in oral narratives. Each of the thirteen voices has a unique and important part in the building of the structural layers of the story. They all are important details in creating the Cantrell family history as presented in the novel. Also, each of the thirteen narrative voices adds to the focus of the novel being Dory Cantrell who surprisingly has little to no voice in the novel. She appears to be apart from her community and family as she dreams of more for her life.

Interestingly, the frame of this novel is based on the visit by Jennifer Bingham, the young college student traveling to Black Cove with a project assignment to collect stories on her recorder of her family's oral history. Jennifer's mother, Pearl, was born in Black Cove in the Appalachian Mountains but moved from the area to attend college. After college Pearl married someone from Abingdon, Tennessee and remained there. Pearl's husband was an upholsterer and she got a job as a high school art teacher. The frame promptly creates a picture for the reader of the Appalachian region from an outsiders' point of view because Jennifer had never known any of her relatives from Black Cove, nor had she ever lived there. Pearl, her mother, had never discussed her past or family with Jennifer, and she had a view of this backward family of whom "all her life, she looked down on," (Smith 16). Jennifer's previous outside ideas and perceptions of her family creates a tension about identity and belonging from the beginning of the novel that will be seen throughout the plot of the novel.

I think it is important to add here that Jennifer is coming to Black Cove mainly because she wishes to impress her professor whom she has a crush on. He is the one with interest into the culture of the region. She has no desire to meet and know her mother's family or the real Appalachian region. One day after class she had shared the story of her mother Pearl's family

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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homestead supposedly being haunted “laughing and over a drink after class one day, to show she was embarrassed because she was even so slightly related to people like that” (17).

It is clear to her family in Old Hoot Holler, especially her step-grandmother, Ora Mae Cantrell, that Jennifer’s intentions are insincere. The reader can sense by their response to her visit that they are aware and treat her in appropriate manner for such. Even though Jennifer tries to be polite towards her family after arriving in Black Cove because she finds them to be “people so sweet....so kind” (16), they treat her as an outsider. They are offended that Jennifer is condescending and using them for a college assignment on the first and only time she has ever visited them. Both Al and Ora Mae hold their thoughts until Jennifer is ready to leave then they say, “Don’t you ever come back here no more with no tape recorder because if you set it going up there, you will likely hear what you don’t want to hear” (28). Ora Mae is telling Jennifer that they all know how she really feels about them and warns her if she returns in a like manner, she will not like how she is treated or what truth she may discover. They were referring to the tape recorder Jennifer had brought to use for the assignment. She placed it in the old Cantrell family homestead, the haunted house up on the mountain.

Ora Mae’s and Al’s comments to Jennifer about her research project reveals to the reader two important points in the relationship between insiders and outsiders to the Appalachian region. Point one is that insiders who live in the region do not like outsiders coming into the region and viewing the culture and the people as something to be studied (Brooks 8). Ora Mae’s statement also reveals another point that outsiders who come into the region to live and do not assimilate into the culture, will never truly understand the land and its people. To become a part of a place one must accept the traditions of the dominant culture and make them a part of their own daily living. We will see later in my paper another example of this with, Richard Burlage, another character who was surprised and respectful but could not understand the people of the Appalachian culture.

The frame of the story forms the base structure of the novel while the bulk of the *Oral History* novel is the multiple stories collected on Jennifer's tape recorder about her family's history. Even though it is a small part in the novel, the frame is very important. It shows the

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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challenges of belonging and the insider-outsider relationships that have occurred in the region in the past, and how many of those same difficulties exist in the region today (Brooks 11).

Within the base frame we find the stories divided into four sections. Each section explains the influence of life struggles, dreams and seeking through the generations. Rosalind B. Reilly is a Structuralist critic who focuses on the symbols of circles and dreams within a novel. She shares her thoughts on these found in *Oral History* in her article *Oral History: The Enchanted Circle of Narrative and Dream*. Ms. Reilly states that, “all four sections follow a similar pattern representing the fact that dreams exist within all generations, and each individual must survive the making or breaking of their dreams.”(57)

Each of the four frame sections contains one primary narrative voice. The first voice the reader hears is Jennifer’s returning to Black Cove. The second voice the reader hears is from Granny Younger. The third narrative voice is Richard Burlage and the fourth voice is from Sally Cantrell.

According to literary critic Harriette C. Buchanan, who is impressed with Smith's manipulation of point of view, these four characters, Jennifer, Granny, Richard, and Sally, receive the role of primary narrators because of their relationship to Dory Cantrell, her story and the suspicion of the family curse.

The first voice the reader is introduced to is Jennifer Abingdon as she arrives at Hoot Owl Holler to meet her relatives for the first time. The second voice section is the strong narrative of Granny Younger which provides the family background and begins informing the reader about the curse of Red Emmy Harris and ends with Dory Cantrell's birth. The third frame story section voice is that of outsider Richard Burlage. Lee Smith uses a different form from the previous insider voices. Instead of using an oral narrative, Richard's voice is represented in written form in his journal. Writing in diaries and journals was a popular hobby at that time for outsiders. Mrs. Smith uses this to denote differences in outsiders to insiders for most insiders used oral histories for few had formal education so oral storytelling was the norm.

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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The insiders' stories are meant to be passed on and heard by many, while Richard's written journal was only for himself. Literary critic Ben Jennings, has commented on the linguistic aspects of *Oral History*. He notes that Richard Burlage's written narrative was specifically chosen by Mrs. Smith to represent a literate culture and she has skillfully captured "his rationalism; his pretentious, mannered diction; yet also his romantic temperament, his sense of being engaged in a grand romantic adventure" (12). However, the outsider literate culture Richard Burlage is part of hinders him in truly "seeing" the people, culture, and mountains of Appalachia. As Paula Eckard notes, "Burlage's immersion in the written tradition of father speech, keeps him from fully experiencing the life and rhythms of the mountains" (123).

Since Richard Burlage's narrative is being written down in his journal for his own benefit to help him as he seeks answers it should be read as credible. Because the journal is written only for him, Richard does not have to hide or temper his thoughts or opinions. An example I would like to note as an example of this is when he saw a girl on the road he jotted down what he really thought but would not dare say outloud, "She was hideous" (Smith 112). Mrs. Smith deliberately creates Richard Burlage's written narrative to give honesty to the structure and focus on the true feelings of outsiders.

Instead of using his time and experiences in the Appalachian Region to face his disturbed past and find some sort of healing, "Burlage abandons his past and attempts to tap into memory and experiences that aren't legitimately his, but in fact belong to another people, place and culture" (Eckard 123). He becomes totally focused on one aspect of his experience there, Dory, which provides him only a temporary reprieve from the issues that brought him to Black Cove and an excuse to avoid reality. He is at the point of facing his past and started a new future when he sees Dory at the door of the church and reverts and closes the door to change. Writer and critic, Frank Soos in the article *Insiders and Outsiders: Point of View in Lee Smith's Oral History* wonders "whether Richard's obsession is with God or Dory Cantrell" (22). His relationship with Dory hinders and blinds him to any other insights he may have gathered from the region. He will leave Black Cove as limited and confused as when he came.

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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There is another aspect that contributed to Richard Burlage's failure to truly experience the region and that is his preconceived ideas about the region and people. He could never see himself living there or as one of them. He was crippled by his outsider mentality which gave him the idea he was above the people there and above Dory. The relationship was sincere for Dory but for Richard it was simply a temporary pleasure. He wrote arrogantly in his journal about Dory: "She is ignorant and largely uneducated; such a gap exists between us that it could never be truly bridged, not even by any attempt on my part to educate her" (Smith 136).

In the fourth section of the narrative structure, Sally Cantrell, who is one of Dory and Richard's daughters, is the prominent narrator. Sally is a character in the story who traveled outside of the region to marry a man she calls "Ding-a-ling". In the novel Sally describes her marriage to him, "He married me to save me, or so he said, and I married him because I wanted to be saved and make something of myself. Have a respectable life" (260). After a time Sally realized there was no love between them and she "didn't have to be saved anymore" (261). Sally returned to Black Cove and married Roy who she thinks is the perfect one for her. With Sally's narrative, Lee Smith again focuses on Dory.

I would like to point out that Lee Smith uses the narrative voice of Granny Younger in the structure to set up and fill in the historical background for the Cantrell family. Sally's narrative voice continues with providing the reader with the outcome of life events for the Cantrell family up to Dory being left behind by Richard Burlage, marrying Little Luther Wade, then taking her own life.

According to Suzanne Jones, Smith used Sally's voice to make the reader aware that problems arise when people romanticize a place because it is different. Richard had left Richmond in pursuit of healing from Appalachia, a place very different than his own home. However, Sally's narrative illustrates that the residents of Black Cove are also longing for a different place. "Hoot Owl Holler inhabitants are plagued with romantic notions too. And their yearnings fix themselves on the flatlands just as the flatlanders' longings often turn toward the mountains" (Jones 108). To both insiders and outsiders, a different place becomes the source of what their own home cannot give them (Brooks 13). Sally rejects the idea that her family is

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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cursed by Emmy harris and describes the curse as simply "being eat up with wanting something they haven't got" (Smith 235). In the narrative structure of the story the curse is presented to the reader with Almarine Cantrell "staring out beyond them hills" (21) as a young boy, and it ends with Pearl (Richard and Dory's daughter and Jennifer's mother) who did her best to "get away, to have a new life" (270).

Sally reveals to the reader that Dory took her own life when "She fell - or laid down - on the spur line, and the train cut off her head" (245). Author and critic, Dorothy Combs, writes that "Dory's death by train is a conflation of the industrial revolution and the ushering in of the age of technology with a continuing fall in the status of women" (73). We see Lee Smith repeats her images like the train taking Dory's life to refer to the past and present conflicts in the lives of the characters. Dory's death was the result of exposure to possible opportunities and dreams outside Hoot Owl Holler when Richard Burlage came into her life with his promises and stories. When this chance to pursue her dreams was ended by Richard leaving her behind and she was shunned by family and community, Dory was shattered. Paula Eckard writes that "Sally's narrative reveals how Dory was trapped between two worlds. Dory was drawn to the outside world introduced to her by Richard Burlage, and yet she was still firmly rooted in the landscape of the mountains" (124). Sally narrative continues by telling the reader that Dory had "a place inside her that was empty and we couldn't fill" (244). The empty place mentioned was her dreams and desire which were torn from her by those she trusted most.

The idea of dreams and longing continue through the story structure by the narrative voices of Dory's twin girls. Although twins, Pearl and Maggie were very different in their ideas of life as the color of their eyes. The novel speaks of Pearl as:

The worst one for wanting of all of us. And the biggest fool. You could see it in her eyes, pretty eyes, blue eyes, exactly the color and shape of Maggie's, but while Maggie's eyes were like a pool and it was restful looking into them, Pearl's eyes were glittery and jumped around they looked wet and kind of smeared" (241)

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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Pearl who was Jennifer's mother was always searching, never satisfied and never content. Sadly, Pearl died giving birth to a baby from an extramarital affair with one of her students.

The other twin, Maggie, was completely the opposite. Maggie has a sweet personality, always giving to others with never a hard word for anyone. She found happiness marrying a traveling minister and four children. Before her death, Maggie gave the gold earring hoops, that symbolized the curse of the Cantrell family, and gave them to Pearl. She knew Pearl had always wanted them. Rosalind B. Reilly suggests the meaning of the golden hoop earrings in the story, "The earrings are a talisman of the past that aids in its imaginative reconstruction. They inspire narrative history. They lock the would be historian in a cycle of questions that push the horizon of a knowable world into the realm of imagination and dream where life is perfect" (82).

Maggie was a giver instead of a taker in life and was able to adjust to new situations. I would like to mention here that Maggie and Sally were the only two characters of the Cantrell family who were successful in leaving and returning to the mountains and they lived a life happy and content.

Other family characters are introduced in the structure frame to the reader with their lives and thoughts revealed in detail. This strengthens the concepts of dreams, leaving and adjusting to life outside of the mountains which is an important theme throughout the novel.

One of the minor characters was, Lewis Ray, Dory and Luther Wade's son, who abandoned his family and left the Appalachian region. He did not even return for the funeral of Pearl. Lee Smith uses his action to show how some use forgetting the past as a coping device. Billy, their other son, who was ashamed of his family of the mountains, moved away. He thought to leave the past behind and reach his dreams by marrying above his own status. Billy met and married a doctor's daughter. This does not seem a bad idea but his wife and her family never truly accepted him or where he was from. Sadly for Billy, he lived his life trying to impress them and gain their approval and when this failed his marriage ended in divorce and he suffered an emotional breakdown. Lee Smith used his character as a way to show that most who



## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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try to leave the region and forget where they came from face complications and disappointments.

In her thesis, *Who Belongs? Insiders and Outsiders in Lee Smith's Oral History*, Bridget Robinson argues that his motives for marriage, or the pursuing of a different life, were inauthentic and this misfortune surfaces when Pearl's student, Donnie Osbourne, comes to Black Cove and "takes out his father's pistol and shoots him point blank in the face" (Smith 275). Sally attempts to explain this odd death, "Now, who knows what Donnie Osbourne thought? Some said he was jealous, and had got it in mind that the baby was Billy's despite the fact he was Pearl's brother, not his and who knows it might have been?" (275), but comes to the conclusion that "When you get right down to it, who knows? Life is a mystery and that's a fact" (275). Almarine II, Ora Mae and Luther Wade's son born after Dory's suicide, has also been caught up in his dreams, but never really tried to pursue them. His biggest leap was joining the Amway business. He is always asking, "Tell me your dreams," (278) but never truly pursuing his own. Almarine's selling of soap with his company was an attempt to become rich but it was not a successful means to fulfilling his own dreams. When Dory failed to feel as if she belonged in her own community, her whole family was affected.

After Pricey Jane's death, another character, Rose Hibbits stays with Almarine to help take care of him and Dory. Rose is a person who has never been blessed with good looks, and has therefore felt like an "other" from a very young age. Although she stays with Almarine and does all his chores for him, he never pays her any attention. She is hurt by this and often runs from the cabin crying. Then one day Almarine's brother's wife, Vashti, appears on the cabin porch after her husband has been killed. She takes over the household chores, and eventually takes over as Almarine's wife and also bears him another son, Isadore. Rose is sent away and feels even more like an "other" than she ever has.

After Almarine asks Rose to leave she spreads the story that Hoot Owl Holler is cursed and Almarine asked her to stay but she would not because it was cursed. Rose tells the community that: "Hit's a curse on the whole holler and I ain't having any part of it. Almarine has done tole me hissself. That witch she put it on" (87). At first Rose seems an unimportant

character voice to the reader, but she has an important part in the plot and narrative structure of the novel. Her actions and voice combine with those of Granny Younger to strengthen the idea of a curse. They are responsible for the "curse" that will continue to haunt and destroy the Cantrell family.

