THE OLD MOUNTAINS
Stanley D. Brunn

In the spring of its life, the valley in the Cumberland Plateau had a hardwood forest so thick that light barely penetrated through to the ground. Oak, laurel, walnut, and maple trees grew on the green slopes, while rhododendron and wild flame azaleas colored the underbrush. Here and there were dogwood and redbud trees. With summer came settlers from the young nation's east coast, most on their way somewhere else, but some choosing to stay and try to farm the forest soils or cut the timber. The town was founded in autumn times, self-reliant and isolated in its valley, nestled amid the ridges of the smokey mountains. Log cabins gave way to frame houses made of wood, laid out in a line along the valley floor. The coal companies came in early winter. They offered to buy rights to the earth, and the people of the mountains sold their land cheaply. Soon, the locals themselves were working for the companies, tunneling into the hills and scraping out the black diamonds. But the pace was not fast enough, and the companies began stripping away the very land to bring the coal out more cheaply and rush it off to places outside. Tall, gray slag heaps of coal and slate buried the forest, and the slopes became gashed and decapitated.

The mountains and the people were old now, and in its late winter, the town was winding down. Measured in miles, the plateau was smack in the middle between the huge cities of the east and the rich central heartland; and yet, was there any other place so alone or so far away?

THE OLD MOUNTAINS
Sergei Rogachev

Low, monotonous, forest-covered mountains encircle the gloomy city, as if sucking it into the treacherous vortex of their topography. Or perhaps this place, which emerged for the sole purpose of digging into the stone innards of the mountains, is really burying itself alive in them. When the infrequent sunshine is followed by long stormy periods, gray mists of poison belched forth by industrial smokestacks smother the basin. As the smoke mixes with fog and snowdrifts, it seems as if the treacherous quagmire of this mountain bog has swallowed up the city, its surrounding mines, sooty blast furnaces, and screeching machinery. Suddenly the snowy gloom is penetrated by shafts of light. But it is only searchlights on the perimeter of the city's famous labor camp, where the son-in-law of the once omnipotent Brezhnev paces among other fallen men of power.

These images are brush strokes for a portrait of Nizhny Tagil - the city which many hold to be the quintessence of the Urals. The writer Mamin-Sibiryak, who was born in the Urals and loved the region, said that Nizhnyi Tagil is "the most dear child of the Urals, closest to its stone heart." What kind of region could give birth to such a child? What kind of place has a heart of stone?
THE URAL MOUNTAINS: NOT MUCH OF A BARRIER

The Urals may be the most elderly young mountains on earth. Although geologically they are considered recent, a more accurate term is “rejuvenated.” Fresh tectonic uplift uncovered the base of more ancient mountains, exposing mineral riches accumulated over millennia. The region’s pioneers were startled with miraculous treasures that seemed like easy pickings. In fact, they say that the first deposits were discovered when the wind blew down trees and revealed precious minerals right there on the roots. From those dead roots grew the quarries and ironworks which made the Urals famous later in the 18th century.

While vernacular images of most Russian regions are somewhat vague, the Urals provokes a definite, if somewhat unflattering response. When you ask someone “so, what are these Urals?” the answer will be a prompt, “well, they’re mountains,” but the word “mountains” would likely be blurted out with a hint of doubt - it’s not Mountains with a capital “M” (the way people of the Russian flatlands speak of the Caucasus and Pamirs with a combination of admiration and awe). The average elevation in the Urals is only about 3,000 feet, with the highest point at 5,600 feet - hardly a mountain climber’s challenge. Strong river erosion has hacked up the mountains, making them easily passable. Some rivers even defiantly flow westward, despite the fact that their sources are on the eastern slopes. Just as the rivers do not “notice” the Urals, the passengers of the Trans-Siberian railroad who stream across the mountains in numbers barely know they’ve been over a range. The amount of actual climbing that the trains have to do is only about 300 to 500 feet, a disappointingly easy victory for the travellers, who then spread the disparaging image of mountains with a small “m.” And yet, in modern spoken Russian, the very expression “beyond the Urals” is synonymous with crossing a certain critical threshold. Stretching for about 2,000 miles almost strictly north-south from the icefields of the northern Arctic Ocean to the deserts of

