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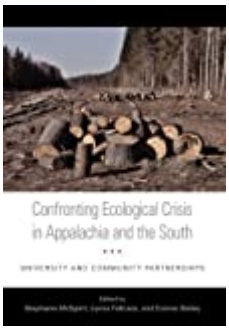
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Stephanie McSpirit, Lynne Faltraco, Conner Bailey, eds. *Confronting Ecological Crisis in Appalachia and the South: University and Community Partnerships.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. xiii + 269 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3619-6.

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Commissioned by Richard C. Smoot (Bluegrass Community and Technical College)

The editors have assembled a well-written, compelling work, written by environmental activists living (as the title suggests) in the southern Appalachian Mountains. The editors have singly or jointly contributed three chapters plus the introduction and conclusion. The editors, Stephanie McSpirit, Lynne Faltraco, and Conner Bailey, have a long background in environmental activism, rural development, or research methodology. A majority of the articles are written by academics (mostly sociologists) but this is not to say the articles are heavy on scholarly jargon or too dense for non-scholars. The articles, however, are heavy on process, which some historians will find puzzling. Historians who are not interested in the makeup of a questionnaire, group dynamics, or research strategies, may find small parts of the book tedious. The final outcome of the various crises, does not seem to be the point of the stories. In each crisis (there are eleven), itâs the journey that matters, not the final destination.

Every chapter relates a different crisis, some years in the making, and how local activists confronted it. Not all environmental crises ended successfully, but at least one group of activists decided to continue the âgood fightâ and remains actively monitoring it (p. 122). A common theme in all the chapters is how local, state, and national government agencies could not be counted on to help citizens in their fight. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is criticized often and disparaged as the Industrial Protection Agency (IPA). In the introduction the editors state, âLetâs face it, government, corporations, and the military lie. They have institutional interests and they hire people to carry out and promote those interestsâ (p. 5). The activists fight coal and timber companies, an industrial hog farm, and the U.S. Army.

Other major subthemes, often repeated, are: What is the role of academia in the world outside the boundaries of the university? What role, if any, do university or college professors have in the world beyond their campuses? Should involvement in activities like environmental activism count toward a professorâs tenure and promotion? This is understandable, considering the bookâs subtitle (*University and Community Partnerships*). Much of the foreword concerns the dilemma faced by the thirteen authors who are academics (there were twenty authors in all). âShould [they] be neutral, unbiased, and detached,â for this neutrality is what gives the academics their credibility (pp. vii-ix)? Or should they become involved? It is refreshing, and unexpected, to read such a forthright analysis of academia and the tenure and promotion process. Many of the authors state that they would have

helped their fellow citizens fight for a cause that would have been mutually beneficial to them all, but they could not have achieved tenure or promotion if they had. One academic even apologized for not helping, and claims she felt like a parasite, sitting in on meetings, doing nothing to help, simply recording the groupâs activities, and using what she needed from the experience to gain promotion, which she later earned. It is obvious many of the authors think the tenure and promotion process needs to be changed.

Institutions of higher education, the editors contend, especially public land-grant universities, have a responsibility to the people who support them. For this reason some of the authors took an active role, and got their students involved in documenting, recording, and publicizing many of the ecological crises. According to the editors, the university and community partnerships have become increasingly important in fighting ecological disasters (p. 7).

The southern Appalachian Mountains, although rich in natural resources, have a long history of ecological abuse, and the authors blame this on the high percentage of land and businesses owned by outside interests. Consequently, decisions affecting the people and the ecology of the area are made by people who do not have to live with the results. This is not to say that the Southern Highlanders are victims; the book outlines the different ways they are fighting back.

Every crisis in the book followed the same basic outline. Local citizens became aware of an environmental crisis, polluted water or dangerous air-borne emissions being the most common. Many of the crises had already impacted the health and quality of life of the activistsâ communities before they decided to act. So a meeting of concerned citizens was organized and a committee formed. In a relatively short time the committee found that government agencies could or would not help them, and the committee needed people who possessed expertise the committee did not have. Some groups turned to a nearby university or college for help, but eventually all the groups turned to the real heroes of these stories, the nonprofits that helped the groups with expertise and funding. Two organizations come up repeatedly, the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Highlander Research and Education Center.

Funding agencies not only provided funds, but counseled the groups on ways to fight the large companies or the government agencies doing the polluting, provided legal advice, and became a clearing house for activist groups scattered throughout the Appalachian region. A lot of activism is hard work: writing surveys, organizing interviews, tabulating information, reading government reports, and strategizing long and complicated legal fights. Many of the fights took years.

One crisis deserves a closer look. In chapter 1, citizens of Bell County, Kentucky, formed the Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens (YCCC) in 1980 after odors from Yellow Creek, which runs through Middlesboro and past a local tannery, began making residents of Yellow Creek valley sick. The tannery had been polluting the creek for about a hundred years and by 1976 all aquatic life in the creek was dead. Although Middlesboro has a sewage treatment plant, effluence from the tannery overwhelmed the capacity of the plant.

After the EPA and the Bell County Health Department refused to help the YCCC, and the Kentucky Environmental Agency was of very little help, the group turned to Vanderbilt University, which helped them prepare a survey and canvas Yellow Creek valley residents. The survey found that valley residents suffered more cases than the national average of kidney disease, dizziness, and nausea even though all residents drank bottled water. In 1983 the YCCC with the help of the Highlander Research and Education Center filed a $31 million class action suit against the city of Middlesboro for failing to regulate the tannery waste sufficiently. Two years later the YCCC signed a consent decree with the city of Middlesboro, along with several other interested parties. The decree allowed the city to continue polluting Yellow Creek with toxins, in violation of the Clean Water Act. The decree, however, specified a series of increasingly strict goals of lowered amounts of discharge allowed into the creek. Over time the city was required to come into compliance with the Clean Water Act.

Although a well-edited work filled with compelling stories, this is not, strictly speaking, a work of history. It is a book about how several local environmental activist groups in the southern Appalachian region confronted polluters. It is a how-to manual, if you will. Granted that it is not a work of history, *Confronting Ecological Crisis in Appalachia and the South* will benefit historians researching southern Appalachian history, the environment, or the local history of the region.

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