The idea of a curse symbolizes the idea of true longing for what cannot be obtained. As I have previously written in this paper it is the main theme of the novel, the sense of not belonging and longing for something more. As we listen to the voice of Rose, we see a woman who feels like an outsider within her own community. This causes her to react irrationally and oddly in some life situations. It is revealed to the reader in the words of another character Jink Cantrell, Dory's younger brother, that Rose is actually mentally ill, or "touched" as the Appalachian people say. He tells the reader in his narrative that, "Rose Hibbits started talking out loud to herself then, the wildest stuff you ever heard....'It was a phone call from hell,' said Old Rose" (199). Rose's mental madness may create in the mind of the reader doubt about her accuracy in spite of their interest in the curse. Lee Smith uses her narrative and her slight madness in the narrative structure to build on the mysteriousness of region and its culture as well as curiosity in the reader to discover its secrets.

#### **2.4. History, Culture and Setting in Oral History**

The novel, *Oral History*, covers the time span of about 100 years of historical and cultural aspects of the Cantrell family in Black Cove in the Appalachian Mountains. Lee Smith through her skill as a writer and a native of the region accurately gives the reader a window into their world, culture and history. The culture of Appalachia is unique and reflects a variety of aspects from those who immigrated to the region throughout its history. It is mostly conservative with focus on God, family and community and suspicious natures toward outsiders and things they do not understand.

I would like to expand more about the historical and cultural influences and changes that have occurred in the last 30 years in regions of the Southern United States. Historical fiction of the American South has seen a major change occurring in the past 30 years. Notable and

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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common features of these historical novels have been: 1) a focus on aspects of everyday life, particularly on the family, or the past, 2) an increase in the number of female authors; 3) a strong usage of traditional Southern storytelling modes like: oral forms of narrative, journals, letters, or folk songs; and 4) considered the most important: the usage of multi-voice or perspective in the narrative structure. Lee Smith is considered one of the outstanding leaders during this time. Other well-known Southern writers are: Jayne Anne Phillips for her novel, *Machine Dreams*, Anne Tylers for her novel, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, and Kaye Gibbon for her novel, *A Cure for Dreams*, as well as many others.

To fully understand the changes in the past 25 to 30 years in Southern writing, it is important to have a short look at few features of the South as a distinct region in the United States. There is a quotation from W. J. Cash's classic study called, *The Mind of the South*, which refers to the southern regions as being very distinct from other regions in the United States. "The South is another land, sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation. That it is different and that it is solid — on these things nearly everybody is agreed" (41).

There are many well-known features of the South and the Southerner, but one that is very important is the affinity to tell stories. As Lee Smith has stated: "We just have a narrative approach to life. It's like everything is a story, I mean even things somebody from Ohio, say, would not even bother to mention, much less think it was a story" (Hood, Smith, and Wilson 306). The skill and tradition of storytelling has been very influential in Southern literature. However, the one distinct factor which establishes regional Southern identity is the unique historical development that separates the South from the rest of the United States.

The most traumatic event in Southern history was the defeat in the Civil War against the North. It resulted in the destruction of the Old South's social order and a traumatic impact on southern family structures. After the war was over the realities of Southern history were hidden or covered by myth in Southern literary works. The South was so badly traumatized by the war it did not see a noticeable normalcy until around the time of World War I. This time in literary works by Southern writers is called the Southern Renaissance (MacKethan 45).

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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In literary works during this time writers wrote about what they knew: their troubles, families, traditions. Especially we see a marked increase in female writers in the South for since the Civil War women had been the ones to help in the rebuilding of families and social order. This position they had, gave them a rich source of material for writing. Authors made use of oral traditions and storytelling as a means of transmitting history, and they usually used the family or home as a setting. In writing in this fashion they aligned themselves with the tradition of Southern literature and at the same time they were tools in changing literary traditions to fit the needs of the present. Contemporary Southern female authors have been able to combine their heritage of postmodernism with the contemporary requirements (MacKethan 49).

Lee Smith, in writing *Oral History*, seems to be mainly focused on telling the truth of the past, preserving a culture and languages and sharing the life and effects of history on women of the Appalachian region. In *Oral History*, social, family and traditions of the Appalachian Mountains are experienced by the reader while the advent of postmodern American mass culture threatens to destroy the indigenous mountain culture. Mrs. Smith includes 3 contrasting historical aspects of this region: 1) the written, academic perspectives of outsiders like Jennifer and her notebook project and Richard Burlage's journal, 2) the folksongs and oral stories of the mountain people, and 3) the comical and cartoonish version created by American popular culture and commercialism.

Jennifer as most outsiders realized there was more to the historical past of the region and themselves but was unable to grasp it. As she said,

One feels that the true benefit of this trip may derive not from what is recorded or not recorded by the tape now spinning in that empty room above me, but from my new knowledge of my heritage and a new appreciation of these colorful, interesting folk. My roots. I think this is why Dr. Bernie Ripman urged me from the beginning to choose this as my oral history project: he wanted me to expand my consciousness, my tolerance, my depth. (Smith 8)

Jennifer's clichéd words show clearly that she has no idea of or understanding of what she has seen or learned. She seems not to notice the satellite dishes, the movie magazines or the

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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ironic comments of her relatives. Instead she blinds herself and maintains her clichés about identity, her roots, the past and her family in the mountains. Even when she is faced with some harsh words and truths at the end of the novel, she still puts up a wall to truth in her mind. Jennifer is a good example of why the construction of subjectivity through the historical events simply fails in her case.

Lee Smith seems to value the oral histories and traditions as being a more authentic and unprejudiced way to know and preserve the past. They are a combination of perspectives and experiences which give us a more accurate and convincing view of the past than the narrow sighted and inaccurate views of those such as Richard Burlage and Jennifer Bingham. But even these narratives often contradict each other and almost always show the inability of one particular person to know the whole story, as the multi perspective helps to accentuate.

Interest in the Appalachian Region, its culture, and literature by academic and literary groups has markedly changed and grown in decades. Writings with colorful characters, language and cultural settings such as the works of Lee Smith have gained a surprised delight, respect and admiration for the people and their culture.

Lee Smith skillfully includes the different layers and worlds of her working class characters. In most of her writings they display characteristics and elements of the simpler mountain culture, along with the more modern professionals and merchants seen in mountain towns. They also include the well-educated and somewhat wealthy outsiders which come in contact with the region. The Mountain class structures and social status is a strong influence on the characters and their life experiences in Lee Smith's writings. Mrs. Smith relates in her text the difficulty many have maintaining their place in the mountain culture after they become more educated or financially secure. It is a difficult balancing act for most and results in inner turmoil. The reader sees this conflict in some of the characters in Mrs. Smith's novels. Mrs. Smith includes a few characters in her works who choose to keep elements of their mountain life and culture after finding financial success and have adapted to city life. This action by Mrs. Smith suggest that even when insiders are pushed by necessity and poverty to seek elsewhere, after finding financial success they seek, they choose to return to the mountain life .

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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History and the culture of the region are very evident throughout *Oral History*. Lee Smith wants the reader to learn about and know the importance of traditions and the past to the people and its culture. She does this skillfully as a writer in the narratives of her multi layered narratives and varied character personalities. The first and most notable character is Granny Younger. Granny is the community medicine woman, midwife and elder. She is the one the community looks to for healing and wisdom. Mrs. Smith uses Granny to provide the historical and traditional aspects of the community as well as the Cantrell family. As one reads Granny Younger's narrative it is clear from the start that she is greatly influenced by traditional things of the past such as: folk tales, oral histories, mythology and a suspicion and wariness of witchcraft. It is precisely Lee Smith's usage of these elements in the narrative which make Granny such an interesting and powerful character in the novel. Under Mrs. Smith's writing pen the old world of the Appalachia Mountain clans, the blood feuds, dulcimers and fiddles, quilting parties and barn raisings give a magical life to Granny's speech.

The last oral narrator in the novel is Sally. She is a sensible and down to earth person who tries to be objective about her family's history. However, it is too difficult for her to grasp the whole truth of the situation as she says "I'll start at the beginning, I said, which I did, and although I told it the best I could, I'm still not sure I got it straight" (Smith 240). Recanting the past and understanding past events is always difficult as she attempts with, "I can see I'll have to start again. It's hard, you know, to find the beginning. This is not it either, of course nothing ever is but this is where we'll start" (250).

I think that Lee Smith is not only revealing oral and written forms of history and their impact and importance, but also a third form which is mass commercial. She reveals this form lacking historical consciousness and shallow by telling us of "Al's grandest plan yet: Ghostland, the wildly successful theme park and recreation area (campground, motel, Olympic-size pool, waterslide and gift shop in Hoot Owl Holler" (291-92). Al's Ghostland project marks the end of the traditional storytelling and the betrayal or perversion of the family heritage. Such a project would be a superficial consumer product and turn the area and its history into a spectacle for profit. *Oral History* ends with the reader seeing a possible blending of cultures in

the worst of ways, building a cheap commercial project. Mrs. Smith tells the reader there is hope that the past will not be forgotten by the passage: “the old homeplace still stands, smack in the middle of Ghostland, untouched” (292). Lee Smith, I think is sending the reader a message that the traditions of the past, the history of people, place and culture are worth preserving as a valued treasure.

## **2.5. Tone and Language in Oral History**

In this section I will discuss how Lee Smith used tone and language to create in the reader apathy and understanding of the hard life and struggles of most Appalachian people. In her story line she shares in detail and repeatedly, their efforts and failures and their never ending search for something better for their lives. As she reveals stories from the Cantrell’s past, the reader hears of lives hurt and destroyed by life or character actions, such as the treatment of Dory by Richard; and how it affected the family for years after, thus bringing about the idea of a family curse.

Almarine Cantrell, who I have mentioned previously in this paper and would like to provide some additional information here had a great impact on the tone set by the characters in the novel. His heartless actions toward Rose Hibbits and Emmy Harris and reactions set the tone for the novel so I would like to expand on his history. The family story tells he inherited his father’s house and property near the end of the nineteenth century and while living there met and became infatuated with the red haired Emmy Harris. She and her abusive father live alone high on the mountain. Local gossip said he sold her as a baby to the devil. After a time, Almarine threw her out after listening to the local gossip and being suspicious in nature. He then married Pricey Jane, a sweet soul whose origins were almost as mysterious as those of Emmy Harris. They were content until the marriage ended in tragedy. Being an outsider, Pricey Jane did not know to not drink dew poison milk, resulting in the death of her son as well as her own. Overcome with grief and rage, Almarine sought a scape goat and blamed Emmy. He chased after her into the mountain and his family stories say his revenge by murdering Red Emmy caused their family curse for generations. After he rejected Rose Hibbits her anger at this reinforced the curse story with locals.

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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The storyline in *Oral History* proceeds to trace this legacy of violence and disaster through succeeding generations by means of a kind of incremental revelation. The dark and hopeless sense in tone is carried throughout the novel and presented through points of view that shift from first person to third person voices.

Once again, Mrs. Smith reiterates the power of oral language by highlighting the fact that Sally and her first husband's inability to talk with each other was a major problem with their marriage, while the conversation she and Roy share is one of the best things about their marriage.

Writer and critic, Ben Jennings, tells us that Lee Smith captures in the voice of Granny “the imaginative diction and metaphorical playfulness, as well as the paratactic style of the vernacular in oral history” as well as “recreating an authentic nineteenth century Appalachian dialect”. (13) Granny also tells the reader that the truth is not always what they wish to hear and warns that her perspective will be biased.

The usage of language in *Oral History* by Lee Smith is what makes the story come alive. She skillfully uses character voices in oral and written form. Uniquely, Richard Burlage’s voice is presented through his journals in written form. By using form alone, Mrs. Smith is presenting yet another difference between the insiders of this region and outsiders (Brooks 15). The insiders' stories represent the traditional oral histories and are meant to be passed on and heard. Richard's story is written in a journal for only himself to read and know of. Ben Jennings, is a linguistic critic has commented on the linguistic aspects of *Oral History*. He writes that it is appropriate for Richard's narrative to be in written form for he represents a literate culture. This was the intent of Lee Smith in her creating his character and has captured, "his rationalism; his pretentious, mannered diction; yet also his romantic temperament, his sense of being engaged in a grand romantic adventure" (12). Sadly for Richard Burlage, the literate culture he represents hinders him in his quest for a new life in Black Cove. Paula Eckard notes, "Burlage's immersion in the written tradition of 'father speech,' keeps him from fully experiencing the life and rhythms of the mountains" (123).



Another writer, Corrine Dale, in "*The Power of Language in Lee Smith's Oral History*" explores Smith's use of language to create a distinct view of Appalachia for her readers. Dale states that Richard Burlage explains his experience through the use of metaphors drawn from his university education. It is only in moments of complete ecstasy in the arms of Dory that the barriers between Burlage and the mountain culture disappear if only briefly. The father's speech of literate culture cripples Richard Burlage's ability to understand and appreciate the mountain culture, as it also creates an aura of mistrust and often dislike around him with readers and other characters in *Black Cove*.

## **2.6. The Characters of Oral History**

The characters in *Oral History* are developed by Mrs. Smith with the usage of the first and third person voices. Each character adds a distinctive perspective and fills a niche in the complex web of Appalachian society. Mrs. Smith gives her characters distinct dialects and grammar which accurately reflect the mountain environment in which they live and interact. As the characters emerge and interact with others in the plot and storyline, a mental image in the reader's mind of the people, region, and culture begins to appear. Appalachia becomes a real place and the lives, interactions and voices of the characters build on that image, thus resulting in the realization by each reader a perception of the region and its minority. Each reader then reviews his or her past idea or stereotyping of the region. Lee Smith wished that each reader to discover for themselves the truth about the region, people, culture as they read her novel (Brooks 16).

I would like to share more about the mindset and influences which provided Lee Smith with such a rich pool of imagination from which to create and build her characters, their narratives and the story line. Growing up in the Appalachian region along with her experiences of life in the outside world, author Lee Smith had a rich store house of experiences and knowledge to use in creating her characters and sharing the traditions, oral history and culture she holds dear in an accurate and rich text using the colorful traditional dialect.

Her imagination tends to work in patterns of repeating characters, which reflects the stock characters of the mountain literary tradition but incorporates types from other sources and from the popular image of Appalachia as well. Further, the repeating patterns of characters in her texts may owe as much to oral folktales, with working class connotations, and middle class ethnographies, as to the middle and upper class perspectives of the mountain literary tradition. Smith's difference from her typical subjects is clear, but her connections to them are constantly shifting, depending on the class perspective of the source material she adopts and her use of it.

Lee Smith utilized imaginative images of Appalachia taken from the mountain literary tradition, academic resources and the popular imaginations. She reflects popular and elite class attitudes towards the region, as well as, the working class and popular forms. These varied views helped her to see and share with her readers a balanced view of the region.