THE EASTERN MOUNTAINS: NO LONGER A BARRIER

The old mountains of a young continent are found in Appalachia. In geography books, you may just as often see them called “plateaus” or “highlands,” reserving the term “mountains” for the Rockies or Cascades. Yet in American history, the Appalachian system represented a formidable barrier to westward migration. European-American settlers, moving in from the coast, encountered the escarpment wall of the eastern side of Appalachia, and it must have seemed that this region was the mountains indeed, stretching from the Canadian Maritimes all the way to northeastern Mississippi. Appalachia consists of several distinct echelons; the Blue Ridge Mountains, a very old range of granitic mountains mostly in Virginia and North Carolina; a series of parallel ridges and valleys from Pennsylvania to Alabama; and two plateaus, the Alleghany in the north and Cumberland in the south. Today, a traveler through the old mountain regions will not find them much trouble to cross, but may be touched by the way the areas hang on to their beauty, with small towns nestled in the valleys, some huge areas of what looked to be heavily forested and mined lands, and small farms, often crawling up the steep hillsides. It might be surprising to the motorist on the interstate highways that now crisscross the mountains to realize how difficult an impediment they were in the 18th century, a barrier that was both physical and psychological. It was not easy for many early settlers on the eastern coast to consider migrating inland because there were too few easy routes. Even those gaps that permitted access across the mountains still required vast amounts of energy and skill.

When the settlement wave finally did breach the mountain passes, people flooded through, and the mountains gave way like a broken dam. As the country grew and expanded, the mountains did not seem so tough to conquer anymore - in fact they seemed a little older every year. They seemed to get emptier too, like a shrunken shell of their old self. Although in area the region is larger than California, its population pales
Kazakhstan, the Urals stand in the way of all routes to the east. Traversing these mountains is perceived as moving beyond a psychological frontier delimiting the Real Russia. Until as late as the mid-twentieth century, the expression “from the Carpathians to the Urals” or “from the Baltic to the Urals” was used in Russia to denote the idea of the “tamed” and lived-in part of the state.

The Novgorodians who first crossed the Urals in the 12th century in the quest for Siberian furs called the mountains by the cold and cruel word “stone.” In doing so, they defined the character of the Urals not by its topography, but by the nature of its soil. This sterile land was too inhospitable for Russian peasants - the shoulders of the Urals reach into the Arctic, and the harshness of the north barrels down the cold stony backbone of the range far toward the south. The arriving Russians were accustomed to the softness of the plain where sediments hid the rock, and found this alien, exposed stone frightening. Maneuvering along river valleys, they hurried to reach the West Siberian Plain, a place that evoked images of the more familiar Russian flatlands. Therefore, although on a geologic map the Urals are a mountain range thrust between two great plains, they have actually long been a type of trench on the map of Russian colonization: western Siberia on the other side of the mountains was settled before the Urals themselves. Two well-settled and urbanized belts of piedmont preceded the development of the mountains proper. Defining the boundaries of the Old Mountains is therefore no easy task.

Today, western approaches to the Urals are controlled by two major administrative centers - Perm in the north and Ufa in the south, each of them gripping its respective section of the Urals with a double-pronged fork of arterial railways. In pre-revolutionary Russia the Urals region was governed from Perm and Ufa. Both cities grew beyond the narrow mining core of the Urals, as factories for the further processing of Uralian mineral resources emerged along the transport routes. It was as if the mining industry rolled off the slopes westward in a kind of economic debris flow, following the

by comparison, as about half of Appalachians live in scattered rural areas. Where are all the cities here? Why does the region seem “empty?”

For early Americans who wanted to venture westward into the anticipated rich agricultural interior, the Appalachians were viewed as a place to go through in order to get somewhere else. Early European frontier settlement in the late eighteenth century was confined to a few select roads, passes, and rivers. Three main routes through the mountain barrier were used: the forks of the Ohio River, the Cumberland Gap along the southern edge of the Virginia/Kentucky border (what became the “Wilderness Road”), and the valley of East Tennessee. By 1800 the National Road went up the Potomac to the Ohio. Many who traversed the mountains realized the opportunities were few for large numbers, so most stopped briefly and went farther west into central Tennessee, the Kentucky Bluegrass, and Ohio, all places with better agricultural lands that could support higher population densities. Those few who remained fashioned an economy and livelihood strongly tied to timber and mining rather than agriculture. They also became increasingly bypassed by larger numbers of people moving into the continent’s interior. In a sense they became isolated by choice from the major currents of economic change that were sweeping the country.

