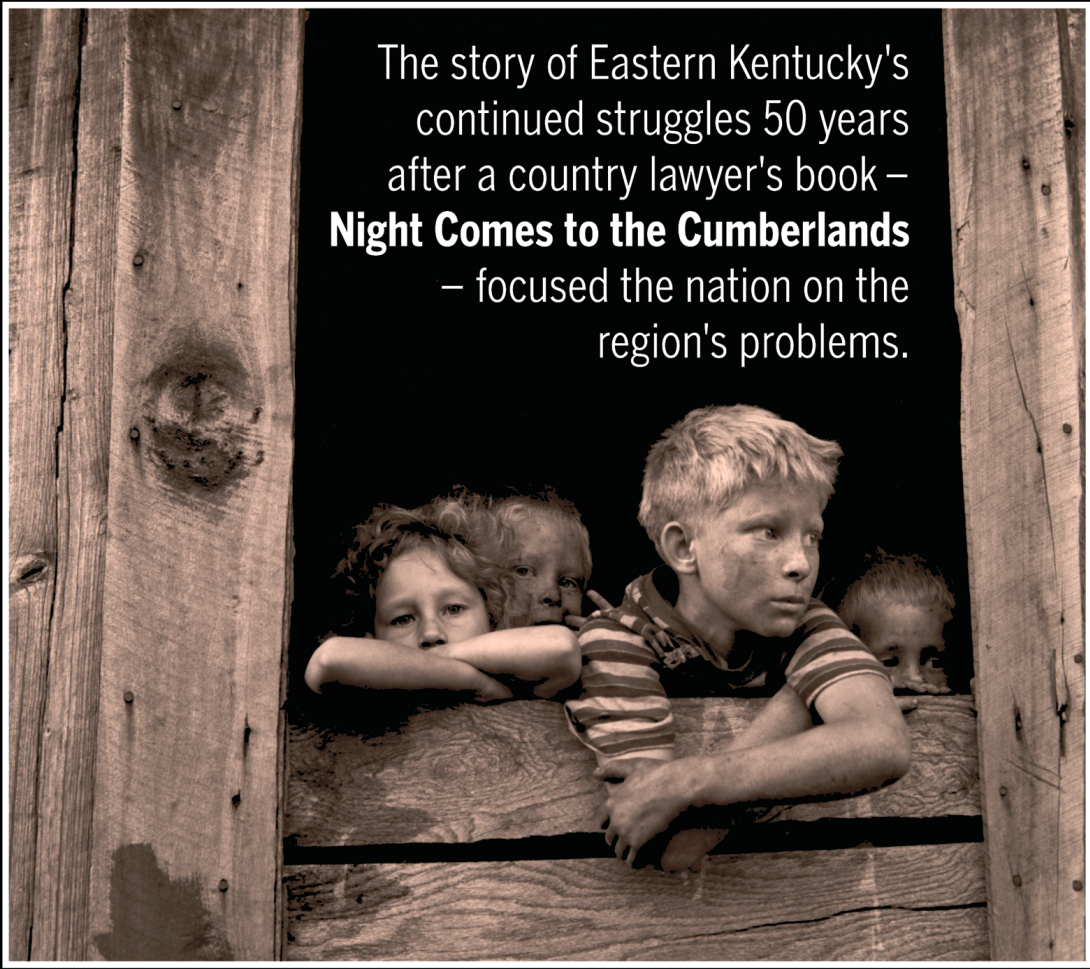

The story of Eastern Kentucky's continued struggles 50 years after a country lawyer's book – **Night Comes to the Cumberlands** – focused the nation on the region's problems.