As I have shared earlier in the narrative voices section of the novel, the reader finds four main characters in *Oral History* introduced into the story line. The first heard is Jennifer Bingham, daughter of Pearl arriving at Black Cove for the first time to meet and record a college project on her family's oral history. Lee Smith used Jennifer's character to introduce to the reader the Appalachian region from a third person outsiders' perspective. Jennifer has never met or known her relatives from Black Cove so she has only an outsider's view of them. This preconceived view creates a tension between them and mistrust. This idea of identity, place and belonging was carried throughout the novel.

The second and most interesting voice in the novel is that of Granny Younger. She reveals in her narrative voice four generations beginning in the early 1900's, of the complicated and detailed history of the Cantrell family.

Literary critic, Frank Soos, tells us that, "Lee Smith has Granny serve up plenty of folk wisdom, old remedies, tall tales, straight historical accuracies about the way people lived in turn of the century Appalachia" (20). Mrs. Smith makes Granny Younger's narrative voice frank and clear as it reveals harsh details to the reader. It is important for the reader to be aware and develop a deeper understanding and acceptance of the regional culture, a culture which has

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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struggled to survive and from necessity lived close to the land. With this revelation by the reader an understanding of centuries old stereotypes will be replaced with truth (Brooks 18).

Through skillful writing and firsthand knowledge, Lee Smith is able to include details of the minority mountain traditions so that the reader understands and sees that though different and sometimes odd the Appalachian culture and way of thinking is not less intelligent, ignorant, or backwards. The character voice of Granny Younger is used by Lee Smith as a major tool in creating to the reader a positive mental picture of this minority way of life, which is rich with traditions and has maintained a harmony with the environment.

Lee Smith makes Granny Younger's voice strong, clear and rich with the oral traditions, histories and suspicions prevalent to the region. These characteristics of her narrative make the reader eager to learn more. Her narrative voice and character is solid and frank, always ready to share with anyone who will listen, such as: "I know moren you know and mought be I tell you moren you want to hear. I'll tell you a story that's truer than true, and nothing so true is so pretty. It's blood on the moon, as I said. The way I tell a story is the way I want to, and iffen you mislike it, you don't have to hear" (Smith 27-28). The usage by Lee Smith of the Appalachian past with its clans, superstitions, blood feuds, music, barn raisings and distinct dialects make Granny and the region come alive to the reader.

The third main character is created by Lee Smith as presented in the narrative section of this paper is Richard Burlage. Although not as interesting or strong a character as Granny Younger he is an important part of the story frame. His character is first introduced to the reader in book two and is important in showing an outsider's preconceived view of the region and his interaction with its culture. Also, he and Jennifer Bingham, are examples of outsiders who lack the ability or motivation sincerely understand the Appalachian culture and its people because they cannot get past their past negative stereotypes of the region.

The character Richard Burlage is noted for his striking contrast to the other insider mountain characters. He is a school teacher from Richmond traveling to the Appalachian region with grand hopes of educating and modernizing the population there as he hopes to

reinvent himself. As with most outsiders, Richard is ignorant to the hardships facing the people of the mountains or the reasons for the seemingly odd life style which is a must to survive. Because of his strong outsider misconceptions he cannot relate or understand Dory or her culture which leads him to failure again and with his relationship with Dory.

Richard Burlage's arrogance and lasting outside stereotyping for the region is made clear in the book in his daily journal entries. In one entry he expresses his feelings of superiority to the mountain people because he has knowledge of the outside world and a higher education, "I saw myself then in her eyes as some superior being from another place, with a fund of knowledge beyond her ken. Thus I realized how I must seem to her. I understood my position and my responsibility" (Smith 130). His character is used by Lee Smith to reiterate the strength and lasting stereotypes that remain even after people have lived and experienced the culture (Brooks 15).

Sally Cantrell is the last insider oral narrator and is very different in her outlook on life and the region. She has a common sense approach to Appalachian life and her family's history. But even with her common sense approach, Sally finds some aspects inexplicable and out of her control. "I'll start at the beginning," I said, which I did, and although I told it the best I could, I'm still not sure I got it straight" (240) and another thought by her, "I can see I'll have to start again. It's hard, you know, to find the beginning. This is not it either, of course — nothing ever is — but this is where we'll start" (250).

Along with contrasting oral and written histories, Lee Smith also reveals to the reader the sad mass commercial culture that erodes and destroys history consciousness and truth. This is portrayed in *Oral History* by "Al's grandest plan yet: Ghostland, the wildly successful theme park and recreation area (campground, motel, Olympic-size pool, waterslide and gift shop) in Hoot Owl Holler" (291-92). This theme park project is a blending of cultures in a terrible way which signals the end of tradition storytelling, turning family heritage into a consumer product, and history into a cheap spectacle for cash. Mrs. Smith leaves the reader with a glimmer of hope that the destruction of traditional histories will not totally happen with "the old homeplace still stands, smack in the middle of ghostland, untouched" (292).

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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As the reader reads the novel it becomes apparent that the character Dory is the center of the novel's mystery. Richard and Dory Cantrell's emerging relationship centers on a mutual desire for the unknown. For Richard, Dory had an "otherworldly quality about her" (118). She represented everything he had never known; she was different than any woman he had ever met. According to Ben Jennings, Richard believes that "Dory is mystically beautiful, open and unaffected, and uninhibited in her sexuality. In contrast to the coquettishness of upper-class women in Richmond" (13).

To Dory, Richard represented the world she had only dreamed of beyond the mountain holler where she lived. Along with her attraction to him she saw with him the possibility of leaving Hoot Owl Holler. This is one reason she continually asked him to repeat his plan to take her with him to Richmond on the train and have a life together. She never tired of hearing this story, and even in their last moments together the fantasy notion is what she asked him to tell her.

Dory Cantrell saw in Richard Burlage a window to the outside world and a way of escape. She believed his words and the fantasy long after he had left her behind. When she stopped believing it, she could not accept that it has all been a lie and took her own life.

Richard Burlage planned to use his experiences in the Appalachian region to face his problematic past and find healing, "Burlage abandons it [his past] and attempts to tap into memory and experiences that aren't legitimately his, but in fact belong to another people, place and culture" (Eckard 123). Richard becomes so involved in his relationship with Dory he fails to see the reality of the region and change himself or his opinion of it (Brooks 16). Writer Frank Soos in the article "*Insiders and Outsiders: Point of View in Lee Smith's Oral History*" questions "whether his [Richard's] obsession is with God or Dory Cantrell" (22). He finds Dory to be his ultimate experience in Appalachia because he finds her naïve, beautiful, and exciting. His infatuation hinders any insight he may have developed for change and his view remains as limited as the day he arrived.

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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Richard never learns to appreciate the importance of the knowledge those who live in the region possess. Even though he creates this story to tell Dory about taking her home to his family, he is never able to see Dory physically outside of the region. Richard notes, "I try to imagine taking Dory to a picture show, walking along a sidewalk with her, as we did tonight, yet she seems to exist for me only in that shadowy setting—those three mountain, that closed valley—whence she came" (Smith 148). He is never able to visualize Dory and himself together in his fancy world of Richmond. Therefore, he ultimately returns to Richmond and leaves Dory behind, pregnant with twins (he is unaware of the pregnancy) in Hoot Owl Holler. Richard, "who had intended to serve Appalachia" (Jones 107), has instead come into the land, entered into a relationship with Dory, and left her pregnant with twins; "Appalachia has served him" (Jones 107). His abandonment is unintentional; Richard attempts to contact Dory through a letter and asks her to join him, but this letter goes purposefully undelivered by Dory's step sister Ora Mae in an attempt to protect Dory. The failure of Richard's request to reach Dory illustrates the limitations of written language and life outside of Appalachia (Dale 188).

With this episode, Smith shows the importance of oral communication within the Appalachian region, and how patriarchal literate culture can actually be hindering within the region.

The writing mastery of Lee Smith becomes more apparent as she expands on historical aspects. She is not only contrasting oral and written records of history, but shares with the reader a modern commercial culture that ignores historical facts for profits. The theme park idea by Uncle Al is her example of this. It was "Al's grandest plan yet: Ghostland, the wildly successful theme park and recreation area (campground, motel, Olympic-size pool, waterslide and gift shop) in Hoot Owl Holler" (Smith 291-92). A project such as this signals the end of oral storytelling traditions, the destruction of family heritages and turning it into nothing but a money making spectacle.

Lee Smith ends *Oral History* with the skillful blending of her character voices with the traditional inside cultures with the commercial and cheap imitation of the outside. I must add here that Mrs. Smith does leave the reader with a glimmer of hope in the people and region in

her words that “the old homeplace still stands, smack in the middle of Ghostland, untouched” (292).

### **2.7. Commentary on Oral History Narrative**

Lee Smith uses multiple narrators which allow the reader a view of Appalachia perceived by outsiders, as well as, insider’s point of view (Brooks 10). This narrative strategy used by Smith creates place, shows the process of othering in cultures and also gives a look into the power of belonging somewhere and its impact on identity formation. Every character in the novel, regardless of their sex or community status, is seeking or dreaming of something more than the familiar. They all appear to be searching for the place to which they belong or something better than their present condition. This yearning and searching is mentioned by post-modern critic Bonnie Winsbro in her article, *A Witch and Her Curse: External Definition and Uncrossable Boundaries in Lee Smith’s Oral History*. Mrs. Winsbro describes the searching and dreaming as “the curse of desiring an alternative way of life that.....they are powerless to attain” (46). The characters in *Oral History* are united by this factor as they share their narrative thoughts and dreams with the readers. Even with this common thread among the characters there are definite distinctions between the voices. Mrs. Smith’s skillful usage of insider and outsider narratives brings focus on the idea of belonging to something or somewhere. The deliberate limitation of Dory Cantrell’s narrative voice seems to cast her as an outsider within her own family and hometown of Black Cove.

In her novel, *Oral History*, writer Lee Smith builds a window into the Appalachian culture and the lives and minds of its people. She achieves overturning the conventional notions and stereotyping. Lee Smith begins her novel with a focus on stereotyping and the inner turmoil of native born who are drawn to the outside world and seek to find their place in it. The plot centers Jennifer Bingham, who was drawn to the mountains to meet her kin, seek the truth of her past and hear and record regional stories.

Unfortunately, Jennifer never gains a true insight or understanding of her family or the region from her interaction with her family. This occurs in part because Jennifer, like most

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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Americans, cannot get past the false cartoon images of people in the Appalachia region seen in literature and popular media (Brooks 3). Skillfully written by Lee Smith, *Oral History* is a compelling illustration of the beauty, culture, and importance of people in Appalachia. Mrs. Smith uses the positive aspects of the region to provide an alternate perspective of mountain life than offered by the traditional false images. She uses the Jennifer Bingham character, along with the teacher, Richard Burlage, to provide a sample of how the outsiders have a negative mindset before they ever visit or know of the mountain culture.

In the story, both Jennifer and Richard bring negative stereotyping with them which were formed almost entirely on the writings from outside by sources that were uninformed and unreliable (Brooks 4). According to the book titled, *Backtalk from Appalachia*, written by Dwight Billings, tells us that Jennifer and Richard's image of mountain people coincides/conflicts with the local-color writers who came earlier because the persistent belief in Appalachian distinctiveness thus results from a persistent way of writing about the mountain region rather than from the regions' actual past (Billings 12).

Interest and views of the Appalachian Region by the academic and literary circles has increased and changed in recent decades. Focus on the colorful characters and cultural settings found in such fiction writings as Lee Smith has gained fascination, respect and admiration for the region and its people. Mrs. Smith skillfully shares the different worlds of her working class characters, who typically display overt elements of mountain culture with her more modernized professionals and merchants in mountain towns and her well-educated and relatively wealthy outsiders. Mountain class structures and social status strongly influence Mrs. Smith's characters and the difficulties in life in the region. Smith's characters often have a difficult time maintaining their place in the mountain culture as they become more educated or financially secure. This suggests a complex class association and inner turmoil that occurs when trying to adjust or change it to find balance with the outside world. Mrs. Smith addresses this inner conflict in some of her characters. Some of Mrs. Smith's characters choose to retain elements of their mountain culture, though they have the financial means to change or adapt to a town



## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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lifestyle. This suggests that while the holler culture is often based in financial necessity and poverty, Mrs. Smith realizes it a distinct lifestyle that some may chose as their culture.

In his publication titled, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*, Fred Hobson first stated that the novel, *Oral History*, is very much a novel about culture and closes by arguing that the book, despite itself, is very much a statement about class. The complicated relationship between classes and culture has been difficult for many Appalachian writers not only Lee Smith. The difference with the fiction writings of Mrs. Smith is that she acknowledges the complex relationships between class, culture, and status that both limits and empowers her characters.

When Lee Smith published, *Oral History* in 1983, it established her reputation as an Appalachian writer. The novel's tragic love story of the mountain girl, Dory Cantrell, and the teacher, Richard Burlage, develops the story of an ill-fated romance between a sophisticated teacher from outside the mountains and a simple mountain girl. Fred Hobson points out that it is important to note the strong influence that social class has on Burlage's relationship to the community where he teaches, his interaction with the people, and his relationship with the girl he loves. A blue blooded, aristocrat from Richmond, Virginia, Richard Burlage came to the backward mountains to find himself, God and hoping to help the students in the mountains as their teacher. His class difference and being an outsider to the region greatly impacted his relationship with both Dory Cantrell and the people of the mountains. When Burlage first struggles with the feelings he develops for Dory, his tries to reason with himself that such a relationship could never work because she is not of my social class. Dory has no idea Burlage thinks she is socially inferior and trusts him fully with her heart. Richard Burlage shares passion with Dory, but he never allows himself to seriously and fully commit to Dory or their relationship. Dory is fully committed to him, their relationship, their future, and trusts him. In the book, Burlage makes plans with Dory for the train to take them away to a new life together outside the mountains. However, he does not put the effort needed to take her with him. Lee Smith paints a very clear and compelling point that social class and culture divides the native mountain people from the outsider characters.

## *Chapter Two: Narrative Analysis of Oral History*

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Oral History is the result of Lee Smith's life and research into mountain traditions, folklore, and ethnographies and her desire to use them in writings and preserve them. Mrs. Smith has said that Oral History came to life mainly from her extensive research:

I never felt like I wrote that [Oral History] anyway... I had never used research in anything I had written before. I kept asking my editor, who kept reassuring me, 'It's all right.' But I loved the folklore. I loved all the research. . . I just sat down and tried to find a form that would allow me to put as much of this in as I could. (Hill 7)

Throughout the text in *Oral History*, we read stories of hog-killings, moonshine, dew-poisoning, feuds, and granny cures. These kinds of things come from real mountain life. Lee Smith uses them to accurately document and share the realness of the Appalachian Region and culture through entertaining works of fiction. Her colorful and engaging stories and portrayal of life events of her characters cause the reader to see beyond quaint customs and picturesque scenery to the feelings and memories that enliven the landscape; the encounter with the stories of *Oral History*'s narrator moves the reader through and past expected stereotypes.