Traversing any physical barrier is difficult, especially in times of slow transportation. There was also fear of the strong Native American nations (Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Choctaw) of southern Appalachia. Finally, the Appalachian system was a psychological barrier. Early explorers and veterans of military campaigns against the Native Americans returned home with tales that there were few easy passages in and around this thousand-mile mountain system. Probably more than one settler was also fearful of the forested mountains; these were unfamiliar terrains to those who grew up in northern Europe and in the flat coastal plains. Few African-Americans settled in the region, leaving it to become a stronghold of white Protestants. Despite the hazards, people from the east ventured into the mountains: Scots-Irish, English, French
stream of raw materials drawn from the Urals toward the main areas of consumption. As a result, the Urals as an industrial region is considerably tilted to the west with respect to its mountain backbone. The contours of the Old Mountains as a social and cultural region were defined by the pattern of Russian settlement. Gradually widening its stream, population movement crossed the Urals as a continuation of the original basis of the Russian eastward colonization - the Volga Basin. The eastern tributaries of the Volga (between the Kama and Samara Rivers) are like two beams of a slide projector which highlight the Russian-populated middle section. The overlap of this well-populated mid-section with the narrow Uralian backbone (beyond which the wormholes of mines and quarries seldom go) defines the quintessential Urals. Perm and Ufa have their counterparts within this ultimate Urals in the large cities of Ekaterinburg and Chelyabinsk.

THEME 1: AN ECONOMY AS WORN DOWN AS THE MOUNTAINS
A Region Used Up

If the Old Mountains seemed a region off the beaten path - an area to be traversed and forgotten - they became a place of interest with the discovery of the rich coal resources of Appalachia. The people of the region were often all too willing to sell their land for existing or speculative mineral value. Very quickly, outside companies obtained mineral rights to lands in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kentucky. These were available at cheap prices as much of the land was unused and had little value for agriculture. The beginnings of regional exploitation had arrived, in the sense that control of the properties and mines was by outsiders with little concern for the general welfare of the population or for the environments they were destroying to obtain fuel for industrial America. It is small wonder that Appalachians felt maltreated by outsiders. A list of offenders would include those who made much money mining a product from the region, but took it out and invested little in Appalachia, those outsiders who have a much higher standard of living because they burn cheap energy produced in Appalachia, and those who continue to see the region as beset with pressing economic and social problems, but steadfastly refuse to solve the root causes of the problems identified by government reports and scholars during the 1930s and again in the 1960s. These include high unemployment and underemployment (sometimes reaching 40 percent), acute rural poverty, dated industrial infrastructures, marginal agricultural economies, low education levels and inferior quality schools, poor job skills, an aging population, poor health standards, and inaccessibility to vital human services.
Before the Urals were tapped for resources, the Russian ferrous metals industry relied on deposits of bog ores with low iron content. The deposits of the Urals were far superior and were combined with an abundance of forests for burning charcoal—a true technological paradise for ironworking of that day. In the 18th-19th centuries, the technological advantages for the industry in the Urals clearly outweighed the locational disadvantage of great distance from consuming areas. Even British industry at the time of Industrial Revolution heavily relied on imported Uralian pig iron. The industrial development of the Urals took place simultaneously with the militarization of Russia’s economy that started with Peter the Great’s wars. By gearing Uralian industry to military needs the centralized Russian state reorganized the region’s mineral wealth into its territorial acquisitions.

Yet for all its importance, the Old Mountains region has always been a loser with respect to the interregional balance of national income. Both before and after the revolution, it sent out more wealth than it took in, and the economic history of the region is one of exploitation for the benefit of people from the outside. Industrial magnates turned pig iron, gold, and precious stones into a means for satisfying their own desires, regardless of the interests of the region: building mansions in St Petersburg or buying castles in Europe. “Be grateful at last: turn your attention to this part of the world which has adorned the whole world with the best amethysts on earth!” passionately implored artist Denisov-Ural’skiy at the end of the 19th century, but in vain. Repelled by the stone heart of the Urals, entrepreneurs who made their fortunes in the region could hardly resist the temptation to become absentee-magnates.