FIFTY YEARS OF NIGHT

By John Cheves, Bill Estep and Linda B. Blackford

LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER kentucky.com

Fifty Years of Night

The story of Eastern Kentucky's continued struggles 50 years after a country lawyer focused the nation on its problems

Lexington Herald-Leader

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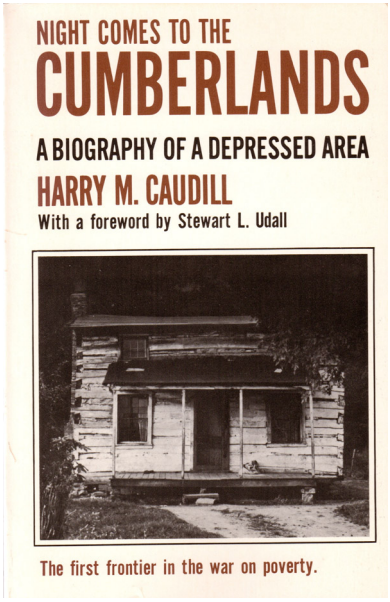
INTRODUCTION

Dec. 16, 2012

In 1963, Harry Caudill of Whitesburg published *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*, which shone a spotlight on the plundering of the mountains of Eastern Kentucky.

The book forever changed Appalachia.



On the eve of the book's 50th anniversary, the Lexington Herald-Leader begins a yearlong series examining the many difficult issues raised by the ground-breaking work. *Fifty Years of Night* starts with a five-part biography of author Harry Caudill, the man who focused the world's eyes on the mountains.

Caudill's story is one of a man who captured the attention of presidents, but whose despair over the fate of Appalachia later led him to espouse disparaging and widely discredited views about the people of his home region.

Reporters John Cheves and Bill Estep tell his story in this multi-part narrative format because his journey is important in understanding the path Appalachia has traveled since its publication.

Throughout the series, we'll invite you to discuss Caudill's work, the changes and progress that have been made over the last half century, and the many challenges that continue to confront Appalachia — and to share your views on potential solutions.

We encourage you to pick up a copy of Caudill's book. Read it for the first time, or re-read it if it has been a few years.

Then, over the next year, we invite you to read along with us.

- Peter Baniak, Editor of the Lexington Herald-Leader

On the cover

Children of coal miners looked out the kitchen window of Monroe Jones' house in Bell County in 1946. Photo Credit: Russell Lee | University of Kentucky Special Collections

PART 1: HARRY CAUDILL

1. He brought the world to Eastern Kentucky

Fifty years ago, lanky, loquacious Harry Monroe Caudill of Letcher County climbed onto the national stage and tapped the microphone.

For the April 1962 issue of The Atlantic, Caudill wrote an essay none too subtly titled *The Rape of the Appalachians*. He told of his native Eastern Kentucky mountains and the out-of-state corporations decapitating them for coal through strip mining. An accompanying photograph showed the rubble of a demolished hillside.

"During the last 15 years, coal-mine operators have systematically destroyed a broad mountainous region lying within five states — Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia and Alabama," he wrote. "By a process which produces huge and immediate profits for a few industrialists, the southern Appalachians are literally being ripped to shreds."

Few Americans had given much thought to Appalachia. Almost none had heard of Harry Caudill, small-town lawyer and father of three. That was about to change.

The next year, Caudill's essay begat his first book, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*, about "the helplessness and hopelessness" of Southern mountaineers. That begat extensive news coverage of Appalachian despair, which begat sympathy for this "whipped, dispirited" corner of America.