In his publication titled, "The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World", Fred Hobson first stated that the novel, *Oral History*, is very much a novel about culture and closes by arguing that the book, despite itself, is very much a statement about class (57). The complicated relationship between classes and culture has been difficult for many Appalachian writers not only Lee Smith. The difference with the fiction writings of Mrs. Smith is that she acknowledges the complex relationships between class, culture, and status that both limits and empowers her characters.

*Chapter Three*  
*Contextual Interpretations of*  
*Oral History*

### **3.1. Introduction**

In Section Five, the third chapter of my thesis I will give an interpretation on the various literary aspects of the novel *Oral History*, along with the purposes and goals of author Lee Smith in her writing of the novel.

Lee Smith, as a Southern Appalachian writer, has been successful in reaching an international audience, as well as, with the writing of *Oral History* having a positive impact on negative stereotyping of Appalachia. Literary critic, Harriette C. Buchanan writes that, "Lee Smith's settings are Southern, her interest in and ability for storytelling are Southern, but her characters and stories, because of their realism, even ordinariness, are universal" (324). Mrs. Smith has been praised and noted for her detail and accurate portrayal of Appalachian life. As discussed in previous sections of my paper, the narrative voices of the novel accurately provide to the reader a rendering of the Appalachian dialect in its true form and an insider's view into the rich culture. Most critics and reviews praise *Oral History* as Lee Smith's best work and it became a Book of the Month selection in 1983.

One strong purpose and goal of Lee Smith was to preserve and share the rich and unique dialect of the region, and inform readers of the truth of the culture and language of the Appalachian region. She did this skillfully in her colorful and interesting character narrative of Granny Younger, the community healer. We can see her personal thoughts and goals in her words from the following taken from her interview with me in Greensboro, North Carolina, USA:

The culture and the colorful language I grew up hearing and observing had always fascinated me. It was one of the main reasons that I wrote this book. I grew up in Grundy, Virginia which is a very small, remote coalmine town. When I was growing up everyone spoke like this...I was raised by mostly older people: my grandparents, my great aunts and uncles and so on. It was a big, huge family and a lot of them were older and they were all fabulous storytellers. I just loved the way they spoke and the way they used language. It seemed to me to be so much more colorful, just a beautiful form of expression. For instance, to say that a creek comes down the mountain, they would say "a creek comes down the

mountain and then turkey tails out in the bottom"; or to say, "a man has daddyed more children than anyone else in the county". I just love these very decorative and precise and beautiful forms of English. The main thing that spurred me to write this novel was to use this language in context as a way to preserve it. I think of myself as a fiction writer but also as a documentarian. I have been privileged to grow up and hear people who spoke like the characters in my book and to hear stories, histories, ballads and bits of folklore. I thought about how to preserve it a long time before I ever started to write. I really wanted to use the dialect in context and at first had a hard time doing it, but that was one of my main aims of the book.

As shown in the narrative voices and interactions of the novel's character, traditionally, the Appalachian region has been recognized as an area suspicious and wary of outsiders. Lee Smith skillfully shows this aspect in her character narratives and experiences of outsiders Jennifer Bingham and Richard Burlage in the novel. Richard notes in his journal, "For I am what they call a 'foreigner.' As they use it, this term does not necessarily refer to someone from another country, or even from another state, but simply to anybody who was not born in this area of the county" (Smith 125). Mrs. Smith also reveals to the reader that some individuals who are native can be viewed as "others" within their own communities.

In this section I will also explore Lee Smith's usage of the theme of belonging and searching for who they are and their place by the various characters in the novel. This is an accurate attribute seen in many native Appalachians and another element in the novel which gives an authenticity to the work.

### **3.2. *Oral History as a Celebration of Appalachian Culture and Language***

In writing her novel, Lee Smith gives her characters authentic and distinct dialects and grammar which reflect the varied environments from which they came. Her skillful writing greatly aids the reader in understanding and forming positive and accurate opinions of the region and its culture and Mrs. Smith is able to insert her love and joy to the reader in learning about the rich and colorful language of the region. Literary critic, Ben Jennings, in his article "Language and Reality in Lee Smith's *Oral History*," wrote

that Mrs. Smith used a varied perspective and that the “languages of the various characters provide much of the richness and originality of *Oral History*” (10).

Of her many literary endeavors, *Oral History* is Lee Smith’s most complex novel. It has interwoven narratives and authentic dialect and as I have previously written in this paper it covers over a hundred years and with thirteen different points of view. I wish to add that the thirteen multiple narrators in *Oral History*, most of whom live in or near Hoot Owl Holler in the West Virginia Mountains, demonstrate Lee Smith’s extraordinary knowledge of regional dialects and speech patterns used by the Appalachian mountain people. These regional dialects and voices reveal personalities and lives of the characters, and give life, irony and humor to the storyline. More importantly, they provide each reader an individual experience and view into the world of the Appalachian people. It is a world that is rich with traditions and peak the interest of many readers.

Lee Smith usage of regional language dialects propelled her into the mainstream when *Oral History* was published in 1983. With *Oral History* she became the literary queen of the new Southern regional movement. Peter Guralnick, writing in the “Los Angeles Times Magazine” in May 21, 1995, defined the movement as a "simultaneous embrace of past and present, this insistent chronicling of the small, heroic battles of the human spirit, a recognition of the dignity and absurdity of the commonplace. Lee Smith, he says “is the latest in a long line of Southerners who transform the region's voices and visions into quintessentially American novels.”(48) Guralnick suggested the writers of the movement though they have varied literary styles, like Lee Smith, write stories which have an exceptionally strong sense of place.

Lee Smith explains that, "in the South, sense of place implies who you are and what your family did. It's not just literally the physical surroundings, what stuff looks like. It's a whole sense of the past. Even if I write a short story, I have to make diagrams of what the character's house looks like and where the house is in relation to the town."(Coley 423) In fact, while writing *Oral History*, Lee Smith drew a map depicting not only the physical setting for the novel, but also the geographical relationship of all its characters.

Lee Smith's *Oral History* creates and develops a reality through intricate details of her characters and the impact of life within the Southern mountain communities of Appalachia (Brooks 2). Reinhold L. Hill, in his article, *These Stories Are Not Real, But They Are As True As I Can Make Them*, tells us that Lee Smith's ethnographic representations of Appalachian culture depicted in *Oral History*, are better representations of culture than standard academic ethnographies because they show the culture rather than merely writing it (106). Mrs. Smith captures the reader and brings them into the world of the mountain characters and culture to address and change the long-standing stereotypes of mountain people being ignorant, incestuous, and isolated peoples who hide out in the mountains of Appalachia (Brooks 2).

### **3.3 Oral History's Impact on Stereotyping and Cliché**

Lee Smith's novel, *Oral History*, has had a large and positive impact on the stereotyping of outsiders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before the publication of her novel, little of the truth about the rich and colorful culture and language was known outside the region. Dwight Billings notes that:

“the stereotypes seen in *Oral History* are not founded because if we examine the region's economic evolution from the perspective of rural nineteenth-century America it is clear that much of Appalachia was neither unusually isolated, physically or culturally, nor was its population uniformly more homogeneous than that of other sections of rural America” (22).

Another literary critic, Katie Algeo, agrees with the view of Billings concerning the people of the Appalachia Region, “Portions of Appalachia were well traveled, especially where mountain passes facilitated the trade routes that connected trans-Appalachian Kentucky and Tennessee with the East and South, bringing people, goods, and ideas through the mountains “(34).

It is surprising that inaccurate stereotyping by outsiders can still be found concerning this region, its people and its culture so, I would like to expand further here on thoughts in the late 1900s when the Appalachian Region saw a new kind of stereotyping appear. According to Sarah Brooks, writer and critic Suzanne Jones suggests that this

change and stereotyping was due to an era of global economic restructuring that brought insecurity, declining living standards, and cutbacks in benefits and protections to millions of Americans mountain people, it seems, were acceptable targets for hostility, projection, disparagement, scapegoating, and contempt. The new stereotypes portrayed the region as beautiful but behind the rest of the national culture and viewed as a region in great need of national attention in areas of economic growth and sophistication (101). The outside public was led to believe some writers and media that the simple mountain people and their culture were an embarrassment and obstacle to the American dream and national progress (Brooks 4).

A derogatory term appeared in the early 1900s across America. It portrayed the Southern mountain people as backward, ignorant, and primitive (Brooks 2). The term “hillbilly” has been described as one of the most lasting and pervasive images in American popular iconography found in the book, *Hillbilly* by Anthony Harkins. Unfairly, all of the population of the Appalachian Region was mislabeled with this derogatory term which describes a people who challenge the dominant trends of twentieth-century American life urbanization, the growing centrality of technology, and the resulting routinization of American life (4). In his book he uses the term “hillbilly” for people of Appalachia and are portrayed with the same traits such as: a poor diet, a hungry physical appearance with well-worn ill-fitting clothing and living in dilapidated houses in need of repair. In reality, these examples given are simply characteristics of the Appalachia people which show they were a hard working class with low pay and benefits.

This type of negative stereotyping of characters can be easily seen in modern media and have changed little throughout modern history. Other examples similar to those given by Harkins are: the shiftless wanderers and hunters, Grannies rocking and smoking corn cob pipes, and the tough, lanky, bearded mountain man with his gun, jug of moonshine and coon dog at his feet. Fortunately, in recent years there has been a growing number of writers who seek to enlighten readers to the truth and facts about the region and its colorful people. One such award winning writer is Lee Smith. In her novel *Oral*



*History*, she is skillful in informing the reader of the misconceptions and stereotyping of the Appalachian people and its culture throughout its history.

With her skills as a Southern writer Lee Smith creates the narrative story and turns the reader's focus on true Appalachian culture. By doing this Mrs. Smith seeks to overturn conventional misconceptions about the mountain people and replaces them with facts and truths.

In his book, *Backtalk from Appalachia*, Dwight Billings writes that "the outsider's image of Appalachian people follows the local-color writers of the past, for the persistent belief in Appalachian distinctiveness thus results from a persistent way of writing about the mountain region rather than from the regions' actual past"(12). Billings writes that the mountain people portrayed in stereotypes of an isolated and backward culture have no basis in fact for If we examine the region's economic evolution from the perspective of rural nineteenth-century America it is clear that much of Appalachia was neither unusually isolated, physically or culturally, nor was its population uniformly more homogeneous than that of other sections of rural America (22).

Sadly for the region and its people, the old derogatory stereotypes of the past continue to haunt Appalachia, even when they have been proven inaccurate and lacking (Brooks 5).

Lee Smith's novel *Oral History* enlightens the reader to the divide which exists between Appalachian people and the outside world, as it has been throughout the region's history. Mrs. Smith's writing skill in weaving intricate and personal details of her characters inside and outside of the region so the reader begins a new awareness and appreciation for its uniqueness. One of the purposes of Lee Smith in writing the novel was to deeply immerse the reader into the region and lives of the characters in *Oral History* so that many details of Appalachian life is revealed to the reader; and they are forced to face their own misconceptions and begin to form a new and correct view of the Appalachian culture.

*Oral History* is successful in reaching Lee Smith's goal and providing the reader an inside and outside perspective of Appalachian life (Brooks 3). This in turn provides a deeper and more accurate understanding of the Appalachian culture and the misconceptions are revealed. Suzanne Jones in her article, "*City Folks*," writes that Mrs. Smith utilizes "the perspectives of two outsiders, upper-class Richard Burlage from Richmond, and middle-class Jennifer Bingham from Abington, to examine the causes and consequences of typical twentieth-century perceptions of Appalachia" (102).

As I have previously explained in this paper Jennifer Bingham arrived to Hoot Owl Holler under the direction and interest of her college professor to collect information for a project on oral history and her desire to please him. She does not come to gain knowledge of or truth and results in, according to Suzanne Jones, "her preconceptions alter her perception. She sees in the mountain people exactly what her professor has encouraged her to see, and she collects information that she knows will impress him" (103). Jennifer is hindered by her set stereotyping of the region and her family from outside sources.

Lee Smith stresses throughout the novel on the readers' expectations of Appalachian's isolation and simplicity by "making sure that for every cotton quilt there is an aluminum lawn chair and for every log cabin here is a custom painted van" (Jones, 102). Mrs. Smith skillfully weaves and reveals to the reader that 20<sup>th</sup> century Appalachia is very similar to American culture throughout the country. Even if Appalachians hold on to their distinct traditions and culture, it is unfair and inaccurate to view them as backwards or static (Brooks 7).

To share this point with the reader, Lee Smith includes aspects of modern culture into the lives of the Hoot Owl Holler characters such as, Little Luther, Jennifer's grandfather, who is described by Jennifer as sitting in his porch swing wearing his "new suspenders," "cowboy boots" and "Western shirt with flowers on it" (Smith 13). Also Luther's son Al Cantrell and his wife Debra are said to have a "living room suite, which is Mediterranean" and "they do AmWay full time" (15). Usage of the Western theme in clothing and popular furniture styles ties the region to the outside population. Mrs. Smith further ties them to modern times by telling the clothing Debra is wearing, "pink knit

slacks, tight, and a black T-shirt with “Foxy Lady” written on it in silver glitter, her long yellow hair like a movie star” (14) and his two grandsons love to watch *Magnum PI* on television and the girls are playing with their *Charlie’s Angels* dolls. Mrs. Smith begins quickly in the story to address stereotyping then moves into the lives of the characters.

Jennifer’s arrival and observations of her family are not revealed to the reader until after the narrator has given the description we see above. With the descriptions presented, the reader can see this family is up to date and assimilated into mainstream American culture. Then Jennifer’s thoughts are revealed to the reader with her misconceptions and outside mindset: “Jennifer thinks it is just beautiful in this holler, so peaceful, like being in a time machine. It is so plainly wonderful ...And these people are so sweet, so simple, so kind... they are not backward at all” (Smith 16). She describes to the reader her thoughts which seem to mirror the writings of local-colorists a century before which was a condescending sentimental picture of people in a faraway land, not at all what reality of the region was.

Stereotyping is not innate; it is something all people must learn (Brooks 11). Lee Smith strives to reveal this to the reader in the words of Jennifer. Our ideas of things begin with what we learn from our parents. Jennifer had learned of her relatives in Hoot Owl Holler her parents, “all her life, she looked down on her real mother’s family, the way she was taught by her father and her step mother” (16). One time Jennifer had overheard her stepmother, Martha saying “how backward his first wife’s people were and how of course they’ve lost contact with them now. Her parents have moved out of their house because it was haunted. Haunted! In this day and age!” (17). Martha looks down on the family members in Hoot Owl Holler because they still believe in ghosts even though she does not know the reason why they feel this way or their history.

Neither Martha nor Jennifer understood the reason or accept this cultural tool. People living in the Appalachian region appreciate the supernatural. It has helped them to cope and explain things and events they did not understand. They have used it as a coping mechanism for complex and misunderstood events in their lives.