State intervention also revived the military role of the region. Many defense industries were evacuated from the central regions of the country during the Second World War. Just as in Peter the Great’s day, the Urals became the second echelon of defense for the country, a line of “industrial trenches” running parallel to the German front. A third of the country’s arms were produced here, including tanks (Nizhniy Tagil and

Coal mining remains the major industry in Appalachia. Kentucky, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania still produce about 40 percent of the bituminous coal of the United States. Other minerals mined in the region include limestone, feldspar, and oil. Coal was discovered in Appalachia in the 18th century, but became important when the industrial revolution started in earnest during the latter part of the last century and steel industries required vast amounts of coal. Engineering and geology teams from major steel companies in the Northeast ferreted out the sites of rich coal seams in Appalachia. But coal is a cyclical industry: times of high industrial demand give way to dips when unemployment rises. During hard times young and middle-aged miners and their families may migrate to nearby Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Knoxville hoping to find work. When the mines re-open, the workers often return home to work in the mines once again.

The human face of coal mining is partly reflected in the story of coal miners and their strikes and stoppages, sometimes violent and bloody. The story is also seen in the places where miners lived, coal mining towns which had a familiar appearance: rows of shotgun houses at the bottom of valleys (houses laid out straight from front to back, where it is said you could fire a shotgun into the living room and the shell would go through every room and out the back door), an occasional church (often of a European ethnic group brought in to mine the coal), and the most ostentatious houses of mine owners and officials on hillsides overlooking the settlement. Despite the early unionization of miners that helped improve labor conditions and incomes, glaring contrasts of wealth and poverty persist. An explosive example of class tensions in the area can be seen in Harlan County, Kentucky: one of the richest in the United States in terms of mineral profits, yet so poor in terms of per capita incomes that it went down in history as “Bloody Harlan” of miners’ revolts in the 1930s.

Many a coal mining town is indeed dismal, depressing, and an unhealthy place to live. Temperature inversions were not unusual in these valley settlements, and the dust
Chelyabinsk), military transport equipment (Miass), and chemical weapons. After the war, the region began to produce nuclear warheads (near Chelyabinsk) and bacteriological weapons (Ekaterinburg). Far from the prying eyes of western intelligence-gathering, the Urals became an area of absolute secrecy.

The Soviet galvanization of the nearly stiffened corpse of the antiquated industrial region had considerably worsened the unattractive features of the Urals, that repelled people even when the region was young. Mounds of tailings, unusable by-products from mining, pockmarked the face of the region, the stagnant air of intermontane basins filled with pollutants, and the shallow rivers lost the struggle to flush out polluted water. Such then was the fate of the Urals - from lofty heights to the abysses of worked out quarries; from the modest flames of early furnaces to the endless fire of radioactivity. Ernst Neizvestniy, a Urals-born sculptor, has designed a monument in Ekaterinburg to victims of the Stalin repression. It features two sobbing faces: Europe, shedding tears in the direction of Asia, and Asia in turn crying for Europe. There is a real grief in this heart of stone - this is the region that sacrificed itself at the altar of the Motherland.

A Region Propped Up

It would not be enough to say of the industrial Urals that it is merely an old region - it is an area of downright antiques. With a mixture of historian's pride and economist's sadness, guides will show a visitor industrial buildings constructed in the 18th century that still perform their original function. In almost any settlement people remember seeing the demolition of the last blast furnace or mechanical press built at the time of the 18th century Demidov magnates. Uralsian cities look like the untidy and disorganized display cases of a regional museum of technology, where antedeluvian factory buildings rub shoulders with industrial giants hastily built in the fever of the pre-war years and scattered specimens from the piecemeal modernization of the post-

