



POVERTY A STAPLE IN APPALACHIAN COAL COUNTRY

By Michael J. Carroll

Appalachia was in trouble long before I arrived there as a newly minted legal services lawyer some 35 years ago. It was also in trouble 100 years ago during the coal wars in which union miners fought for basic human, civil and economic rights. It is still in trouble now 50 years after a war on poverty was declared to rescue it and other poor rural and urban parts of this country.

County, W. Va. After my interview at the main legal services office in Charleston, I got on a bus and rode...for hours. The proverbial crow could have flown the distance in an hour. The bus took many. The narrow winding two-lane roads – even the West Virginia Turnpike was two lanes then – and the stops in scores

I grew up in the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania and knew a little about coal country. I was not prepared for the poverty and hard life of the southern mountains.

I was assigned to the legal services office in Welch, W. Va., the McDowell County seat. McDowell makes the news now and then as a rural compliment to the urban poverty of cities like Camden, N.J., where I would work in later years at legal aid and the public defender.

McDowell is also sometimes used as a media placeholder at the lower end of the life expectancy and income continuums, compared unfavorably to places like Fairfax County, Va., on the other end of the continuum – a half-day's drive by one measure, and a million miles away by another. An average man in Fairfax can expect to see age 82. A man in McDowell can count on 64 years. In Fairfax County, the median annual income is five times that of McDowell County.

It was late spring when I first saw Welch, McDowell

of small coal towns and crossroad patches made for a long dizzying journey, often through tree-and mountain-shadowed midday twilight.

When I arrived in Welch I found a town clinging to a narrow strip of flat land wedged between mountains on one side and the river a few hundred yards on the other. A lot of hardworking people were trying to cling to mining jobs fast disappearing.

Fall in the mountains had its pretty side, more so if you drove an hour or two to escape coal country. Fall yielded to winter which brought days so short they fit better nearer the Arctic Circle than in the middle of North America. At the time of the winter solstice the sun did not clear the mountains surrounding Welch until midmorning, and disappeared below them by mid-afternoon.

Welch once had a Hollywood moment. It was featured in the film "Matewan," the story of a 1920 coal miners' strike



that turned into a war. At the end of the movie the epilogue noted that Sid Hatfield, the police chief who sided with the miners, was shot to death by Baldwin-Felts detectives as he walked up the steps of the McDowell County courthouse – the place where I first practiced law.

There is a long history of this country discovering Appalachian poverty and then forgetting about it. That poverty ebbs and flows but never disappears. Each time it ebbs, it ebbs a little less and flows back a little more.

John F. Kennedy discovered the West Virginia poor during the 1960 presidential primary elections. He spent lots of hours and lots of his father's money fighting to prove that a Catholic could win in a Protestant state, then go on to win the presidency in a still Protestant-dominated country. He won the West Virginia primary, the nomination, and finally the White House. He did not forget the Appalachian poor. As president, he tried to do something about it. Then he died. His brother Bobby tried to do something as cabinet officer, senator and presidential candidate. Then he died. Both murdered.

JFK's successor, President Lyndon Johnson (LBJ) also tried, declaring his War on Poverty 50 years ago and opening a major front in Appalachia. Medicare, Medicaid and school

lunches helped lift many in the mountains out of poverty for a time, like Social Security had done earlier for the elderly.

In recent years, the disappearance of good-paying mining jobs and the rise in drug use have destroyed families and communities in southern West Virginia with McDowell hit

hard. Nearly half of the children do not live with a biological parent. Fewer than one in three McDowell residents is now in the labor force. Government programs, including black lung benefits, account for half of the income of county residents. Many would not survive without them.

The rough statistics go on. You can discount some here and explain away some there, but the overall picture cannot be denied and is not good.

One hundred years after the coal wars and 50 years after the declaration of the War on Poverty, Appalachia is still in trouble. The nation has discovered poverty once again in the southern mountains. People there are still fighting hard to survive. The new national plan seems to be to do nothing for them. ■

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