I would like to elaborate on how Lee Smith encourages her readers to step beyond the cultural boundary that Jennifer was unable to pass. She does this by giving the reader the stories of the Cantrell family, the oral history and mountain voices that “provide a corrective to Jennifer’s romantic notions for the reader if not for her” (Jones 104). We, the reader, hear several versions of the same story from different voices to “show us that the repeated transmission of the tale supports the belief and produces a legend that may make its way into family history” (Jones 106). The tales and beliefs that the reader is told in the story make the frame of the Cantrell family and Appalachian culture. Jennifer, as well as, Richard Burlage are incapable of hearing these stories due to their previously formed biases and close-mindedness.

According to Ben Jennings, Mrs. Smith captures in the voice of Granny Younger in book one, “the imaginative diction and metaphorical playfulness, as well as the paratactic style of the vernacular in oral history” as well as “recreating an authentic nineteenth century Appalachian dialect” (48). Granny Younger promises the reader to “tell you a story that’s truer than true, and nothing so true is so pretty. It’s blood on the moon, as I say. The way I tell a story is the way I want to, and iffen you mislike it, you don’t have to hear” (Smith 37). Granny warns the reader that the truth is not always the story one prefers to hear and also that her perspective is also biased. According to Frank Soos, “Lee Smith has Granny serve up plenty of folk wisdom, old remedies, tall tales, straight historical accuracies about the way people lived in turn of the century Appalachia” (20). She will not hold back on any harsh details, so that we can gain a deeper understanding and acceptance of their culture: “the life that Granny Younger describes is the hard struggle for survival of the subsistence farmers, who, of necessity, had to live close to the land. The community of Hoot Owl Holler as depicted here seems to be pre-literate, several miles by wagon trace from the closest crossroads store, a day’s journey from Black Rock, the county seat where the nearest school is” (Jennings 11).

Mrs. Smith includes the details of mountain traditions so that each reader can experience the region’s true culture and understand the belief systems (Brooks 15). Their culture is very different from the majority of America but this does not make them

backwards or static (Brooks 6). Jennings writes that “The world Granny Younger describes is one in which the rhythms of life are in harmony with the seasonal cycles. She articulates a folk aesthetic, an intuitive appreciation of the natural world” (12). Lee Smith uses the voice and knowledge of Granny Younger as a powerful and convincing tool to show this alternative way of life. A life that is rich with traditions and in tune with the environment.

Richard Burlage’s character, introduced in book two offers “us outsiders a chance to see what would happen to a test case, an outsider plunging into Granny’s world” (Soos, 21). He represents, like Jennifer, the inability and lack of motivation to understand Appalachia due to preconceived stereotypes of the region (Brooks 5). Burlage travels to Appalachia with the hopes of educating and modernizing the population, like so many before him. He begins his journey with noble and romantic ideas as we see written:

I intend for this journal to be a valid record of what I regard as essentially a pilgrimage, a simple geographical pilgrimage, yes, but also a pilgrimage back through time, a pilgrimage to a simpler era, back dare - I hope it—to the very roots of consciousness and belief. I make this pilgrimage fully aware of the august company I hereby join: all those pilgrims of yore who have sought, through their travels, a system of belief—who have, at the final destination, found also themselves. I seek no less, I seek no less. (Smith 97)

Ben Jennings believes that “Burlage’s journal is like a local color story written about the mountains. He tried to be open-minded and objective in dealing with the inhabitants of Hoot Owl Holler and their culture, but he is ultimately bound by his class prejudices and is forever astonished that “this mountain region is as stranger land than Richmond can conceive of” (13). Richard’s journal entries are full of stereotyped notions of the region and the people who live there.

Richard’s experiences in Appalachia reveal to the reader the inaccuracy of his preconceived ideas of his trip and the culture there (Brooks 6). What he actually discovers is the tradition of schoolteacher’s living in local homes with no privacy, strange food, and people wary of foreigners. He decides to live alone in the schoolhouse because “proximity to reality is not conducive to maintaining romantic illusions” (Jones 108). Richard avoids

seeing or discovering the culture or region as it truly is. His friend Aldous Rife corrects Richard's insensitive assumption:

I wouldn't be so quick to judge, young fellow, if I was you. Now you've been up to that holler, and you've seen how many folks Almarine Cantrell has got to feed. And you seen the land up there, and the hardships" (Smith 131). Richard, in fact, is ignorant to the hardships because his idealistic perspective prevents him from understanding either Dory or her mountain culture (Jones 109).

Richard's arrogance and feeling of superiority is evident when he says, "I saw myself then in her eyes as some superior being from another place, with a fund of knowledge beyond her ken. Thus I realized how I must seem to her. I understood my position and my responsibility" (Smith 130). It never occurs to Richard Burlage that his classroom education does not hold much weight in surviving the harsh conditions of mountain life. In the Appalachian Region traditionally the children have to help with work on the farm. The whole family must help to produce food and income. The children of the mountains do receive an education; it was just very different education from what Richard Burlage perceived as quality. In his character narrative he described his students as "wizened and already woebegone grownups who expect nothing more from life than the subsistence their parents have torn from these mountains" (Smith 116). Outsiders like Richard Burlage cannot understand that children of the mountains may wish to stay in the mountains because that is their life and where their family is.

Lee Smith reintroduces Richard at the end of book three to reiterate how strong and influential these mountain stereotypes are, even for outsiders who have lived within for many years and experienced their culture. Richard returns to Black Cove disguised as a photographer, believing himself to be "a new man, a confident man, so different from the boy who had left here ten years back" (Smith 217). Yet, he still cannot escape his idealized vision of Appalachia for he returns to "capture a bit of the past" (217). Frank Soos believes that Richard Burlage matures and comes full circle in his revelation, "Instead of seeking completeness through a confrontation with the mysterious, the

mystical, he now prefers to peek out from a viewfinder at the world. And his pictures distort as well as limit what he sees” (Soos 23).

Richard Burlage as with the character Jennifer Bingham, never stops to consider the effects he had on the people he came in contact with (Brooks12). “Richard, the man who had intended to serve Appalachia, makes it the subject of his art when he returns. Once again Appalachia serves him” (Jones 110). Both times he visited he profited from the people. This was used to reveal to the reader by Lee Smith, how throughout history the region and people have been taken advantage of and used to profit others.

### **3.4. Interview and Reflections on Oral History by Author Lee Smith**

In the following section, I will share excerpts of the personal interview I conducted with award winning Appalachian writer, Lee Smith. We spoke concerning her writings, the Appalachian, and her novel *Oral History* in spring 2011 in Greensboro College in Greensboro, North Carolina in the United States.

The interview was part of my research for a student project on Languages and Cultures. My professor, Dr. Jillian Haeseler, suggested Lee Smith’s novel *Oral History* as a fascinating and unique depiction of the minority American Appalachian culture and dialect. After reading the book, I contacted Mrs. Lee Smith and requested a personal interview. She graciously agreed and was eager to discuss her novel and her native region with me. I have transcribed the interview to share in this chapter. In the following I will be the Questioner and Mrs. Smith will be responding:

**Question1:** Mrs. Smith, thank you for meeting with me today. I hope you are enjoying these lovely spring days. Let’s begin if you are ready.

You have written many works of fiction but your novel, *Oral History* stands out from your other works for its in depth usage of the regions dialects, the richness of your characters, and the revelations of stereotyping of the region. Tell me please your purpose and how these points came about in your mind to build a story around them. Also how

you developed the idea to include the regional dialect forms of English in your novel *Oral History*?

**Mrs. Smith:** First of all let me thank you for inviting me today. The culture and the colorful language I grew up hearing and observing had always fascinated me. It was one of the main reasons that I wrote this book. I grew up in Grundy, Virginia which is a very small, remote coalmine town. When I was growing up everyone spoke like this. I am 65 so this was a long time ago. I was raised by mostly older people: my grandparents, my great aunts and uncles and so on. It was a big, huge family and a lot of them were older and they were all fabulous storytellers. I just loved the way they spoke and the way they used language. It seemed to me to be so much more colorful, just a beautiful form of expression. For instance, to say that a creek comes down the mountain, they would say "a creek comes down the mountain and then turkey tails out in the bottom"; or to say, "a man has daddyed more children than anyone else in the county". I just love these very decorative and precise and beautiful forms of English. The main thing that spurred me to write this novel was to use this language in context as a way to preserve it. I think of myself as a fiction writer but also as a documentarian. I have been privileged to grow up and hear people who spoke like the characters in my book and to hear stories, histories, ballads and bits of folklore. I thought about how to preserve it a long time before I ever started to write. I really wanted to use the dialect in context and at first had a hard time doing it, but that was one of my main aims of the book.

**Question 2:** What response have you gotten from your readership concerning the Appalachian dialects in your novel? Has it created a change in the interest and appreciation for the regional culture and language?

**Mrs. Smith:** Well, it was very interesting. It got wonderful critical reviews nationwide but the people in the mountains where I am from were not so sure about it. My father, who ran a dime store there in downtown Grundy, was furious at first. He called me up and said, "Listen here Lee, I did not send you away to these fine schools to have you writing in bad English" and he was serious. People in the Appalachian Region are very afraid outsiders are going to be making fun of them and stereotype them unfairly. By using that much true



dialect in my book, and trying to get the real spoken sense of it, there was a real wariness among some people about my using it. I have to say not among literary people, but mountain people like my cousins and so on. "Why don't you write about a nicer class of people?" my Aunt Millie asked me. My cousin said to me, "I don't know why you want to go write all this stuff." My generation was being raised to leave the mountains, including me. My family members could not understand why I wanted to spend all this time up in the hollers taping people and why I would write a book glorifying lives they thought simple, hard and not glorious. I found the simple lives fascinating. I have been so impressed all my life by the bond in families and the women of Appalachia, the hard lives they had, and how well they managed. As I said, the novel received a complicated reaction. Now the book, *Oral History*, is taught all over the place in university and college Appalachian Literature classes. Appalachian literature did not exist when I wrote this book in 1983. Now it does. It is being taught in many colleges and universities Literary classes thirty years after I wrote it. Finally even my daddy was proud of it, even though he did not read the full book. It has taken a while for us in Appalachia to understand that our minority culture and language is something to preserve, celebrate and treasure. I think now that sense is pervasive in the Appalachian Region and also in every other little town in America that celebrates their culture.

**Question 3:** Mrs. Smith, concerning linguistics, do you see many variations in the dialects of the sub-regions of the Appalachian Region, such as we see in American and British English or various areas of the United States?

**Mrs. Smith:** Yes, absolutely. I think the Appalachian dialect you hear in my book *Oral History*, is one of the more isolated and abstract dialects. It is from the Appalachian regions of coal mining and southeastern Kentucky, along with parts of West Virginia. There are other parts of the Appalachian Region which were less isolated or cut off where you would not find so many odd language constructions. The other sub regions use more in the main stream of English. As I have said, one of the main reasons I wrote this book was to preserve the language and unique dialect of these regions. Some of them are really archaic constructions and expressions. These dialects and language are still in use in these

regions today. I needed to write down customs, histories, memories and stories of these old mountain people before they were gone and lost. In terms of the language and sentence structure and double negatives and all the kinds of term of phrase, you still hear them strongly used today in that region. In fact, I just gave a workshop up in the mountains and their language is the same as when I wrote *Oral History* so many years ago. Little has changed. When you get out of the really high mountains down around cities like Asheville, North Carolina where you find many kinds of people living as in a crossroads you have less of the really ancient terms of phrase seen in my novel *Oral History*.

**Question 4:** You have stated your purpose in writing *Oral History* was to try to preserve and share the Appalachian regional dialects, culture, stories and history. In the 30 years since writing the novel, has this minority culture been greatly impacted by the outside world?

**Mrs. Smith:** Yes Mustapha, the outside world is coming into the mountains. It has had some impact on the regions but also on us all. Slowly, we are all sounding more like we are from the same place and I think this trend is continuing. Some Appalachia Region colleges such as Berea College in North Carolina offer courses in public speaking to teach students to get rid of their Appalachian accents. One of my cousins went to William and Mary College in the North and she worked very hard to not sound country and gets rid of her Appalachian mountain accent. Unfortunately, many young people of the region are told if they want to get a good job they should not sound so Appalachian. The Appalachian programs do not like this. They think the culture and language should be preserved and the young people should be taught to treasure their dialects and culture. Many regional young people try to lose the most extreme or abstract portions of their native language. In fact, when I remarried, my new mother in law was an English teacher from Boston, Massachusetts. She told me to take lessons to get rid of my native language. I politely informed her this was the way I wished to speak and sound as I am proud of my language and region. Needless to say she was shocked. I think we all should be proud of

our native languages and cultures and should work to preserve them. I think it is a good thing.

**Question 5:** What personal experiences inspired you to create the Granny Younger character in *Oral History*?

**Mrs. Smith:** Granny Younger remains one of my favorite characters of all. It was again the area of Appalachia where I grew up. The isolation created a shortage of nearby medical care and doctors so some women had knowledge of medicinal plants and care and passed it on to others. They were called "root women", "herbal women" or "granny women". They called them "grannies" for they were the main ones to deliver babies and care for the mothers and children of the mountain and they seemed a part of all families. Their main function was to deliver babies and give women potions to try to get pregnant as well as, creating plant and root remedies for childhood diseases. I actually heard legend of one who had delivered hundreds of babies in the county. There were lots of stories about her and I was fascinated about things she did for the people and her status in the county. Also, in older mountain culture, women were to stay in the home and did most of the time for they had many babies, raising gardens, caring for animals and stayed busy with home things. The men had to go out to search for and work on the main or pipeline. For work men had to travel a lot but women couldn't. The "granny women" just fascinated me for they seemed to have the respect usually given to men during that time. They had a masculine type of freedom and even told the men what to do. People did what the "granny women" told them to do. The wise "granny women" were given an air of authority and respect.

**Question 6:** Mrs. Smith, in your novel the characters have a sense of superstitions with fear of the unknown and ghosts. You mention and imply spirits and ghosts in the story line. Is this attitude found in the people of the mountains?

**Mrs. Smith:** Oh yes. Many of the tales in my novel were told to me by my father, uncle, grandfather and Aunt Kate. I had heard her stories all my life and when she was 87 I thought to hurry and tape what she had to share before her death. I taped many of her

stories and she lived to be 107. In my novel the superstitions and ghost tales are those I heard in family stories from my childhood. The mountain culture has a rich treasure of oral tales and storytelling. In recent years more of these stories and tales are being preserved and I am so glad about this.

**Question 7:** Tell me about the regional dialect and cultural influences on the character Richard Burlage and how it changed him. He was an outsider who had come to live in the mountains for a long time.