from the mines was in the air one breathed, in the food one grew and ate, in the clean clothes one wore, and even inside the house. In the mines themselves, health and safety problems lurked. Machinery was dangerous, roof supports were unstable, dynamiting was reckless, and the all-pervasive coal stifled the lungs of workers through ten- and twelve-hour shifts. It was not unusual to have explosions, roof support collapses, and machinery accidents that resulted in loss of limbs. More silent were the deaths attributed to those who worked forty or fifty years or more in the mines and developed black lung disease. Those victims represent part of the social and health costs associated with years of working to produce energy for the nation's factories and utilities. Equally as destructive as the toll of human life has been what the coal economies have done to the environment. People welcomed early coal mining in Appalachia because it provided a dependable source of income, certainly much more than timber industry or eking out a survival existence from marginal and submarginal agricultural lands. Mining was seen as beneficial, and jobs and environmental quality were considered separately. Hillsides were being eaten away by huge machines, mountain tops were being removed and flattened to provide easier access to minable seams of quality coal, rivers and streams were turning ugly shades of yellows and browns, and the air was unfit to breathe. Land reclamation is now required after strip mining, but accusations of inefficient and half-hearted efforts still abound.

A Region Propped Up

The Old Mountains have been identified as a problem region far back in American history, when even Abraham Lincoln called for economic assistance to Appalachia. Numerous federal and state policies and programs have been implemented to try to end some of these problems, but the issues seem to persist.
war period. The Old Mountains were never able to accumulate enough capital to afford the luxury of rejuvenation. Big investment was directed there only during turning points of history: Peter the Great's perestroika of Russia in the early 18th century, Russia's European wars in the late 18th century, the war with Nazi Germany, and later the peak of the Cold War. Investment was always limited to the barest minimum necessary for immediate returns on capital, and was exclusively concentrated in the material sphere of production.

If in the past the mountains tolerated the plunder of their seemingly endless treasurehouse, now the steamshovels no longer dig into thick layers of minerals, but scrape the very bones of the exposed mountain skeleton. When mining development started, ores with about 66 percent iron content were worked, but now even 17 percent content ore is regarded as a lucky find. The metallurgical industry in the region is no longer a link in the technological chain converting Asian raw materials into European products.

The industrial structure of the Urals, with a preponderance of the obsolete smokestack industry, will continue to handicap its future development. The conversion of military industries has already dealt the region an extremely painful blow. This poorly planned process cut to the quick the very foundations of the economy in many major cities. There is little doubt that complete victory of the free-market economy in Russia will again spell death for the Urals, already suffering from the shift of investment from heavy industry to the consumer products sector. But the Urals is not an empty backwater that could weather the storm by living on social security. Today, the region ranks second only to the Core in terms of industrial output. The size of the region's population (about 13 million people) rules out a hands-off approach to its problems. As in no other region, the future of the Uralian economy, which had been saved by state intervention in the past, depends on the political course of the country.

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was created to resolve a host of rural problems in the southern Appalachians. In May of 1933 the authority was established by federal law "to improve navigation and provide flood control of the Tennessee River," as well as to deal with reforestation, encourage use of marginal lands, and help develop agriculture and industry in the Tennessee Valley. The people of the area at the time had incomes less than 45 percent of the national average. The 1940s was a big growth period for the TVA as dam construction and electricity generation became the cornerstones of its various projects. In 1933, only 3 percent of the farms in the valley had electric power; by 1950, the number approached 80 percent.

The TVA, however, was a top-down project, a child of the Roosevelt era designed to show what big government was capable of achieving. In a later attempt to improve the region's economy through more local approaches, the American government created the Appalachian Regional Commission in the 1960s across the thirteen states that contained portions of Appalachia. A host of programs were carried out with federal and state cooperation. Local and civic groups benefitted from the almost $6 billion of investment. Improved housing, job training, health services, transportation networks (in the early years of the program most money went into roads), and educational programs were but a few of the efforts to raise the region's standard of living and quality of life.

