

THE STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA

BY MICHAEL KEARNS

DRIVING slowly along a mountain road in West Virginia, a motorist suddenly jams on his brakes as a landslide hits the road ahead of him. It piles onto the highway in a terrifying explosion of dirt and boulders. Then, as the driver sits horrified, a gaunt hill-billy crawls out from the débris. He waves through the spiraling cloud of dust, and yells: "Consarn it! That's the fourth time this morning I've fell outen that cornfield — and I've got eleven more rows to grub!"

The West Virginian gets a perverse pleasure out of spinning yarns like this on himself. He gleefully admits that he never wore shoes until his wedding day, claims that one leg is longer than the other (from walking along hillsides) and affirms that his dandruff is pure hayseed. The tendency to self-deprecation may appear sinister, perhaps even un-American, to chambers of commerce and professional boosters. But the West Virginian realizes, sadly perhaps, that most Americans regard his state as nothing but one great coal mine populated by a motley collection of snake-

worshiping hill-billies. He wards off contempt by telling jokes on himself. He knows, further, that his state is historically and geographically undistinguished. The only thing Robert Ripley could say about it was that it has the world's only monument to an apple.

Statistically, West Virginia is unimpressive. Its size is surpassed by 39 other states. Almost two dozen others have more population. Only Delaware has less inland water area. Geographically, the state is in an awkward position. The most easterly tip is as far east as Rochester; the opposite end is as far west as Michigan's Port Huron. The northern border is north of Pittsburgh; the southern is south of Richmond. From New York to Vermont the West Virginian assumes the rôle of a Southerner. Down South he's a Yankee. Along the Atlantic Coast he's a Westerner; in the West, an Easterner.

Practically no one of importance has come from West Virginia. The state has produced no Presidents, Presidents' wives or Vice-Presidents. Nor has so much as one prominent

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movie star, scientist, writer, artist, admiral, stage or radio personality or national sports champion come from West Virginia. ("Stonewall" Jackson was born in Clarksburg, but that was part of Virginia at the time.)

A West Virginia governor once had his car halted in New York's Times Square by a policeman. The officer grinned at the gathering crowds, pointed dramatically to the chief executive's "No. 1" license plate and shouted happily: "See, there really *is* a car in West Virginia!"

II

Only the very proud can afford the luxury of poking fun at themselves. And the West Virginian is proud, as only a mountaineer can be. His pride has in it something of the landed Englishman's quiet self-assurance and, paradoxically, something also of the provincial's truculent self-assertiveness. One often hears natives proclaiming they are from "West By-God Virginia!"

Part of this pride stems from history. West Virginia's original settlers spilled over the mountains because they wanted their own homes, because they hated tenant farming, plantation society and slavery. These Irish-English-Scotch pioneers resented their poor-relation position inside the Old Dominion. Virginia's public monies rarely crossed the Blue Ridge. As late as 1812 the state's only two banks were in Richmond, which, for all practical purposes, was as far away as Tibet for the isolated hillmen.

Eastern Virginia used slaves to create inequalities in taxation, legislation and suffrage. Western Virginians hated almost everything about the setup.

Most historians agree that formation of the separate state was logical and inevitable. It had been attempted earlier, when Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Walpole petitioned the King for a fourteenth colony. Later it almost became the state of "Westsylvania." And when the secession movement came along, the western section of Virginia — as Daniel Webster had predicted — quite naturally broke away from its eastern half. The creation of West Virginia in 1863 was the only change of the Civil War that showed on the maps.

Yet the character of West Virginia has been formed less by history than by the mountains. The Mountain State was aptly named. Once self-publicized as "The Little Switzerland of America," it has the highest mean altitude of any state east of the Mississippi. There is a slope of at least 40 per cent to more than one fourth of the state's 15 million acres. West Virginia used to lead the nation in lumber production; it is still second only to Arkansas in hardwood output.

Over half of all the land is forested. Wildcat and great black bear still prowl the underbrush. White-tailed deer are common. Rattlesnakes and copperheads slither about everywhere. Bats hang in grisly clusters from dank, dripping caves. The hills are peopled with everything from rabbits and foxes to squirrels and skunks,

from trout and "cats" to buzzards and bald eagles. Botanists find the back areas a paradise: they have more than 3400 known species of plant life, including great spruce in the mountains and prickly-pear cactus in the desert-like South Branch Valley. One of the few known carnivorous plant growths, the Sundew, thrives in the "glacial bog" of Cranberry Glades. Blueberries grow so lush on a twenty-mile ridge in Randolph County that the crop is never completely harvested. The state also produces a blackberry which continues to mystify scientists — it is thornless in the wild state, but develops thorns immediately after it is cultivated.