**Mrs. Smith:** In the novel as in real life we see how spoken language is influenced by what we hear on a daily basis and we speak. The character in the novel, Richard Burlage, adapted to his new home and gradually his speech patterns changed to mimic the patterns of the mountain speech. Many people will absorb some of the speech and way of life of the Appalachian Region. In a small community you wish to fit in, to be accepted as one of them, so what you are around and hear daily you gradually get into the habit of using. Many take the change as permanent while some use "code switching" and revert to their previous language patterns upon leaving the mountains or returning to their original home. Personally, when I return home to visit family I notice that I will "code switch" into my mountain accent while there.

**Question 8:** In your novel one character, Pearl, seems to struggle with inner conflict when trying to suppress or change her mountain accent and ways for that of the big city where she leaves to live. She returns to the mountains to try to resolve this inner conflict and seeks the advice of Sally.

**Mrs. Smith:** In my book the character Pearl had tried very hard to "get above her raising" and speak in a finer way of talk and hide the fact she was from the mountains. Her family called her "high fallooting" and "too good for her raisings". Pearl returned to the mountains wearing her white dress. She had tried to be someone she was not and she could not find peace in this. One of main themes in Appalachian writing is someone who goes away/leaves the mountains to get an education then returns with inner turmoil and with their sense of identity threatened. They are unsure of who they are and where they

belong. This dilemma happened with Pearl. She keeps thinking there was something missing, that something was not right and simply could not find her place or feel at peace; so she returned to the mountains to talk to someone wise in the old ways to ask questions and get answers. The person she sought answers from was, Sally.

**Question 9:** Mrs. Smith have you thought to write a sequel novel for *Oral History* using the same characters?

**Mrs. Smith:** No, not really. For me, when I complete a book I am done with the story line. It is complete. The characters' story is done. I have thought of it when people have asked me to, but I cannot write a sequel. When I complete a book the story is ended for me.

**Question 10:** Have you thought of making a movie with *Oral History*?

**Mrs. Smith:** I was asked to make it into a movie and we started the process, but you know what? I have had so many movie deals that have fallen through. PBS bought the rights to make a mini-series several years back and set up office in Grundy. We got excited then it fell through for lack of funding and we were disappointed. It is more difficult than people think to fund a production. Who knows, maybe in the future it will happen.

**Question 11:** Do you feel any kind of a responsibility to continue writing about the mountains and depicting them in a positive or complex light?

**Mrs. Smith:** No, I feel a responsibility to the region where I'm from to keep supporting things like the community college system which has made such a difference there and various organizations that I have been involved with; but I don't think the writer has any business doing anything but telling a story. In my writing I don't feel that kind of responsibility. If I did, I wouldn't have written a lot of things. If the idea is to change the image of the mountains, then you can't write honestly. I don't feel like I'm exercising a lot of responsibility in my fiction, so I try to exercise a little responsibility elsewhere. The reason I probably will always return to the mountains from time to time is because the

language touches me so deeply. I love to write things set back in time a little bit in the mountains; there's a greater eloquence that comes with that.

**Question 12:** Are there any earlier or traditional novels or literature of the mountains that have influenced you or your writing?

**Mrs. Smith:** I don't see myself in the tradition of the mountain writers, but there are some earlier books that have been very influential to me. The main one is James Still's *River of Earth*. I read it at Hollins College at a time when I was trying to write and not writing anything of quality, because I was not writing about anything that I knew about. I thought I needed to write about something intellectual or elegant or different from the mountains. I wasn't ever writing about anything close to home. I by chance, came across *River of Earth*. It's kind of an Appalachian *Grapes of Wrath* story about a family like the Joads: the crops fail, the mines close, and they have to leave and go somewhere else to find work. At the end of the book, the daddy puts them in the car, and they move to a new town where a new mine has opened up, it was Grundy! It's an eloquent novel. It's just gorgeous and beautifully written. It's written in the vernacular that everybody spoke when I was growing up, the language I was working so hard to get away from. To use a mountain phrase, my parents were "raising me to leave." As I was reading this book, I saw everything that I was trying to leave behind me was in the story of this incredibly good book. It was life changing for me. I burst into tears, finished the book then read it again. Also Harriette Arnow's book *The Dollmaker*, because I had grown up around very strong women too. This was a book about Appalachian women and this was important to me.

**Question 13:** Do you make a distinction when you're writing about the more Southern material than when you write about Appalachian material? Is there any difference in the amount of research you do?

**Mrs. Smith:** It depends on the time when something is set. If it were say, straight Southern but with a historical setting, then I have to do research. I just have to feel comfortable with the place and period. In the novel I'm writing now, different sections of

it were set in different places, so I had to go to those places. I think that the past always requires a lot more research.

**Question 14:** Can you tell me a little about the issues of class as it exists in the South and in your town of Grundy, and the differences between the holler kids and the town kids?

**Mrs. Smith:** When you live in the holler, up one of those creeks, there's a whole different kind of society up there among neighbors and clans. It's a very close, warm, extended community and they are very protective of each other and those in their families. Traditionally, the people who live in the hollers and on the creeks have less money. They usually work in the mines, or the hospital, or they may clean somebody's house. The townspeople are the ones who usually own the businesses in the towns.

I recently read an interesting book named *Creeker* which is written from the point of view of a woman who grew up in a holler in eastern Kentucky. She makes what I feel is an important point in the book which is for kids who grew up in the town near where she lived to her from a different social class, they might as well have been far away in the large city of Lynchburg, Virginia. The town world was very different from her world in the holler. When I was growing up, I was aware of the two different worlds. Then I became aware as I got older of a third world, which wasn't the creek, or the town, but was the outside world beyond our particular ridge of mountains. My mother was from eastern Virginia. She was from an educated family of the town class who had lost their money. My Mamma grew up in the upper class world and tried to maintain links to it. Her father killed himself, so my grandmother had to turn her big house on Chitonteague Island into a boarding house. Mamma helped her by assisting in the kitchen, but they all knew how things were supposed to be. Because my mother was very different and was determined to remain very different from other women in Grundy, I was made aware of the three kinds of worlds from an early age. It was my mother's wish that I was sent to an elite prep school in Richmond.

**Question 15:** Even though Grundy was a small town, it sounds like there must have been a lot of interaction between the classes.

**Mrs. Smith:** Oh, there was total interaction. There were no black people in Grundy, which has always made me feel that the Appalachian experience is vastly different from the deep Southern experience where one does grow up with a sense of racial guilt. In Grundy, there was a lot of mingling of social classes, and there still is. The differences were just in which church you attended. Most people who made a lot of money acted the same as they had before. They would just build a bigger house and go on stringing beans on the porch.

**Question 16:** You had some people who had not moved up in class but would try to act as if they had?

**Mrs. Smith:** Oh, yeah. I was always shocked as a small girl in Grundy because I went to school with so many really, really poor children. I always felt that I was so rich, even though I really wasn't. Everybody thought I was rich because my father owned the dime store, which is the symbol of all the toys of the world. All my extended family owned other stores downtown. None of them had ever been in the mines except for one uncle who was a superintendent at one of the mining camps.

**Question 17:** So Grundy was a coal-mining town but it wasn't a company town? The company didn't own it, is this correct?

**Mrs. Smith:** That's right. It wasn't owned by one company. In the company towns, there's only one store, that's the company store. Miners would get paid in scrip, and oftentimes they would spend more than they would make. It's like the Johnny Cash song, "Owed My Soul to the Company Store." But in a town, there would be independent merchants. Many of the coal company towns would be around it, and then also independent mines. The independent miners were often doing what they called truck mining and strip mining, where instead of going down you just strip off. That can be done less expensively than deep shaft mining. There were all kinds of mining going on around the town; most all the jobs were from mining except for people like teachers or doctors.



**Question 19:** When you talk with people outside the mountains, do they realize there is a difference between people who live up on the mountains from people who live down in the towns or do they see all people of the region alike?

**Mrs. Smith:** They lump everybody together. They also lump the Appalachian South in with the Piedmont, which is quite different, and also in with the Deep South. An example of how outsiders see us is my mother in law, who is from Boston in the North. She is a smart lady and a teacher in New York State. Driving up into the mountains, she kept saying things like, “Where are the big houses with the columns?” “Where are the black people?” These stereotypes of the South persist to a degree that we are not always aware of, even with people who are smart.

**Question 20:** Could you tell me more specifically about how you develop the idea of social class in your writings? How important you think class tends to be in developing your characters?

**Mrs. Smith:** Well, I think it’s very important. When I’m developing a character, I have to know what social class they’re in, what social class their parents were in, and I see that also as economic. It has to do with money, and it also has to do with level of education. Obviously these are the determining factors in what will be somebody’s outlook on life and how they will view the world. So I see social class as having to do with the education level and kind of job and the parents’ expectation level and the parents’ social class. As in life, it sometimes will limit the possibilities for some of my characters and some can sidestep around. For most in the mountain culture social class is a very strong and lasting influence on their lives.

Along with social influences, mobility is another one for the people of the Appalachia Region. People of the mountains always ask me, “When are you coming in?” This is the mountain way of asking when are you coming back. People view the mountains as a place that would hold you in. I knew people who had never been out of the county, never traveled far from where they were born. In my thinking, mobility is something that the

higher class had the option for and often utilized but the middle and lower classes could not.

**Question 21:** Is it possible to be from one of the minority mountain classes and be able to move up into another social class and be accepted or comfortable there?

**Mrs. Smith:** Oh, yes I think so. I've been fascinated with this idea as I have observed and researched the thirty kids I've worked with in my oral history project, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, over the last couple of years. A few of them who live way back in the mountains are so smart. They have simply transcended many of the things that might have held them back. They have done well in their studies, they have attracted the notice of their teachers and others who have helped them get good scholarships. They are from poor families, but they are being helped to go to college. This creates a problem and difficult situation for their parents. One mother cried when we discussed the oral history project with me saying, "She will go away from here, away from us." Many of the young people who are given the chance will leave and not return but there are always those who will return, for the mountains have a strong pull.

**Question 22:** Do you think it is possible for someone to move up the social and economic level without losing the attributes that connect them to their raising?

**Mrs. Smith:** Conflict is one of the themes a writer uses in writing fiction. To have fiction at all, you have to have conflict, and class conflict is a kind of conflict I have written about a lot in my work. How does one move into different classes and retain who they are? I am not sure if or how it can be done but many try. Many people that have risen up the social ladder have certainly held onto parts of their pasts. I think if they give their past up entirely they often become very rootless and lost in a certain way.

As an adult, you decide if you will identify yourself by your family of origin, or whether you are going to make your own identity. It has been this way in America. The Appalachian tradition is to keep family ties strong and close to family things. Many live outside the mountains but will travel long distances to visit with family in the mountains. I

think the family tradition of remaining close is stronger in the mountains than other places in the southern United States. I think the hard life of the mountains along with traditions taught by family contribute to this tie. It is a tie that survives so far the influences of TV, internet and the outside world.

**Question 23:** Ms. Smith, many of your major characters are from the holler areas of the minority regions of Appalachia. Is it difficult to write about characters who grew up in a different social class and outside the minority region?

**Mrs. Smith:** Sure it's harder, because you have to think about things that you wouldn't ever think about. Just like it's harder for me to write from the point of view of a man, because I have to think about things that I wouldn't necessarily think about. I was fortunate, to have a very open childhood where I spent a lot of time with kids who lived up in the hollers, kids from other social classes and we always had people in our own family who did, too. There was a whole lot of association among all of us, and I felt like I knew and understood them. Also, my parents were older when I was born, and I had many older people in our family. This gave me a rich environment for asking the older generation questions and listening to them talk about their own lives, traditions and stories. I was always fascinated with something new about the region and its past. Through all these histories and stories, I felt as if I had grown up farther back in the hills than I did.

**Question 24:** Your mother was a teacher in Grundy?

**Mrs. Smith:** Yes you are correct. My mother was a teacher. The mountains are a very isolated and closed society. There were few reasons outsiders came to them to work or live. Teaching was a big one.

**Question 25:** I read in of your novel a comment about people who worked at the community college, saying they worked there instead of getting a real job. Can you explain what you meant by these words please?

**Mrs. Smith:** Yes, I always found those words odd also. I have heard people say that and I thought it is funny for the community colleges provide a great service to the region. They offer an education to some who cannot or might not attain education after high school, those who wish to train for a job or remain in the region. Maybe it was said by those who feared any kind of education that would take their children from them and the region.

**Question 26:** Mrs. Smith, do you have any questions you would like to ask me or anything further to share today?

**Mrs. Smith:** Yes, Mustapha, I do. I am curious to know if there are some dialects, cultural aspects, or oral histories in Algeria you are aware of and have had a curiosity or wonder about and wished to study and preserve it. Do you have something special about your country or region to share with me today?

**Questioner:** Yes Mrs. Smith, I would love to tell you about the Berber people. Berber communities have thousands years dialects and rich culture of art, music and, folklore that had a significant impact on our identity, history and culture. Its extinction is a loss to both the community who uses it in their daily lives, and also to humankind in general. The songs, stories, words, expressions, sound and grammatical structures of these endangered dialects developed over countless generations are part of the intangible heritage and artistic expressions of all humanity.

The Berber people, as an example of people creating and using a language as an expression of their culture, history, and communications, were present in our area for thousands of years. They developed a complex and rich culture with a language of oral tradition. The Algerians, who identify themselves as Berber, live mostly in the mountainous region of Kabylie east of Algiers, The Atlas Mountains and the south East. These Berber Algerians are by faith Muslims but identify themselves with their Berber heritage rather than the Arab cultural heritage. Like Appalachian Language and Culture, our Berber Languages and Cultures should be celebrated, treasured and preserved.

Thank you for your time and wonderful sharing today Mrs. Smith. Also, thank you for all your efforts to preserve your native dialect and cultural treasures of the Appalachian Region in your novels. I wish you continued success in your writings.

**Mrs. Smith:** Thank you also Mustapha. It has been a delightful experience.

### **3.5. Major Points on Oral History with Author Lee Smith**

I would like to discuss five major points from the interview with Lee Smith which relate to my research and expand on our information of underlying forces seen in the novel. The first and seemingly strongest was the importance of preserving and sharing minority cultures and oral histories. Lee Smith has spent most of her life researching and seeking ways to preserve the rich and colorful language, culture and traditions of the Appalachia region. In the interview she stresses their importance in her decision and creation of the characters narrative and her desire to share and preserve. During her research and writing process, Lee Smith told me she wrote down customs, histories, and memories, and felt the need to hasten to collect stories of the older mountain people before they disappeared. Her diligence and rich amount of material from this minority culture enriches her work and provides it with high quality and value as literature presenting a people and their world.

The second main point in the interview is stereotyping of the culture and people of Appalachia. This point is discussed by Mrs. Smith and she addresses it throughout her novel, *Oral History*, in her two outsider characters of Jennifer Bingham and Richard Burlage , and how their misconceived stereotyping of the region hinders their ability to fully appreciate and see the truth of the region. *Oral History* is a compelling illustration skillfully used by Mrs. Smith to create and enlighten the reader to the true beauty, culture, and significance of people in Appalachia.

