

Dudley Cocke

Roadside Theater director and writer Dudley Cocke has worked for 30 years with the internationally known multi-media production center, Appalshop, in Whitesburg, Ky. Cocke is the 2002 recipient of the Heinz Award for Arts and Humanities. Appalshop celebrates its 35th anniversary in 2005.

A wink and a laugh. What do Li'l Abner, "The Beverly Hillbillies," and "Deliverance" all have in common?

Well, for one thing, they're products of our popular culture – Appalachian stereotypes to be sure, but meant to be greeted with a wink and a laugh. Why, then, isn't everyone laughing?

Unfortunately, the Appalachian stereotype has been and continues to be presented as more than a joke that we all can enjoy. In "A Study of History" (1935), Arnold Toynbee wrote:

"The Appalachian mountain people at this day are no better than barbarians. They are the American counterparts of the latter-day white barbarians of the Old World, the Rifis and Kurds and Hairy Ainu."

Hairy Ainu, ouch! (It's a fact that Toynbee never visited the Appalachian mountains.)

Toynbee wasn't alone. In 1912, the *New York Times* proclaimed on its editorial page:

"The majority of mountain people are unprincipled ruffians. There are two remedies only: education or extermination." Extermination? That's why people aren't laughing.

Secession the answer? So it's no wonder that for the past 30 years I have periodically heard late night talk of secession: Forget Richmond, Raleigh, Charleston and Nashville – they don't know us! By God, we'll secede! "The State of Appalachia" – it has a certain ring.

In the early 1780s, in the bright new day of independence, there was an attempt to establish just such a political entity, dubbed the State of Franklin. Boundaries were negotiated with the Cherokee and a state constitution drafted.

One of my kinsfolk (William Cocke) was dispatched to Philadelphia with the petition for statehood. Congress pretended he wasn't there, leaving him pacing and sputtering in its antechamber.

Returning to Tennessee empty handed, it wasn't long before Cousin William, never one to give up on a grudge, lit out for the

wilds of Mississippi, which he reckoned were 600 miles farther from central government – maybe even further psychologically.

The impact of the coalfields. It was about 100 years later, in the 1880s and '90s, that coal speculators from the eastern cities rolled into central Appalachia, wild-eyed and promising to turn places like little bitty Big Stone Gap, Va. into the mighty Pittsburgh of the South. Not every local was buying the program, fearing the end of a cherished frontier way of life.

Thus began the 100-year absentee ownership of the Appalachian coalfields by national and eventually transnational energy conglomerates. To control the coalfield economy from New York or London, it helps to control the courthouse and schoolhouse; it helps to have allies in local, state and federal government; it helps to have others think of the natives as less than human. The ultimate control, of course, is when the natives themselves take the negative stereotypes to heart.

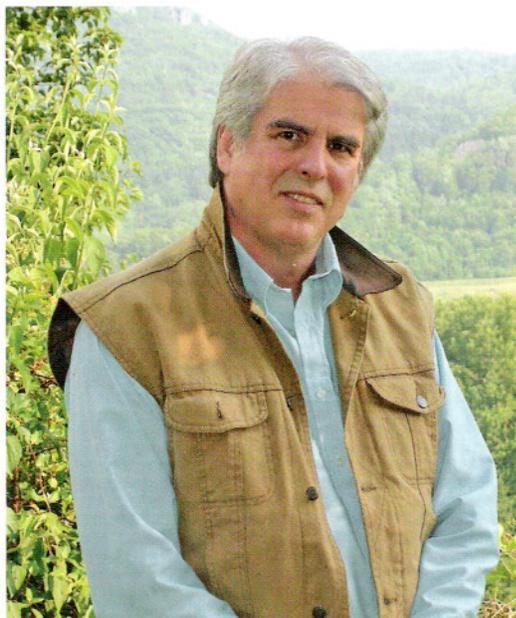
Now in 2005, the coal industry has left places like Big Stone Gap, packed up and gone overseas. So what's next?

Taking the longer view. Maybe the question has been the same for the past 200 years: How much political, economic, and cultural self-control will and can Appalachia exercise over its future?

I see that's a question lots of people are asking themselves about their regions, so I recommend that we stand here.

Let's not pack our bags for Mississippi, or anywhere else. Let's take our stand here. Let's contemplate the mountains, and think about what we want of this place for our children, grands and greats. Let's weigh our decisions against the future; let's take the longer view.

Seventy-five years from today, in 2080, people living in these Appalachian mountains will thank us from the bottom of their hearts if they can see that we made our decisions about the environment, the economy, our schools and communities thinking of them.



H WILLIAM SMITH

TAKING A STAND. "The State of Appalachia' – it has a certain ring."