Government efforts to resolve the nagging human problems of Appalachia have met with some successes. New schools, clinics, libraries, bridges, small town airports, industrial parks and shopping centers represent part of the newly built landscape in the region. Programs for job retraining, training local health professionals, small business development, and environmental cleanup abound. These projects, small or large, visible or invisible, are funded not only with government money, but also by churches, unions, and philanthropic organizations, many of the same groups that invested in human welfare last century. Volunteers from outside Appalachia continue to contribute time and
THEME 2: A CULTURE WALLED UP IN THE MOUNTAINS

The pioneers who entered the mountains filled in the void left behind by more enterprising migrants en route to Siberia. The oldest Russian inhabitants of the mountains are Old Believers, who fled from governmental and Church persecution and intolerance in European Russia and found in the narrow river valleys of the Urals their burrow for hiding. Later, the population was largely formed from the ranks of "called up" people: destitutes unable to control their own fate who surrendered themselves to government agents recruiting for the factories of the Urals. The agents would "call up" these unfortunate souls at the bazaars - volunteers, yes, but then locked into a kind of industrial serfdom. The construction of factories in the Urals went hand-in-hand with the importation of serf peasants and the use of free settlers, who were "attached" to factories, fully dependent on the mining administration. This industrial serfdom was accompanied by other forms of forced settlement: exile and imprisonment. The region had no shortage of prisons, among them some of the best known in Russia: the Nizhniy Tagil labor camp, designed for formerly high ranking state officials, and Perm Camp, with the dubious distinction of being the most feared in the country. In the Soviet period, new migration flows into the Urals followed the age-old model of the "called up" people: contract laborers and the idealistic Komsomol youth, lured into sacrificing their best years "building Communism" out in the hinterland. Thus the settling of the Old Mountains took place in the passive mode: strong personalities with enough will to act independently seemed to avoid the area. How vastly different this type of settlement is from the pattern of the Russian Breadbasket steppes and even Siberia, where free pioneer settlements preceded government efforts. While self-reliant personalities bravely ventured into new frontiers, the more passive or outcasts allowed themselves to be squeezed into the stony dungeons of the Urals' canyons, mines, and sweatshops. If you want to call someone a hick in Russia, you may say "What is it with you? Are you from the Urals?"

and money to try and correct local problems. But in spite of these visible changes and successes in alleviating pressing human problems, the region remains poor, worn out, and neglected. Perhaps Appalachia has little political clout because it has few people scattered in rural areas in a dozen states; in a predominantly urban nation, where most voters live in cities, it is difficult to obtain federal and state funding and support for problematic rural regions. The "neglected" and "bypassed" nature of the region two hundred years ago still seems applicable today.

THEME 2: A CULTURE WALLED UP IN THE MOUNTAINS

The isolation of the people of the Old Mountains created a culture that became a living museum of American traditions. But while people who know how to build a wooden spinning wheel and construct a log cabin from scratch may still be found here, the uniqueness of the culture came at the price of education levels lower than national averages, poor access to ideas from the "outside," and a kind of siege mentality of regional pride. Jack Weller (who wrote about the region in *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia*) noted that such characteristics as traditionalism, independence, and fatalism seem to imbue the culture of the mountains.

It is little wonder that fatalism and fatalistic religions have support in coal-dependent economies, as many a mining community has experienced the human toll of coal mining: a walk through a local cemetery would show numbers who died the same day, many at very early ages. The number of families without fathers and husbands in mining towns shows the human tragedy of coal mining. The people of the region also had good reason to fear the outside world. Although the outsiders brought in capital to invest in the coal industry, they also took advantage of the local peoples' lack of sophistication to win mining rights cheaply. The federal government told them that their stills, representing years of traditional conversion of corn to "white lightin'" were suddenly illegal. The outsiders brought or lured in many miners. The immigration
Russians did not feel quite at home in the Urals, and they felt that hostile forces still lurked in the land beneath their feet, as if they lived on the back of a huge, sleeping dragon. Reptilian images were always associated with the Urals. Even in ancient Russian folklore, the monster dragon “Zmey Gorynych” was thought to have his lair in the Urals. (“Gorynych” in Russian can relate to both the terms “gora” for mountains and “gora” for grief). The best-known writer of the Urals, Paul Bazoiv, who drew from local folklore, peopled his mountain tales with myriads of tiny gorynychs—magical lizards who formed the retinue of the Queen of Copper Mountain (the most purely Uralian personage of Russian literature). Many young gem-seekers were lured by the cruel flirtation of this ice queen of the mountain and driven to death.