Mrs. Smith continued with her third main point of how many natives in the Appalachian region who have the means are raised to leave and encouraged by their parents to leave for higher education and find a new life outside the region. Because of

outside pressures and poverty in most of the region, many in the middle class encourage their young to get an education and leave the mountains to seek a better life. Until very recently, young Appalachians have been told by parents and teachers to get a good education, lose their mountain accent to find a good job outside of the mountains. Slowly, things are changing in the mountain regions where now Appalachian programs have been created to encourage and teach the young how to balance preserving their dialect and culture as they find success in life.

The fourth main point discussed with Mrs. Smith is the importance of valuing our elderly to gain knowledge from their experiences and the past. Respect for elderly wisdom and their place in society has been a traditional trait of the mountain culture. Older women in the Appalachia region have had a special status since they possess ancient knowledge of the culture and medicinal plants. People in their communities call them “Granny”. These elderly women are given respect usually given to men and have a masculine type of freedom and they do not hesitate to tell men what to do with an air of authority. Mrs. Smith told me that Granny Younger is her favorite and perhaps the most important character in *Oral History*.

The fifth main point I noted in my interview with author Lee Smith was the value and richness of traditional oral history or storytelling. The Appalachian region of the United States is known for its colorful and rich traditions of storytelling, tall tales, and music. Tradition and teaching the young have always been an important part of the Appalachian family. The Appalachian tales included in *Oral History* by Lee Smith she learned from her father, uncle, grandfather and her Aunt Kate. Appalachian tales include stories of superstitions, ghost tales, overcoming life struggles and humor.

Like other Appalachian children, Lee Smith was raised to leave Appalachia for what her parents thought to be a better life, but found in the novel, *River of Earth* by James Still, the language and the culture she was trying to leave behind. I must note here that Appalachia Literature is different from Southern Literature for in Appalachia there were no houses with poles, no plantations and most importantly no blacks and no historical guilt of slavery. Mrs. Smith shared with me that after reading *River of Earth*, she

### *Chapter Three: Contextual Interpretations of Oral History*

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found peace within and her place as a writer and storytelling of Appalachia. Because of the success of *Oral History*, Mrs. Smith has become a leader in the movement to encourage and educate young people of the region to take pride and preserve their oral traditions and culture.

# *General Conclusion*



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## I. General Conclusion

In this case study of the invisible minority of the Appalachia region of the United States, my research has explored and revealed facts about the reclusive people, culture and language of the region. To assist in my research I chose the award winning novel *Oral History* by noted southern Appalachian writer Lee Smith. I chose this particular author and novel as my focus for they are considered by most in the literary community to accurately and clearly represent the literary and cultural aspects of the Appalachian region. Also, native born author, Lee Smith, is considered the ultimate literary voice for the region and its culture. In an article in the Los Angeles Times Magazine on May 21, 1995 Author and Historian, Peter Guralnick wrote:

Lee Smith made a giant leap into the mainstream when *Oral History* was published. With that novel, she became the titular queen of the new Southern regional movement, defined as a simultaneous embrace of past and present, this insistent chronicling of the small, heroic battles of the human spirit, a recognition of the dignity and absurdity of the commonplace. Lee Smith writes stories with an exceptionally strong sense of place. (McDonald 48-1996).

Tapping into her upbringing and firsthand knowledge of the region and culture, author Lee Smith created narrative complexity with regional dialects with first and third person points of view. Mrs. Smith masterfully interwove the story with multilayers of voices and variety of perspectives which created in the mind of each reader a clear picture of family, culture, traditions of the Appalachian region. Her in depth knowledge and writings, along with the personal interview I conducted with her greatly assisted in the exploration and discovery of various aspects of the region, its history, as well as, its concerns and misperceptions by outsiders.

Through my various research sources along with the novel, *Oral History*, several points of importance were brought to light or came to be noted. Stereotyping, the theme of belonging and dreams of better life, strong sense of place, the importance of family and community, as well as, the traditional oral histories and stories of the region. These have been explored in my paper and aided in the forming of a positive and accurate portrayal of

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the people, minority culture and region of Appalachia. Humans tend to form conceptions and images from the information they have whether it is correct or not. This human characteristic has contributed to the misconceptions of the Appalachian culture for centuries and is just now starting to be corrected by interaction with the outside cultures as well as new Southern writers who include facts and truths in their writings, such as Lee Smith. “The Appalchian culture is based on subsistence agriculture and hunting, not on industrial class structured ways of existence.” (Barker 102). New people, mostly the younger, that move to Appalachia try to change it and make it more modern. They are ashamed of the image outsiders give to Appalachia. They try to get rid of stereotype images by removing all things old and different from outside things. They believe times have changed and Appalachia must catch up. However, a larger group feels differently, and there are many new projects started to create pride in and the preservation of traditional ways and lifestyles.

This research and case study brings to light the truth of a minority culture and region previously invisible and misunderstood by the literary circles of the outside world. It will be of great benefit to the field of American studies by providing Americanists accurate information and tools in understanding the history, the literary as well as the cultural diversity of the United States.

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## ملخص

الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو استكشاف أقلية الأبالاشيا مع تحليل مركز على الرواية تاريخ شفوي للروائية الأمريكية لي سميث باستخدام نهج استراتيجي السرد وتحليل متعدد الطبقات للصوت والنص بالإضافة الى مقابلي مع الكاتبة. هذا البحث يحاول اثبات أن شعب أبالاشيا هو مجموعة عرقية وثقافية ولسانية فريدة من نوعها. أقلية ثقافية غير معروفة ومساء فهمها. يتطرق البحث لأسئلة من الحاضر والماضي متعلقة بالحياة في أبالاشيا ، بالأعراق، اللهجات، الفلكلور، والإقتصاد وكيفية تغييرهم في العقود الأخيرة. هذا البحث سوف يقترح أيضا السبب وراء أهمية معرفة هذا الشعب وثقافة أبالاشيا ولماذا يجب اعتبارهم كنزا ثقافيا يجب المحافظة عليه.

## الكلمات المفتاحية

أبالاشيا – تاريخ شفوي – استراتيجي السرد – تحليل متعدد الطبقات للصوت والنص – أقلية عرقية وثقافية ولسانية – الفلكلور

## Résumé

Ce mémoire répond à la problématique pourquoi le peuple des Appalaches été inexactement dépeint et compris tout au long des 19<sup>eme</sup> et 20<sup>eme</sup> siècles. Ce travail est une analyse ciblée du roman *Oral History* de Lee Smith, une écrivaine Appalachienne authentique en utilisant une approche d'analyse narrative. Cette étude démontre que le peuple des Appalaches est une ethnie minoritaire, unique et précieuse, une minorité culturelle et linguistique à part. Mon mémoire suggère également la raison pour laquelle il est important d'en apprendre davantage sur ce peuple et de la culture des Appalaches comme un trésor à préserver pour tous.

**Mots clés :** Appalaches – Préjugés – Minorité Culturelle et Linguistique – Ethnie – Analyse Narrative – Dialectes.

## Summary

The purpose of this study is to explore and discover the Appalachian people, their history, minority culture, rich language and oral histories with a focused analysis of the novel *Oral History* by Lee Smith. The Cantrell family represents the typical family and life of the little known and mostly misunderstood minority culture upon which my research will explore and share with the reader. By using a narrative strategy approach, multi-layering voice and text analysis, along with my interview with the author Lee Smith, this paper attempts to demonstrate that the Appalachian people are a unique and valuable ethnic, cultural, and linguistic group. My paper will also suggest the reason why it is important to learn about these people and culture of Appalachia as a treasure to celebrate and preserve for all.

## Key Words

Appalachia – Minority culture – Oral histories – Dialects – Narrative strategy approach – multi-layering voice – ethnic – cultural – linguistic.

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**SUMMARY**

**LEE SMITH'S ORAL HISTORY.  
THE INVISIBLE MINORITY OF THE  
MOUNTAINS:THE CASE OF  
APPALACHIA**

**PRESENTED BY:**

**Mr. Mustapha AIMER**

**SUPERVISED BY:**

**Dr. Yahia ZEGHOUDI**

**Academic Year 2015/2016**

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The aim of this memoir is to explore and reveal to the reader an accurate view of the Appalachian people, history, literature and culture. It is an attempt to argue that the Appalachian people are distinct minority cultural group which has been inaccurately portrayed and understood throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I have accomplished this exploration and sharing by analyzing the culture and stereotypes portrayed in the novel, *Oral History*, by the native Appalachian and Southern American writer Lee Smith. Along with the novel my paper reviewed pertinent interviews and various resource documents and writings to provide a modern and true view of the Appalachian minority culture and its oral histories.

There are several reasons why I chose *Oral History* as my reference text to analyze. First, in Algeria, as in the rest of the world and even in the United States, little accurate information is known about Appalachia as one of America's oldest minority regions, its culture, history, or its unique dialect. My research attempted to explore the various aspects of the Appalachian region in literature and fiction, along with, how author Lee Smith portrays its aspects in her novel which the reader will discover assuming the following hypotheses:

Lee Smith's *Oral History* helps us gain an accurate insight and appreciation of the Appalachian Culture. It reveals the disconnect between Appalachia and the main stream America.

Lee Smith; through her novel and interview and various writings reveals misconceptions and breaks the pattern of misunderstanding by providing us with a broader view of Appalachian tradition, storytelling and folklore.

As an Appalachian born author and educator, Lee Smith, is considered the pioneer of Appalachian Literature. She is credited in literary and educational circles with challenging the common misconceptions and stereotypes that this minority has endured for centuries and even still today.

Secondly, Mrs. Smith is writing from firsthand experience being a native and educator of the Appalachia Region so she provides a unique and rich perspective into the

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world of the culture with her usage of multi-layering of voices and colorful dialect in *Oral History*.

The novel, *Oral History*, was published in 1983, and is considered her most noted and influential work mainly for it includes a rich study into the culture language and minds of the Appalachian people. It has been instrumental in creating since its publication an interest in the region and its people along with Appalachian literature. It has become a serious study in academic settings around the world, as well as, a tool for sharing and preserving the mountain dialect which was one of Mrs. Smith's main objectives in writing the book. Thirdly, my aim was also to provide the reader with a more accurate view and information on the people, their unique dialect, and culture of the Appalachian Region.

As a novelist and short story writer, Lee Smith has published a total of nine novels, two novellas, and three collections of short stories since her senior project work titled, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* was published in 1968. Her fourth work of fiction, *Black Mountain Breakdown* which was published in 1980, pinpoints the time Lee Smith begins her literary writings about her childhood home in Appalachia.

As the daughter of a schoolteacher and the owner of the local dime store in Grundy, Virginia, Mrs. Smith identifies herself as a town girl rather than a holler girl, suggesting she has more in common with Campbell's town dweller class than the branchwater mountaineers of early Appalachian fiction. Smith described this difference in a recent interview with Sharon E. Coley:

When you live in the holler, when you live up one of those creeks, there's a whole society among neighbors and clans—different people from one family in one place. It's very close, warm, extended community. Traditionally, the people who live in the hollers or up in the creeks have a lot less money, and they work in the mines, or they work in the hospital, or they might come to town and clean somebody's house or work in the tire store. The town people are more the people that own the businesses, the doctors—the people that own things (345).

Lee Smith's past as a town girl implies a degree of social and economic privilege which distanced her from most of her classmates who had roots in the hollow groups. Dorothy Hill writes about Lee Smith as fascinated by her classmates, even drawn to them,

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and yet she was distanced too; she felt burdened by a sense of guilt and privilege because she always had shoes and her immediate family did not work in the dangerous coal mines.

When Lee Smith reached her junior year of high school, her parents sent her to an elite private school in Richmond, Virginia called Saint Catherine. There she was introduced to a traditional Southern class system different from the mountain system.

After attending the St Catherine School, Mrs. Smith attended Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia. There, one of her professors was Louis Rubin and some of her classmates included well known critics Anne Goodwyn Jones and Lucinda MacKethan, and writer Annie Dillard. After her graduation from Hollins College in Roanoke, Mrs. Smith married the poet James Seay and they had two sons. Mrs. Smith accompanied her husband to various academic jobs. He worked briefly as a reporter then took a position as a high school and college English professor. The marriage fell apart and the couple divorced in 1982. After her divorce, Lee Smith began to rebuild her life and taught adult education classes. There she met and married journalist and fellow teacher Hal Crowther in 1985. Mrs. Smith continued her writings all this time as she worked as a teacher. Recognized as an accomplished Southern fiction writer she acquired a position on the faculty at North Carolina State University where she taught until her retirement in 2000.

Smith is often labeled a Southern writer, but she prefers to be known as an Appalachian writer. She explained why she prefers to be known as an Appalachian writer in a 1989 interview with Pat Arnow:

There's a huge difference between a Southern writer and the kind of writer I am. For one thing, so much of what I think as the canon of Southern literature does have to do with race and racial guilt. . . . I just didn't have a sense of that. And also, I never had a sense of an aristocracy. You know, there was nobody with big columns on their house, with lots of money or black mammies. I just don't think of myself as a Southern writer. I really don't, because the class system was so different, the money situation was so different, even. Well, just the whole social structure was quite different, I think, from the Deep South. . . . There's not much similarity between a novel that comes out of Appalachia and a novel that comes out of the Deep South. (26)

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Mrs. Smith is clear in her explanation and showing the contrasts in her experience in a coal-mining Virginian region with the plantation system of the deep Southern region. She explains further the difference in the regions in an article she posted on her web page titled, *White Columns and Marble Generals*:

Nobody I knew was attached to the soil in a mystical blood-bound Faulknerian way— everybody had long since sold the timber and mineral rights to their land, which was mostly too steep to farm anyway. Mining had taken its toil on the landscape, as well. We weren't allowed to play in the river because they washed coal in it upstream; the water in the Levisa River behind my house ran black as night. Nobody had much money, and there was no aristocracy either—unless we were the aristocracy, us town kids whose parents owned the stores and didn't go down into the mines, who took pimiento cheese sandwiches to school in our lunch bags instead of the corn bread and buttermilk in a Mason jar brought by the kids from the hollers. (Coley 350)

There are great differences in the Appalachian and Southern regional cultures and languages. Living in her home town of Grundy presented Lee Smith with a definite social society with differences and divisions created by class and economic factors.