These mountains leave indelible impressions on their sons; even the visitor from the city begins to acquire a longer stride soon after coming to West Virginia. His home may have a front entrance fifteen feet higher than the back yard; and the back porch may be level with the chimney-tops of houses a block away. Sidewalks often end in flights of steps up or down to the next street level. The town itself is usually tacked onto hill-sides, after the fashion of villages in Switzerland, Wales, Bavaria and Scotland. Unlike most Americans, the West Virginian is not apt to be much interested in the speed of his new car. The important question is: will it climb? He's adept at hillside parking and at braking with half-clutch at steeply graded intersections.

West Virginians who've never seen a hill-billy, and who live the standard

city life, are nonetheless exposed to all these mountain hazards. Mostly, the natives take the slopes for granted — until they venture abroad onto the tabletops of Indiana or Oklahoma. Or, perhaps, until a southern Florida visitor suddenly pales in fright at a near-vertical avenue the native has always regarded as normal.

There's a real-life double for that farmer in the joke who falls out of his cornfield. He lives on a freak farm in Wayne County. The fields there can only be reached by ladder; mules and plows are hoisted up cliffsides by block and tackle.

III

The mountains have created the mountaineer. The latter, it should be said at once, bears only the dimmest resemblance to the "shiftless skunk" in jukebox mountain ditties, to the skinny hill-billies in Paul Webb's *Esquire* cartoons, or to Snuffy Smith and Li'l Abner. He is usually tall and long-limbed. He plows his acres on the bias, working his way around stumps and stones. By sweat and faith he grows his own corn, wheat, oats and garden vegetables, often his own tiny patch of stubborn tobacco. He comes close to the ideal of self-sufficiency; he is still pretty much a pioneer.

The mountaineer does quite well without radio and television; his recreation will center around folk dances in barns rather than sambas on packed dance floors. A daily newspaper would be useless to him because his news comes from the country store, more

intimate, factual and fresh than any wire service or columnist could ever make it. His liquor is home-made; it is surprisingly good. As a matter of fact, most of the rude equipment of the mountaineer comes off well in comparison with the luxuries that are taken for granted in urban life. His hand-quilted comforter is as warm as any thermostat-blanket. The forest gives him fuel for the taking. Inflation has made little difference in the mountains. Food comes straight from the good earth — uncontaminated by the hands of a thousand middlemen. He usually has within easy reach the best literature available anywhere: the Holy Bible. He knows the Bible intimately, as he knows his God intimately. God in the mountains is all-powerful, highly personalized and not easy to get away from.

Honesty is taken for granted. Doors are never locked in mountain communities; public opinion is the only policeman. The story of old Andy Argus, as related by the objective *WPA Guidebook to West Virginia*, is a case in point. After his wife's death, Andy was placed on county relief rolls. The indignity was bad enough, but he was particularly perturbed at the size of his weekly check — two dollars. And so the hardy octogenarian hiked and climbed 25 miles over the Smoke Hole Ridge to Franklin. There he told an astounded county agent: "I've come to give ye a refund, because two dollars be too much for me. One dollar a week be plenty — ye

see, I don't like to be extravygant with public funds."

A small part of the cartoon legend is true. Mountain girls marry young and age early. They and their men call a bag a "poke," pronounce chair as "cheer," transform care into "keer" and get into "git." Sentiment is liable to be earthy. Ardent WPA writers doing research among musty autograph albums in the hills uncovered such realistic classics as:

My love for you will always flow
Like water down a 'tater row.

'Tis sweet to kiss, but Oh! how bitter
To kiss an old tobacco-spitter!

A book could be written about mountain medicines. Acidic oak-stump water is used for warts. Catnip tea is taken for colds and colic, blackberry tea for dysentery. Water dipped from a stream before sunrise on Ash Wednesday is used to cure rheumatism. Gold beads strung around the neck are worn for a sore throat, rattlesnake bones for a fever, freshly-chewed tobacco for coaxing poison from bee sting and tobacco juice for earache.

