

“Which Way to the Road Out of Poverty?” From the *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, Vol. 6, Nos. 1 & 2 (Spring/Fall 2000).

Review of Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee, *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

When I began graduate studies in Sociology at the University of Kentucky in fall 1969, department chair Tom Ford, knowing of my work with the Appalachian Volunteers, immediately introduced me to James S. Brown, who remained a friend and mentor as I completed my dissertation on the Central Appalachian coalfields. At UK I also worked as a teaching assistant with Clyde McCoy, who collaborated with Brown in follow-up studies of migrants from Beech Creek to Ohio.

With many fond memories of Brown, I particularly appreciate what Billings and Blee have done in extending his pioneering work on Beech Creek, begun in 1942, back to the early 1800s through an extraordinary detailed analysis of U.S. Census manuscripts and county documents including tax records, property transactions, and civil and criminal court case files. The result is an unmatched longitudinal study of social structure and change in one local jurisdiction -- Clay County, Kentucky.

What most provoked my meditations on this book, however, was not the painstaking historical analysis of Billings and Blee but the set of questions about the origins and maintenance of poverty with which they begin and end their study. These questions recall for me the issues of Appalachian poverty and social policy that motivated my work at UK in the 1970s. In my dissertation and in several articles, two co-authored with Billings, I explored three models attempting to account for poverty in Appalachia, in a framework initiated by Helen Lewis: culture of poverty, regional development, and internal colonialism. Although it was vital in highlighting issues of political and economic power, the internal colonialism model, we had agreed by the end of the 1970s, also had its shortcomings in focusing on absentee ownership and control of land and corporations.

By the time I left UK and its Appalachian Center in 1981, I had concluded we needed a more complex model of a peripheral region within an advanced capitalist country. I had not gotten down to the task of specifying what that might mean, particularly in terms of policies for social and economic development. My academic concerns after moving to Sonoma State University in California shifted to social movements, and I have not returned directly to the subjects that so engaged me at UK.

The outstanding contribution which Billings and Blee make on the sources of poverty is to show how deeply rooted the problem is in what they call the local state, that system of local politics and power, characterized all too often in central Appalachia by corruption and clientelism. Longstanding local elites welcome public programs that can expand their patronage networks, but often resist economic development activities that would threaten their control of resources. The regional development model, underlying many of the programs of the Appalachian Regional Commission, calls for improving social and

economic infrastructure – highways, industrial sites, water and sewer systems, improved schools and hospitals – that can attract private industry through the workings of the market economy.

Billings and Blee suggest that local elites can thwart this development by failing to support those activities they can't control. The bleak prospect this presents for Central Appalachia led me to reflect on the community where I have been living in northern California for nearly twenty years, Sonoma County. Although it has many differences from Lexington/Fayette County, Kentucky, where I lived for the dozen years I spent at UK, Santa Rosa/Sonoma County has some broad similarities in its development and relationship to its rural hinterlands. A comparison sheds some light on the growth center concept that is part of the ARC's regional development model. Both localities are examples of the intermediate-size cities which growth center theory predicts will spark economic development in their peripheries.

In the 1930s Sonoma County was itself a rural hinterland producing agricultural products primarily for a regional market in the San Francisco Bay Area. A promising grape and wine industry had been held in abeyance by Prohibition during the 1920s and 30s. Local elites strongly promoted the construction of the Golden Gate bridge in the 1930s and the development of highway 101 north to the Oregon border (the local version of an Appalachian Regional Highway), which opened a quick route to San Francisco. Only well after World War II, in the 1950s and 60s, did new industrial companies begin to locate in the county, with a Hewlett-Packard plant in Santa Rosa playing a similar lead role to that played by IBM in Lexington.

Both cities changed from sleepy agricultural county seats to bustling regional centers of banking, commerce, higher education, and health services. The Sonoma County population was also swelled in the 1970s by young "back to the land" refugees from the Bay Area, as well as retirees with moderate to higher incomes. The old local political and economic elites of Sonoma County were essentially swamped by newcomers as the population doubled and then doubled again by the 1990s. After initial cultural conflicts, lasting perhaps a decade or more, a mood of mutual tolerance took hold. Local politics was forced to adapt to a variety of new constituents and outlooks.

During the 1990s Sonoma County found itself the center of a new telecommunications industry, a "Telecom Valley" spun off from Silicon Valley south of San Francisco, resulting in a booming economy with an unemployment rate presently around three percent. The rural counties to the north of Santa Rosa, facing a declining timber industry, have not yet been able to attract much in the way of high tech industry, and have unemployment rates two to three times that of Sonoma County. Nor have abundant recreational resources or the ability to attract lower to moderate income retirees made up the difference. In the "Emerald Triangle" of California's north coast timber counties, marijuana has become a cash crop rivaling timber, a phenomenon I understand is not unknown in the mountain counties bordering Kentucky's Bluegrass. Also in Oregon high tech development has flourished along with agriculture in the Willamette Valley south from Portland, between the Coast Range and the Cascades, but with few exceptions

communities east of the Cascades have had little luck attracting new industries. Workers fleeing skyrocketing real estate prices in Sonoma County now commute 60 minutes or more from northern counties to Santa Rosa.

Similarly, in Kentucky one can imagine that the spread of modern manufacturing and other high tech industry will happen in the central Bluegrass within a 45-minute drive of Lexington well before outside companies would be attracted to the mountain counties. Eventually such localities as London/Corbin, sharing access to a vital transportation corridor like I-75, may become satellite growth areas attracting commuters down the parkway from economically depressed areas like Clay County. One bright spot in the rural areas north of Santa Rosa in California has been the flourishing of home-based enterprises – writers, designers, consultants, telecommuters, other small businesses that often use the internet to communicate or the Web to sell products.

But this is hardly the vision of thriving mountain communities with a revived local employment base that the Appalachian regional planners put forth in the 1960s. If California and Oregon have difficulty spreading new wave industries to moderately remote rural areas, is there hope for Central Appalachia? Are there no other options for breaking the cycle of poverty in declining resource extraction regions? If swamping the old elites with newcomers is an unlikely -- and perhaps undesirable -- prospect for eastern Kentucky, what then?

Billings and Blee make one intriguing suggestion for disrupting the old patronage systems of local elites --vigorous prosecution by state officials of local corruption. They also argue for the necessity of sustaining and supporting local social capital – networks of reciprocity among kin and neighbors that have served mountain communities as survival systems for generations. Such networks could be the foundation for locally generated family enterprises and small businesses, perhaps supported by micro-lending programs.

Billings and Blee's book points to the need for case studies of successes in local enterprise development in mountain counties, and whether such successes relate to the openness of the local political system. I'd also like to read more about the comparative success of migrants out of Clay County, and whether the migration stream has shifted from Ohio to central Kentucky, and with what effects. Certainly the road out of poverty will be longer and more rocky than we hoped three decades ago.