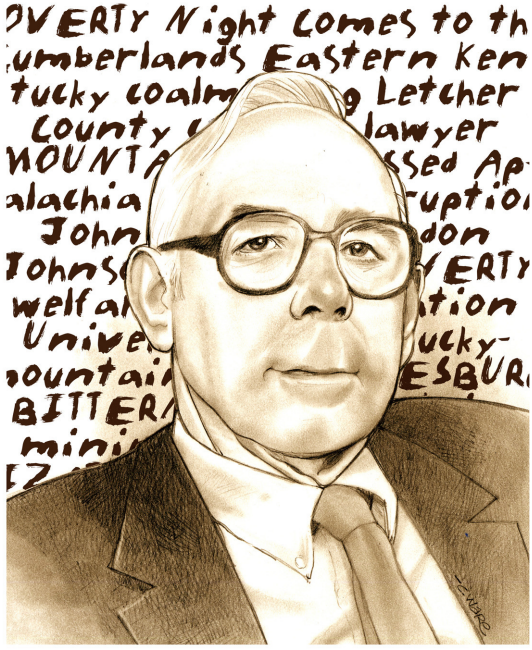


Illustration of Harry Caudill by Chris Ware | Herald-Leader

"The mountains have become a vast ghetto of unemployables," reporter Homer Bigart wrote from Whitesburg that October in a story on the front page of The New York Times. "Crowds of listless, defeated men hang around the county courthouses of the region."

Bigart, whom Caudill had led around, told of malnourished Kentucky children plagued by intestinal parasites, so sick and starving they ate dirt. Caudill was quoted as saying, "This is what happens to a great industrial population when you abandon it, give it just enough food to keep it alive and tell it to go to hell."

Among those stricken by the stories was President John F. Kennedy, who told his aides to read *Night*. Before he was assassinated in November 1963, he had been planning a trip to Eastern Kentucky.

His successor, Lyndon Johnson, made the trip instead, declaring his War on Poverty in front of a tar-paper shack in Inez.

And lo, aid rolled into the mountains. Appalachia collected billions of dollars, much of it through the new Appalachian Regional Commission established by Congress. The money paid for — and still pays for — roads, schools, water lines, health care and welfare.

Caudill grew into a celebrated international spokesman for the plateau, author of nine books on the region and an Appalachian history professor at the University of Kentucky. He met with presidents of the United States who were moved to act by his words. He badgered bureaucrats and businessmen to do more to help, to be bolder.

"He was grateful that he had been able to call the attention of the nation to these problems," his widow, Anne Frye Caudill, said in an interview this year at her home in New Albany, Ind. "*Night* put together for the first time the history of the Cumberland Plateau and the forces from outside that had created the sad state of affairs there."

It made a difference.

Between 1960 and 2000, spending by the Appalachian Regional Commission reduced Appalachian poverty by 7.6 percent relative to the country as a whole, according to a study by UK labor economist James Ziliak.

Coal mining was subjected to new taxes and new worker-safety and environmental laws. In the 1980s, Kentucky finally outlawed the "broad-form deed," a controversial legal device that allowed coal companies to strip-mine people's land against their will. Caudill had agitated against the broad-form deed for most of his adult life.

Conservation caught on as Caudill and others fought to defend natural treasures, including the Lilley Cornett Woods and Red River Gorge, from development. Young do-gooders flocked to Eastern Kentucky as anti-poverty volunteers. Many settled in Whitesburg,

where Caudill lived. Some remain today as gray-haired civic elders. *Night* changed people's lives.

"Reading that book had a profound effect on me," said acclaimed writer Wendell Berry of Henry County, who was teaching in New York City when *Night* was published. "It showed me how a Kentuckian might accept responsibility for the land and the people."

As bad as things look for Eastern Kentucky today, they're better than when Caudill wrote his book, and in no small part because of it.

"It changed the prospects for Appalachia," said Dee Davis, president of the Center for Rural Strategies in Whitesburg.

From outrage to bitterness

In something of a personal tragedy, Caudill never recognized this success. His outrage gradually devolved into disappointment and then bitterness.

Despite all the intervention, countless mountaineers remained poor and idle, he said. Strip mining continued to raze the land. He did not see that Appalachia advanced in important ways because of the light he shed.

"He acknowledged nothing — no progress, no reforms," said Al Smith, a friend and a former federal co-chairman of the Appalachian Regional Commission. "Even after Kentucky passed education reform to finally put more money into the mountain school systems, he said it was just a sham and it wouldn't do anyone any good, anyway."

Ultimately, Caudill concluded that Appalachia could not be fixed because its people were broken, its gene pool hopelessly watered down by inbreeding among the "dullards" who wallowed in ignorance and "welfarism" in isolated hollows.