Warmth seeped out of the people held in the stony embrace of the Urals, until even their souls seemed cold as the stone. The folk tales of the Urals shocked the reader who has been steeped in the tradition of mainstream Russian folklore. What is jarring is the blurred lines between good and evil and the sense that people’s lives are controlled by fate and heartless forces. Another tragic theme; forming common threads in many Uralian tales, is the deficit of inspiration. “Worn out” is the regional dialect term best describing the physical and moral condition of workers in leading industries of the area.

Nationally-significant culture could not have bloomed from the cold stone of the Urals. Throughout their history, the Ural Mountains have not given Russian culture a single passionate poet, deep thinker, painter or composer of national fame; it did not nurture great examples of monastic ascetism or saintliness. Instead, it generated a whole constellation of technicians and inventors, representatives of professions demanding cold, calculating, reasoning minds. The Urals was home to innovators in various branches of technology: railroad builders, the inventor of the Russian steam engine, the inventor of radio, and the mastermind of Soviet nuclear programs (Kurchatov). Even the better known cultural figures of the region, who seem to have overcome the tenets in part because of the “bypassed” nature of the region. But to the insider of the Old Appalachians, isolation and inaccessibility represent a positive part of their heritage. The Balls were devised their own ways to entertain, to express themselves, constantly experiencing changes.

The mountain people were devising their own ways to entertain, to express themselves, and to survive in a harsh environment. Isolation helped preserve the cultural traditions. Balladeers traveled the mountains and celebrated folk stories in song. Dulcimers, banjos, and fiddles were made of locally available materials such as oak, creating fine instruments which may survive to this day. Many of the country’s major musical developments of this century, from blues to country to jazz, had southern origins. Country music emerged mostly from the southern Appalachian highlands but has become perhaps the standard music of the South and, increasingly, of the entire country. Since the 1920s, radio dispersed the knowledge of Appalachian music outside of the region, introduced the term “mountain barndance” into the American vocabulary, and publicized the songs, humor, and dialogue associated with the region. Many well-known Country and Bluegrass musicians can trace their personal roots and origins of their music to the region, especially to the central and southern Appalachians.
their heads. These labels implicitly deny them the “All-Russian-ness” of full-fledged national fame. Whereas the focus of truly Russian writers has always been on the eternal Faustian dilemmas of humanity, those in the Urals were more parochial, limiting their work to purely regional topics such as the daily life of factories, the folklore of prospectors, or descriptions of mountain landscapes. Only in sculpture did artists of the Urals breach the confines of purely regional fame and achieve renown all over Russia, perhaps inspired by the three-dimensionality of the mountains.

The Old Mountains has always been a region out of sync with time and surrounding space: a mountain barrier between Europe and Asia which was really no barrier at all, a forgotten place jumped over by voluntary settlers, but later populated by people not wanted elsewhere, a place impoverished despite its own riches, looking only inward—still held captive by the monster Gorynych, but safe in the isolation of its mountain box.

Popular forms of entertainment even among early settlers were music and story telling, both of which required little or no formal schooling. Legends and ghost stories were spun in the tradition of the Scots-Irish; this was not only a way for parents and grandparents to convey personal and family histories, but also to regale children. It has only been during the past several decades that these so-called “jack tales,” often humorous stories about politicians, lawyers, and favorite town drunks, have been collected from older generations. Valuable information has been gathered in recent years through a project known as “Foxfire,” founded by Eliott Wigginton, a school teacher in northern Georgia. He started a magazine with his students in the 1960s which encouraged them to mine the hills, but not for coal this time: the children interviewed members of their community and tapped into a treasure-trove of information on local culture: stories, instructions on cooking wild plants, and building log cabins, and a wealth of crafts from the Old Mountains. The Appalachian region has long been associated with “home made” items, be they pottery, tables, chairs, music instruments, dolls, toys, or quilts. Today, members of a new generation of Appalachian craftspeople have arisen, often living in artisans’ communities (such as Berea, Kentucky), and traveling to a series of crafts and antique fairs and exhibitions throughout America. The crafts industry thus represents a mix of “old and new” Appalachia. And while not employing large numbers of employees or generating huge sums of income for the region, these low-technology ventures are an integral part of the Appalachian cultural landscape.

Tradition is an appropriate term to describe the peoples of Appalachia. It is not difficult to understand the strong sense of pride and identity the residents have to their region, nor to understand why many people believe that the region has changed little for the better in recent decades.