

How Do Eastern Kentucky and Clay County People Feel?

[Reply to Annie Lowrey's "What is the Matter with Eastern Kentucky" (June 26, 2014)]

This summer a family stopped by with buckets of fresh produce. They said, "You shared with us food last winter and we want you to taste our stuff." Only among Appalachians can such produce taste so good, though that's impossible to quantify.

For Clay County Kentuckians to be dead last (3,135th) in the listing of American counties by the stats reviewed by Ms. Lowrey for the *New York Times* in June may seem a "fact" worth reporting, but with little regard to underdog feelings. And what does it do to Eastern Kentuckians declared to be living in the hardest of places in the U.S.? WE fall back on knowing we don't have congestion or high rents; we pick blackberries and hear mockingbirds; and we can't fall lower on accepted national standards. It's like being last in choice for a spontaneous ball game, and wondering just what is it all worth.

My residential Estill County is 117th from the bottom and my additional parish/(Powell County) is 103rd, but so what? Why fault Clay County for last place. In fact, a piece of my heart stays in Clay County upon discontinuing a two-decade-old ministry to prisoners at the two Federal prisons near Manchester. Even though invited to continue and with FBI clearance, the 200-mile weekly round trip was too much for an 80+-year-old with a full-time job in parishes and environmental work. But certainly with regrets!

The six sets of statistics that gave Clay County its ultimate underdog status were: educational achievement, life expectancy, employment rates, median income, disability reporting, and obesity. Other national stats could not have graded quality such as size, ethnic composition, or racial relations. Or could they in polite society? How about listing time it takes people to respond to others in emergencies? Or help given in times of shortages, sickness, or flooding? How about encouragement in artistic skills? Proportion of population gathering at celebrations or tragedies? Do lack of numbers justify omissions of quality of life factors? Or do they tell what a culture thinks is news fit to print?

Perhaps American progressives assign value in assembling certain facts and figures as assurance that knowledge will lead to improvement either by the target community or by those sympathetic enough to come and improve things. Or does it just reinforce flimsy and utterly tiresome stereotypes? On the other hand, conservative less-government Americans may say either "Who cares?" or "It's up to them" -- the afflicted. Appalachians have been subject to a wide variety of articles and studies; we recall newsmakers who coax kids to play in mud puddles to get the proper dirty look; we hear from devastated folks who after being interviewed were described as defecating in the floor cracks.

On deeper thought, all people have limitations that are hardly newsworthy; our treasures are harder to reveal and promote, and peer pressure and sophistication may deny them a ready hearing. To be at the bottom and still have hope is really a

valuable asset in our Appalachian culture -- and worth indicating but not always convincingly because it concedes to this ranking game. This much is true; we in Eastern Kentucky have been deeply hurt by reporting from even well-meaning individuals. We agree with Kentucky tourist personnel pointing out that one disparaging article costs months of positive promotion. Reinforcing stereotypes is detrimental to our economic health and this is worth emphasizing.

On the other hand, Clay County's uniqueness includes being the "Land of Swinging Bridges," some of the most lovely and practical structures; they caught the eye of noted Appalachian photographer Warren Brunner, who shows numerous Clay County bridges in his publications. For him and others, swinging bridges are vintage Appalachia. They challenge some, are needed by others, and are picturesque to virtually all. Residents crafted swinging bridges when roads lacked adequate creek crossings and sensitive streams in narrow valleys yielded sudden "high water" problems. Such bridges required adequate engineering as to location, choice of materials, and placement of anchoring posts and cables. Many remain scenic local artifacts as testimony to earlier building skills.

The county is also naturally scenic, and that impresses the seasonal passersby, but especially those coming in mid-spring when dogwoods, redbuds, and black locusts bloom, through summer's deep foliage and into autumn's change of leaves. Creeks and rock formations, hidden valleys and trees, yes, many trees in what naturalist Lucy Braun called the "Mixed Mesophytic Forest," the

oldest and most varied temperate forest in the world with over a hundred native species in a single location. This region ought to be declared a world heritage site, making its sightseeing far more valuable than its timber harvesting.

Clay County has its wealth of artists, for Appalachians have a store of musical and craft talents, all making do and expressing themselves with limited resources. This is the land of patchquilts and cornshuck dolls, of dulcimers and fiddlers. Folks take pride in their community, in annual festivals, in reenactment of historic events in the region, and currently in Clay County there as just been a well-attended "Salt Works Festival." A recent "Stay in Clay" citizen's program received first place in the 2014 Kentucky State Fair for its efforts at tourist promotion.

As spokesperson Maggie Miller knows, when you are behind, you must try harder.

When the Lowrey article was written a nurse who practiced physical therapy in the county for 32 years was forced to retire while approaching ninety years, due to impaired driving and walking skills. Sister Mary Glass insisted on returning to New York with no fanfares, no toasts, no dinners, even though she served so many for so long. Beside caregiving, Sister Mary gave much time to the Manchester federal prisoners and was regarded by many as a second mother; she regarded them as family and says she misses them dearly.

Needless to say, if my choice of residence would be between first place Los Alamos, New Mexico and 3,135th place Clay County, the latter would be my first choice, and I would not be so cruel

as to say why.

Al Fritsch, SJ