Having publicly blamed coal operators and crooked courthouse bosses for the region's troubles, Caudill privately told friends that he had "come full circle in my thinking and have reluctantly concluded that the poverty … is largely genetic in origin and is largely irreducible."[1]

In 1974, Caudill brought to Whitesburg a controversial eugenicist, William Shockley, who notoriously proclaimed that blacks are genetically inferior to whites and that dumb people are out-breeding their intellectual superiors.

The two men, and several others with an interest in "race science," met for a weekend at Caudill's home. They proposed to study poor Eastern Kentuckians as part of a research project on inherited intelligence.[2] Cash bonuses would be offered in exchange for sterilization. It was time for some ill-fated family lines to end, Caudill said.

Their project — never publicly disclosed — stalled for lack of money. But Caudill stuck to his belief that genetics are destiny. He admired Denmark, where, at least into the 1960s, citizens with low IQs and other "undesirable" characteristics underwent state-organized sterilization.

"Dad was not just associated with people like William Shockley on the spur of the moment. He fully agreed with the sentiment that three generations of imbeciles is enough," said Caudill's older son, James, who attended the meetings with Shockley. "His views of the underclass were not as sympathetic as many people think."

Writing to an acquaintance in Iowa in 1975, Harry Caudill said society "has a right and a duty to prevent people from reproducing[3] when the prospects are overwhelmingly large that their children

[1] https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/516209-caudill-8-26-74.html#document/p2/a84322

[2] https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/516220-whitesburg-position.html

[3] https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/516213-caudill-12-15-74.html#document/p1/a84318

will be feeble-minded and chronically dependent on other people. This is not killing anybody; it is simply preventing the appearance on Earth of people who will have to burden other people in perpetuity."

Shortly before his death in 1990, Caudill sounded just as dour in a letter to Lexington lawyer Larry Forgy, a future Republican nominee for governor.

"The basic problem in Kentucky is not a lack of schools, libraries or other facilities, but rather is a deeply ingrained cultural resistance to the very idea of learning," he wrote.

Mostly forgotten now

Caudill's admirers wince at memories of his bitterness. They prefer that his legacy be advocacy of wise environmental stewardship and the courage to challenge long-entrenched powers, as a writer, a citizen-activist and a teacher.

"No one else at the time was saying the things that Harry was saying about the corruption in the relationships between business and government," said Ronald Eller, an Appalachian historian at UK and author of *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*.

Most of Caudill's battles, including the fight over surface mining, still are being waged, his friends say. When Gov. Steve Beshear indignantly demands that federal regulators "get off" the coal industry's back, it brings to mind Caudill's lament that Kentucky governors humor liberals by passing environmental laws, and they humor conservatives by never enforcing them.

Modern audiences can't appreciate the sheer physical courage that Caudill showed by confronting the coal industry a half-century ago while raising a family in the coalfields, his friends say. He walked among those he scolded in a place where dissent could lead to harassment, even violence.

In 1968, several sticks of dynamite were tossed at the Pike County home of anti-poverty activists Alan and Margaret McSurley, shattering windows and showering them and their infant son with debris. No one was arrested.

The offices of The Mountain Eagle, the scrappy Whitesburg newspaper for which Caudill wrote opinion pieces, were destroyed by a firebomb in 1974 after the paper took on local police corruption. A police officer was convicted in that bombing.

"Harry and I were at a friend's in Louisville one time and we started talking about the responsibility that writers face," Berry said. "I said it would be a serious matter to have written something that got someone killed. And Harry said, 'Yes, and it also would be a serious matter to write something that got *you* killed.' He said this so quickly that I realized it had been on his mind a lot over the years."

Unfortunately, his admirers say, while Appalachia remains a popular cause for journalists and academics to rediscover every few years, Caudill is mostly forgotten now beyond the Letcher County public library, which bears his name.