Although they are tillers of the soil, the mountaineers comprise only a portion of West Virginia's farmers: all of them together own more than half of all the land. Three fourths of the farms are owner-operated and the latest available statistics indicate that West Virginia farmers are freer from debt than the farmers of any other state in the union.

IV

What of the coal mines? One census survey showed that West Virginia may be divided into three groups, all about equal in number: those engaged in farming, in manufacturing and in coal mining. Coal is not King.

But West Virginia does produce more bituminous coal than any other state. And the "black diamond," which Emerson once described as "portable climate," has influenced West Virginia almost as much as the mountains. Its influence has been especially great in the field of labor relations. To the men who worked in them, the mines used to be little better than concentration camps. The coal operators ruled with an iron hand, and warfare between miners and deputized thugs was open and bloody. Mine disasters occurred regularly. Bureau of Mines statistics (which do not list disasters in which fewer than twenty men die) record explosions and cave-ins in West Virginia in which 20, 46, 50, 56, 81, 91, 112, 119, 181 and 361 men were killed. The 361 deaths at Monongah in 1907 probably comprised the worst disaster in the history of American mining.

The first miners were mostly poverty-stricken refugees from Europe, who were shipped into the mountains by the operators—who had, in many instances, paid the men's passage to this country. Their dingy homes were without any pretence of sanitation. When the men were not

fighting the armed company police they were fighting disease. Neither of the fights was very easy, especially since they were perpetually in debt. They were paid in scrip money that was good only at the company stores.

The typical coal-mining village is not very attractive even today. Coal dust covers the houses, the grass and the streets. It cakes the windows and gets into the food; it makes cleanliness almost unattainable. And it is partly responsible for the high incidence of tuberculosis.

Today the company stores have to compete with independent shops, scrip has almost gone, the union has boosted wage scales, and safety measures in the mines, though still capable of improvement, are vastly better than they were. The company police are neither as numerous nor as brutal as formerly. But the heritage of the past has made the West Virginia miner independent, suspicious of strangers, union-worshipping and pretty much disdainful of any considerations not immediately related to his life in the mines. He drinks hard and curses even harder. Personally, he is apt to be sullen and bitter, implacably hostile toward the coal operators and vaguely suspicious of the whole outside world.

Not many emigrants from Europe have come to West Virginia in the past 25 years. According to one reliable source, 90 per cent of all West Virginians today are native-born; and in 20 of the state's 55 counties the figure is as high as 98 per cent. Moreover, the few Europeans who do move

into West Virginia move into the state's major cities — Huntington, Charleston, Wheeling, Clarksburg, Fairmont and Morgantown — rather than into the mining communities.

The growth of the cities reflects the growing industrialization of the state. In time, if the process continues, the stereotype of the West Virginian may even change from a hill-billy to a machinist. Right now, in addition to supplying about 25 per cent of the nation's bituminous coal, West Virginia produces vast amounts of natural gas, petroleum, iron and glass. The state is supplying all the raw materials which go into the manufacture of nylon stockings. The Kanawha Valley (where Daniel Boone once served as a lieutenant-colonel in the militia) is one of the most heavily industrialized areas in the country. West Virginia today has a population density greater than the mother state of Virginia and 70 per cent above the national average.

In the Kanawha Valley the citizens can point with pride to the world's largest flat glass plant and the world's largest synthetic rubber factory. Anti-freezes, alcohols, chlorine, ammonia and lucite also come out of this region in enormous quantities. Wheeling is a center of America's tin plate and steel production, as well as the home of one of the country's most popular chewing tobaccos. The state's mineral resources are topped in dollar value only by those of Texas, California and Pennsylvania.