In yet another interview in 1989 with Irv Broughton, Mrs. Smith shared her own position in Grundy which was very revealing into her life and inner feelings and how at times being a town girl and of different class to the coal mining mountain people made her feel isolated as well as guilty:

It was a mountain culture. Mining was the only industry in that county. My dad didn't work in the mines, but lots of my family did, lots of people that we knew did . . . I felt very isolated. I felt kind of like a little princess in a sense. One thing people don't understand about Appalachia that makes Appalachian writing very different from Southern literature: there is no upper class. There was nobody wealthy. I felt sort of embarrassed to live in town, and I had friends whose lunch would eat buttermilk and cornbread in a Mason jar. But I lived in town, and my mother was from the Eastern shore and had pretensions. . . . I didn't go back up in the "hollers" after school. It was very funny; when I grew up and went away to school, I realized I had had the most middle class of childhoods. But given the circumstances, those of us who lived in town . . . we really thought that we had something. Our lives were different just because our family lived in town. People were always getting killed in the mines—I remember so well when I was growing up—or being disabled. And our families weren't disabled, who had stores

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in town. . . I still feel a lot of guilt because I didn't grow up in the "hollers." I didn't have a father who went down in the mines every day. (Coley 280-281)

Mrs. Smith tells of her appreciation of her family situation and experiences but her comments also suggest she may have a sense of ambivalence and guilt about her privileged upbringing. Though Mrs. Smith has lived much of her adult life in the research triangle of North Carolina, she often visits her family in Grundy and remains involved in her childhood region through educational and research projects.

From her interview comments, Mrs. Smith reveals that her relatives held prominent positions in the Grundy community. Also, her personal childhood experiences and observations have played an important part in the characters and creation of her fiction writings. Examples of their prominence in Grundy society was: her great-grandfather was chairman of the county Democratic Party in 1896, then became the Deputy Sheriff, followed by becoming the Clerk of the County Court for over 20 years; the local Methodist church conducted its services in the family's front yard; and Smith's great-grandfather helped the fledgling coal-mining industry in the county and ordered surveys to reveal the rich coal deposits in the area. Lee Smith's fiction is filled with her experiences, both in and out of the hills. However the fact that Mrs. Smith was a town girl does not discredit her Appalachian identity nor does it mean she is not able to fairly or accurately portray people whose lives were so very different from hers.

In her fiction writings, many of Lee Smith's most celebrated characters such as Granny Younger in *Oral History*, belong not to Smith's own town class, but to the holler social groups of her region. Mrs. Smith is able to make such characters come alive to the reader and use realistic attributes for them because she lived near similar people, interacted with similar people, acutely observed them, and then researched them before picking up her pen to write.

My analysis of *Oral History* takes into account several aspects of the work, namely its narrative voices with their multi-layering of ones, structure, history, culture and setting, tone of the language and characters. Before I began my analysis, I provided a biography of



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author, Lee Smith, to secure a background for the discussed work followed by the analysis within three chapters.

In the first chapter, titled Appalachia, I introduced Appalachian historical, cultural and literary aspects that make it unique and distinct from the American main stream culture and literature. An additional section of chapter one commented on the misconceptions and stereotypes of the region of Appalachia mainly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Appalachian region of the United States has been a place of solitude, mysteries and new beginnings for many; a place of wondrous beauty with endless majestic mountain ranges covered with dense forests of green and teeming with wildlife and flowing waters since its formation millions of years ago.

Before the Europeans arrived to the Appalachian Region, it had been home and hunting grounds for thousands of years to various Native American tribes, such as, the Shawnee and the Cherokee who developed closeness to the mountains and the nature it held, and a strong oral history.

The creation of the mountain ranges of Appalachia is described in ancient Native American oral legends which are still shared as part of the Native American's oral history and religion.

The most prominent Native American culture was and remains today is, The Cherokee Nation. It is the Cherokee ancient legend that tells of the creating and formation of the Great Smokey Mountains of Appalachia by a giant buzzard or vulture which had been circling above the earth after a great flood. According to Moonlit Road, Strange Tales of the American South the legend says that "the giant vulture had been flying a long time over the flooded land and was growing very weary. When it reached the area of the Smokies where some land appeared above the flooded waters, exhausted he plummeted to the earth. Where he landed and where his massive wings touched the earth, the mountain valleys appeared under their heavy weight". (9)

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The Appalachian region encompasses a large rugged region running parallel with the Atlantic Ocean coastline on the Eastern coast of the United States, and contains the oldest mountain chains in the United States. As it is demonstrated by the following picture graph, this region stretches from the southern counties of New York State in the North, down into the northern parts of the southern states of Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. It includes a span of approximately 2000 kilometers and is covered with lush, dense forests with abundant water sources and wildlife.

It includes several mountain ranges: the Great Smokey Mountains of the Tennessee Region and the Blue Ridge Mountain range and the Appalachian Mountain range overlapping in the other states of the region called Appalachia. Early inhabitants of this region were separated from the Eastern Coastal plain by a massive fall line which is a mixture of mountains, valleys, high ridges, and wide plateaus. The massive fall line and great mountain ranges contributed to its wilderness and the isolation of its inhabitants. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission,(ARC) this region of Appalachia touches 13 states including all of West Virginia, parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The Appalachia Region is home to more than 25 million people while covering 420 counties and almost 205,000 square miles.

Chapter two titled Narrative Analysis of *Oral History* is an analysis of the novel narrative that provides the necessary information for the commentary on the narrative critical interpretations.

This chapter two is devoted to research into the novel's character narratives by using the qualitative approach with narrative analysis. My research sought to discover and give an understanding to the narrative voices and the complex layering of the characters in *Oral History* by author Lee Smith. I also wanted to reveal their importance and purpose to the story and setting. As a writer, Lee Smith masterfully weaves the narrative with multi layers of voices and a variety of perspectives to create an intertwined picture of a family, a regional culture, its people, and a linguistic treasure.

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The complex narratives and character development in *Oral History* is done by using the third person to first person, then back to third person voice at the end, each with distinctive perspective and its own place in the complexity of Appalachian society. Each character voice helps to add to a mental image in the reader's mind of the region, the culture and action happening in the story. As one reads, Appalachia becomes a real place and the lives, interactions and voices of the characters help to build on the picture.

The prologue of the novel is written in italics and the narrator promptly introduces the characters and setting to the reader. Author, Frank Soos, writes that the aim of the novel's narrator is "to quickly establish the values of the world, in this case contemporary Appalachia that her characters inhabit. Our narrator is in omniscient form to let us know that what's going on in Hoot Owl Holler is just fine, thank you" (20). As the story unfolds and develops, the reader is surrounded by the real life situations, the voices and thoughts of the Appalachian people and their minority culture. Appalachia becomes a real place and the lives, interactions and voices of the characters build on that image, thus resulting in each reader's perception of the region and review of past stereotyping (Brooks 5). Lee Smith wished that each reader would discover for themselves the truth about the region, people, and its culture as well as its colorful language.

The epilogue, like the prologue, is typed in italics and returns back to the third person narrative that the novel began with. It returns to Jennifer Bingham's narrative interaction with her relatives as she ends the project she began at the first of the novel. At this point in the novel the real feelings of the relatives and the weak and close-mindedness of Jennifer is revealed to the reader. Jennifer's aunt, Ora Mae Cantrell, finally reveals to her that she does not like her uninvited intrusion into their lives or her condescending attitude towards them which is obvious to all. Ora Mae sends Jennifer's uncle Al up the mountain to get her tape recorder left in the old house then she warns her to "take it and go on, and don't you ever come back here no more with no tape recorder because if you set it up there, you'll likely hear what you don't want to hear" (Smith 28). Ora Mae is referring to a family secret from the past from which she has been protected from by her father. Jennifer responds to Ora Mae's sharp warning by saying, "I don't understand what's going on here." (28) This response by Jennifer tells the reader that she cannot see

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her own ignorance and naivety. She has dealt with her relatives with an outsider's preconceived idea and lack of open mind for her project assignment. This idea led her to see them as, "really very primitive people, resembling nothing so much as some sort of early tribe. Crude jokes and animal instincts, it's the other side of the pastoral coin."(28) Jennifer leaves puzzled by the exchange with her aunt and blinded by her outside notions of the region and its people.

By implying imaginative images of Appalachia found in the mountain literary and oral traditions, academic resources and current popular imaginations, Lee Smith accurately mirrors popular and elite class attitudes towards the region. She has also included some aspects of the working class and popular country music to give balance to her view of the region.

This skillful way of presenting the Appalachian people, culture and region by Lee Smith will appear to everyone who reads the novel, *Oral History*, to form a unique perception of the region and review their past ideas or stereotyping of the region and its people. It is the hope by the author Lee Smith, that each reader will discover for himself/herself the truth about the region, the people, and their culture.

I will begin this section with general ideas about the narratives and voices, and end up later by elaborating more specific details on each one of them.

Chapter three of my thesis is devoted to some interpretations of *Oral History* by various literary scholars. However, it is not a simple overview of past and present criticism as the information obtained was processed by the narrative while describing the various interpretations. Furthermore, I evaluated each interpretation and compared them with the criticism in question. In other words, the interpretations were assessed according to their actual understanding of the nature and mechanics of the discussed text. Moreover, the results are contrasted with each other and a commentary on the interpretations of the novel *Oral History* was made.

Chapter three also includes a personal interview I conducted with Lee Smith in Greensboro, North Carolina, USA in which she shares her reflections on life, culture, history and the stereotyping of the Appalachian region as well as her personal experiences

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and thoughts on the region and her reasons for writing *Oral History*. In the interview Mrs. Smith elaborates and answers questions about life in the Appalachia, her writings, the novel *Oral History*, and the Appalachian minority.

In the third chapter of my thesis I will give an interpretation on the various literary aspects of the novel *Oral History*, along with the purposes and goals of author Lee Smith in her writing of the novel.

Lee Smith, as a Southern Appalachian writer, has been successful in reaching an international audience, as well as, with the writing of *Oral History* having a positive impact on negative stereotyping of Appalachia. Literary critic, Harriette C. Buchanan writes that, "Lee Smith's settings are Southern, her interest in and ability for storytelling are Southern, but her characters and stories, because of their realism, even ordinariness, are universal" (324). Mrs. Smith has been praised and noted for her detail and accurate portrayal of Appalachian life. As discussed in previous sections of my paper, the narrative voices of the novel accurately provide to the reader a rendering of the Appalachian dialect in its true form and an insider's view into the rich culture. Most critics and reviews praise *Oral History* as Lee Smith's best work and it became a Book of the Month selection in 1983.

One strong purpose and goal of Lee Smith was to preserve and share the rich and unique dialect of the region, and inform readers of the truth of the culture and language of the Appalachian region. She did this skillfully in her colorful and interesting character narrative of Granny Younger, the community healer. We can see her personal thoughts and goals in her words from the following taken from her interview with me in Greensboro, North Carolina, USA:

The culture and the colorful language I grew up hearing and observing had always fascinated me. It was one of the main reasons that I wrote this book. I grew up in Grundy, Virginia which is a very small, remote coalmine town. When I was growing up everyone spoke like this...I was raised by mostly older people: my grandparents, my great aunts and uncles and so on. It was a big, huge family and a lot of them were older and they were all fabulous storytellers. I just loved the way they spoke and the way they used language. It seemed to me to be so much more colorful, just a beautiful form of

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expression. For instance, to say that a creek comes down the mountain, they would say "a creek comes down the mountain and then turkey tails out in the bottom"; or to say, "a man has daddyed more children than anyone else in the county". I just love these very decorative and precise and beautiful forms of English. The main thing that spurred me to write this novel was to use this language in context as a way to preserve it. I think of myself as a fiction writer but also as a documentarian. I have been privileged to grow up and hear people who spoke like the characters in my book and to hear stories, histories, ballads and bits of folklore. I thought about how to preserve it a long time before I ever started to write. I really wanted to use the dialect in context and at first had a hard time doing it, but that was one of my main aims of the book.

As shown in the narrative voices and interactions of the novel's character, traditionally, the Appalachian region has been recognized as an area suspicious and wary of outsiders. Lee Smith skillfully shows this aspect in her character narratives and experiences of outsiders Jennifer Bingham and Richard Burlage in the novel. Richard notes in his journal, "For I am what they call a 'foreigner.' As they use it, this term does not necessarily refer to someone from another country, or even from another state, but simply to anybody who was not born in this area of the county" (Smith 125). Mrs. Smith also reveals to the reader that some individuals who are native can be viewed as "others" within their own communities.

In this section I will also explore Lee Smith's usage of the theme of belonging and searching for who they are and their place by the various characters in the novel. This is an accurate attribute seen in many native Appalachians and another element in the novel which gives an authenticity to the work.

## **Conclusion**

In this case study of the invisible minority of the Appalachia region of the United States, my research has explored and revealed facts about the reclusive people, culture and language of the region. To assist in my research I chose the award winning novel *Oral History* by noted southern Appalachian writer Lee Smith. I chose this particular author and novel as my focus for they are considered by most in the literary community to accurately and clearly represent the literary and cultural aspects of the Appalachian

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region. Also, native born author, Lee Smith, is considered the ultimate literary voice for the region and its culture. In an article in the Los Angeles Times Magazine on May 21, 1995 Author and Historian, Peter Guralnick wrote:

Lee Smith made a giant leap into the mainstream when *Oral History* was published. With that novel, she became the titular queen of the new Southern regional movement”, defined as a "simultaneous embrace of past and present, this insistent chronicling of the small, heroic battles of the human spirit, a recognition of the dignity and absurdity of the commonplace. Lee Smith writes stories with an exceptionally strong sense of place. (McDonald 48-1996).

Tapping into her upbringing and firsthand knowledge of the region and culture, author Lee Smith created narrative complexity with regional dialects with first and third person points of view. Mrs. Smith masterfully interwove the story with multilayers of voices and variety of perspectives which created in the mind of each reader a clear picture of family, culture, traditions of the Appalachian region. Her in depth knowledge and writings, along with the personal interview I conducted with her greatly assisted in the exploration and discovery of various aspects of the region, its history, as well as, its concerns and misperceptions by outsiders.

Through my various research sources along with the novel, *Oral History*, several points of importance were brought to light or came to be noted. Stereotyping, the theme of belonging and dreams of better life, strong sense of place, the importance of family and community, as well as, the traditional oral histories and stories of the region. These have been explored in my paper and aided in the forming of a positive and accurate portrayal of the people, minority culture and region of Appalachia. Humans tend to form conceptions and images from the information they have whether it is correct or not. This human characteristic has contributed to the misconceptions of the Appalachian culture for centuries and is just now starting to be corrected by interaction with the outside cultures as well as new Southern writers who include facts and truths in their writings, such as Lee Smith. “The Appalachian culture is based on subsistence agriculture and hunting, not on industrial class structured ways of existence.” (Barker 102). New people, mostly the younger, that move to Appalachia try to change it and make it more modern. They are

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ashamed of the image outsiders give to Appalachia. They try to get rid of stereotype images by removing all things old and different from outside things. They believe times have changed and Appalachia must catch up. However, a larger group feels differently, and there are many new projects started to create pride in and the preservation of traditional ways and lifestyles.

This research and case study brings to light the truth of a minority culture and region previously invisible and misunderstood by the literary circles of the outside world. It will be of great benefit to the field of American studies by providing Americanists accurate information and tools in understanding the history, the literary as well as the cultural diversity of the United States.