He committed suicide in 1990. The only person to seriously attempt his biography — former Los Angeles Times reporter Rudy Abramson — died in 2008 before he could publish it. The manuscript rests with Abramson's grown children, who don't wish to discuss it.

"I'm not sure a lot of people today know who Harry Caudill is," said Loyal Jones, the former director of Berea College's Appalachian Center and author of *Appalachia: A Self-Portrait.*

"I mean, they do if they're involved in Appalachian studies. Other than that, no. He's been gone for a while," Jones said. "Unless you're an Appalachian scholar, I suppose you may wonder why you should be reading *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* at this point, though so much of it really is relevant today."

Harry Caudill railed against strip-mining the mountains for most of his adult life. The mine pictured here in 1998 was owned by the Martiki Coal Company in Martin County. Photo Credit: David Perry | Herald-Leader

'A crown of sorrow'

Excerpted from Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*, by Harry M. Caudill. Published in 1963 by Little, Brown & Co. Republished in 2001 by the Jesse Stuart Foundation. Used with permission of the Jesse Stuart Foundation.*

Editor's note: In the introduction to his book, Caudill gives a brief history of Eastern Kentucky.

The Cumberland Plateau region of Kentucky is a serrated upland in the eastern and southeastern part of the state. Its jagged hills and narrow winding valleys cover some ten thousand square miles. It embraces nineteen counties and portions of a dozen others. These units of government were created by the caprice of governors and legislators and, with one exception, were named for the state's heroes of statecraft and battlefield: Bell, Breathitt, Clay, Floyd, Harlan, Knott, Knox, Laurel, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, McCreary, Magoffin, Martin, Owsley, Perry, Pike, Whitley and Wolfe. Few of the heroes deserved so high an honor, and few of the counties

were worthy of creation. Only Pike County has proved to be sufficiently large and wealthy to discharge even fairly well the responsibilities inherent in local government.

The plateau's half-million inhabitants are among the earth's most interesting folk. Their European ancestry and American adventures constitute a remarkable page in the history of mankind. The American public is prone to think of them as quaint hillbillies, a concept sociologists have neglected to explain or explore. In truth, the Kentucky mountaineer is drawn from some of the oldest white stock to be found north of Florida. His forebears had dwelt in or on the edge of the Southern Appalachians for generations before the Declaration of Independence was penned. In their long residence on this continent they left behind a unique, checkered and violent history. Their past created the modern mountaineers and the communities in which they live, and resulted in a land of economic, social and political blight without parallel in the nation. The purpose of this work is to trace the social, economic and political forces which produced the vast "depressed area" of eastern Kentucky.

Much of the region's story is the story of coal. Geologists tell us that two hundred million years ago it was a plain that had risen from the floor of a long-dry inland sea. Then the tortured crust of the earth cracked and "faulted," rearing the Pine Mountain. This long, steep, ragged ridge now stretches from the Breaks of the Big Sandy River on the Virginia line some hundred and thirty miles southwesterly into northern Tennessee. It parallels the Cumberland (or Big Black) Mountain, the southern boundary of the plateau. Water flowing away from its base over a great fan-shaped territory carved the channels of three of the state's major streams and chiseled thousands of narrow valleys — the creeks and hollows of today.

After the shallow sea receded, it left a vast bog where vegetation flourished, died, piled up in deep beds, turned to peat and finally, aeons later, to coal. When the streams carved

out the mountains and ridges of today they sliced through magnificent seams of coal, a mineral the steel age would esteem more highly than rubies.

Coal has always cursed the land in which it lies. When men begin to wrest it from the earth it leaves a legacy of foul streams, hideous slag heaps and polluted air. It peoples this transformed land with blind and crippled men and with widows and orphans. It is an extractive industry which takes all away and restores nothing. It mars but never beautifies. It corrupts but never purifies.

But the tragedy of the Kentucky mountains transcends the tragedy of coal. It is compounded of Indian wars, civil war and intestine feuds, of layered hatreds and of violent death. To its sad blend, history has added the curse of coal as a crown of sorrow.