In recent years the state has de-

veloped a new type of urban dweller, a sort of commuter-in-reverse. Thousands of West Virginians have taken to living in the cities and commuting to work on the outskirts, where most of the industrial plants are situated. This new species, described by one writer as "clean, neat, newspaper-read, opinionated," has not yet succumbed to the influence of the hills, but it is probably only a matter of time before he begins to walk, think and speak like the rest of the state's citizens. In the meantime his labors are helping to turn out clothespins, coin nickel, overalls, chinaware, porcelain, packed meat, bluing, pop bottles, gasoline, petroleum, electric power, plate glass, box cars and an amazing variety of synthetic chemicals. Right now West Virginia has a higher per capita income-tax payment than any southern state except Virginia or Florida.

v

Outside the big cities, in most parts of the country, social life is, to a large extent, centered around the churches. About one fourth of West Virginia's citizens are listed as church members, with the Methodists in the majority, the Baptists second and the Catholics third. But the church as a social institution in the state cannot compare with the lodges and fraternities which have naturally taken roots among a clannish people. The Loyal Order of the Moose, one of the country's leading good-guy groups, is an important institution in West Virginia: only five other states contribute more mem-

bers. The national Supreme Governor of the Moose, one F. Roy Yoke, is a clan-loving mountaineer who is also active in the Masons, Rotary Club, Elks, Knights of Pythias and several similar organizations.

The ballet, theatre, symphony and other arts do not, on the whole, come off very well in the state: the sophisticates generally have to go "outside" to get what they want. Schooling, however, is far from primitive. There are twelve colleges and universities in the state, including West Virginia University, a public institution which is coeducational and has a high academic rating. The enrollment at WVU is now close to 7000, about twice what it was before the war. About one third of the student body is working its way through school.

The main come-on for tourists are the thirteen state parks and six state forests, all of which are carefully preserved in a rustic condition by an alert conservation commission: they range in size from 30 acres (Pinnacle Rock) to 12,915 acres (Cooper's Rock). Watoga State Park sets aside two weeks each November in which visitors may hunt deer with bows and arrows.

Like the sea, the mountains get into a man's blood. West Virginians who have left the state develop terrific cases of home-sickness. Forgetting the poison ivy and sumac, the deadly snakes and maddening insects which

infest the state, they build up a mental image of sulphur springs, roaring streams, dark, hidden caves, placid river valleys and Olympian mountain tops. The state motto, "Mountaineers Always Free," accurately expresses the feeling of West Virginians for their state.

Perhaps this feeling of local patriotism and total independence is best summarized in a letter written almost a century ago by one James Trotter. Back in 1855 he and his brothers shared a contract to deliver mail in what is now West Virginia's Tygarts Valley. Unfortunately, a series of heavy snows prevented the brothers from delivering the mail on time. A group of snowbound mountaineers finally complained to Washington about the long time the Trotters were taking. Postal officials transmitted the protest to the brothers. James Trotter, who was manifestly not taking anything from anybody, took his pen in hand and set down the following reply:

Mr. Postmaster General,
Washington, D. C.

Sir:

If you knock the gable end out of hell and back it up against Cheat Mountain and rain fire and brimstone for 40 days and nights, it won't melt the snow enough to get your damned mail through on time!

Yours truly,
Trotter Brothers,
By James Trotter

THE ORDEAL OF HERBERT HOOVER

BY EUGENE LYONS

OVER the coffee cups one night recently I steered the conversation to our only living ex-President. I was at the time working on a book on the subject and therefore keen to sample the misconceptions about Herbert Hoover held by various groups of Americans. That particular company, I expected, would be rewarding, and I was not disappointed. Our hosts and their guests would have described themselves as liberals, and hence by definition relieved of all restraint and fairness in attacking Hoover.

One after another they trotted out an assortment of mythical stories and libelous imputations — not in partisan passion but casually and calmly, as if they were alluding to scientific facts. It was not amusing but fascinating to watch that display of self-righteous prejudice in action.

Avoiding the temptation to dispute generalized accusations, I tried to pin them down to specific charges. The fumbling that followed was pathetic. Most of the alleged data on which their anti-Hoover sentiments

rested had faded out with time; the sentiments themselves remained intact. But being conscientious folk, fearful of indecent exposure of bias, they did their best to recall definite allegations. From these I choose a few at random, simply to indicate their flavor.

“But didn’t Hoover refuse to help the Red Cross in the drought period?” one man asked.

He was a lawyer active in social work. Evidently the “heartlessness” of a President who opposed a humanitarian organization had rankled in his soul for a long time. I had read and heard scores of charges against Hoover but that one was new and I made a mental note to trace it to its source. This is what I subsequently found:

In the summer of 1930, as if nature itself were conspiring to deepen the national economic crisis, one of the worst droughts in our history hit the Midwest and the South. President Hoover took a great many and, as it turned out, effective remedial steps, among them the assignment of certain phases of the drought relief work

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