

# Home Grown – Appalachian Folklore

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## Educational Objectives

- Participants will learn to define Appalachia.
- Participants will learn to understand the history of the traditional Appalachian language, which is at the heart of Appalachian folklore.
- Participants will learn to explore popular Appalachian folklore.

According to Merriam-Webster, folklore is defined as, “the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth.” For anyone who has visited West Virginia, or the greater Appalachian region, they have heard,



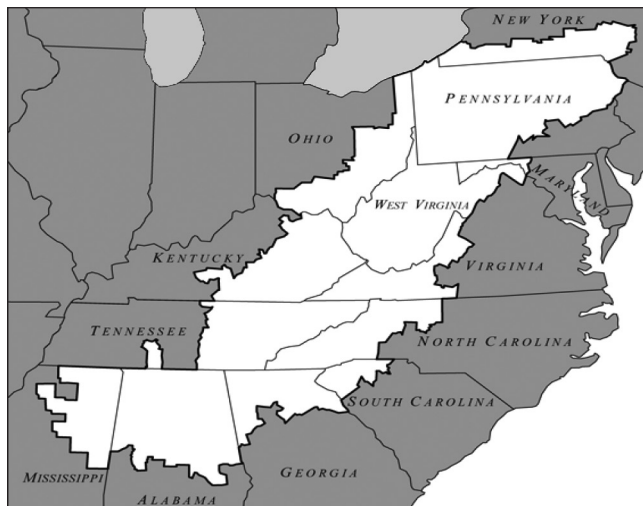
and possibly even seen, that Appalachian folklore. It remains present in family traditions, like their recipe for apple butter, farming practices, techniques for weaving baskets and even their canning recipes. It can be heard in the stories of locals, the old wives’ tales of the area and the spoken language of the people. That is Appalachian folklore!

To develop a greater understanding of Appalachian folklore, one must first understand Appalachia – what it is, where it is, what defines it – and the language of the people. Then, those beliefs and customs become easier to understand and share.

## What is Appalachia?

Appalachia exists. No one will argue that fact. However, the boundaries of that territory and the cultures that define it are quite fluid. When asked where Appalachia is, people will rarely provide the same answer. For many, Appalachia is a cognitive region defined not by boundaries but by the culture, stereotypes and geography. As one linguist put it, “No matter where you are geographically on the mountain range, if you’re poor, white, and rural, you must be Appalachian.”

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*A map of the Appalachian region.*

According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, Appalachia consists of 423 counties across 13 states, with its boundaries stretching from southern New York to northern Mississippi. West Virginia is the only state that sets entirely within that region. As a result, many have embraced their Appalachian culture and heritage, reclaiming and taking pride in perceived negative epithets like, “redneck,” “hillbilly” and “white trash.” Those terms, originally developed by those external to the region, have become common in an Appalachian language that itself is unique.

## Appalachian Language

Linguistics is the study of language, and people love exploring Appalachian language and dialect. One popular claim is that the Appalachian dialect is the most representative of the oldest English dialect – older than Shakespeare and similar to Chaucer. How has such a romanticized dialect survived in Appalachia? Many claim the isolated terrain of rural Appalachia has seen time stand still.

The truth is, while it may be more representative of Old English, the Appalachian dialect also has evolved overtime. Immigrants who settled the region, largely from Scotland and Ireland, along with others who have entered the area since

have led to a distinctly Appalachian dialect that varies throughout the region as well.

The Appalachian language includes vocabulary with different meanings like “sorry” (something of little or no value), “britches” (pants), “lick” (to hit), “poke” (a bag), and “afeared” (afraid). This language is accompanied by strong accents! For instance, words ending with an “oh” may be pronounced with an “er” like “holler” and “winder.” Those that end with an “ah,” may be replaced with a “y,” like “sody-pop,” and there are also unfamiliar contractions like the use of “might could” or “a-prefixing” (a-courting). Finally, everyone knows how popular words like “y’all” are in Appalachia!

This language and its dialect are just another ingredient in the mixture of customs and beliefs that make up Appalachian folklore.

## Appalachian Folklore

Appalachian folklore is embedded with superstitions, beliefs and customs. Although people today may not live by these beliefs today, you still find sayings and habits deep within the mountain folk culture. Many have to do with death, sickness, weather and relationships – an understandable reaction to the dangers of this country’s early days of life. Whether or not you believe in them, you’re probably familiar with a few of these superstitions. But where did they come from?

A superstition is a half-belief or practice for which there appears to be no rational substance. Superstitions can sometimes have religious origins and are based more on cultural habits than actual beliefs.

**Weather:** *Winter will be cold and snow if corn husks are thick and tight.*

Since the beginning of time, man has found various ways to predict the weather. From this have come superstitions, old wives’ tales and cultural stories passed from one family member to another. Farmers have depended on these predictions and superstitions for planting their

crops and harvesting the bounty for the coming season.

As fall approaches, farmers begin to gather their share of corn. Many old-timers would look to see how tight the corn husks were to determine how severe winter would be that year. Farmers believed thick, tight shucks on corn indicated a harsh winter. There might be some scientific insight as to why this may be true. Corn husks become tall and tight during a wetter season to protect themselves from the rain. An extremely wet year would likely be preceded by a somewhat wet winter that would produce snow in many cases.

**Marriage:** *If two people dip their spoons into a cup at the same time, then they will be married.*

Love spoons were a sign of a proposal presented to a prospective bride. Because of the remote nature of many Appalachian villages, the prospects for a bride were limited. The competition for their hand in marriage was intense. This is likely one of the reasons why Appalachian women married at a much younger age than their counterparts across the nation. Often a successful courtship – which had its rituals and rules – ended when the prospective groom presented a hand-carved wooden spoon, called a love spoon, that had been decorated as lavishly as the whittling skills of the gentleman allowed, in place of an engagement ring. The love spoon was a descendant of a tradition brought from Wales and demonstrated that the gentleman presenting it was skilled with his hands and thus likely to be a good provider.

**Death:** *If a bird flies against a windowpane, there will be a death in the family. If a dog howls before the moon rises, someone will die.*

Of course, there are also quite a few superstitions associated with death. Often, death would have happened at home back in the hills and hollers of Appalachia – from disease, mishap or old age. It's only natural to develop solid beliefs and superstitions about something so tricky yet inevitable.



*Statue of legendary railroad worker John Henry in Talcott, West Virginia. He is an example of real-life figures that evolved into popular folk tale subjects.*

**Folk Healing:** *To cure baldness, rub the scalp regularly with a divided onion cut crosswise into hemispheres. If you have a toothache, drink liquids from a cobalt glass to cure the ache.*

Southern Appalachian folk healing lore – using plants, prayers, herbs and dirt to heal illnesses, ward off evil and protect the home – reflect the vibrant cross-section of people who initially inhabited the area from West Virginia down into Mississippi. These remedies and superstitions have been passed down to us from our ancestors. Whether we believe in their efficacy, they are interesting to read and think about.

## Storytelling

Storytelling is the oldest form of narrative communication we have. In Appalachia, storytelling has served as an essential tool for the sharing of folklore and provided a perpetual reminder of who and what makes up the region's history. Folklore only survives through this continued sharing of stories!

We all have stories to tell; stories we have lived from the inside out. Your stories and the stories



of the people around you are unique, valuable treasures for your family and your community. Using oral history techniques, you, your family and community members can preserve unwritten family and local history, large and small. Oral history is so flexible that people of all ages can adopt the techniques of asking and listening to create and learn about history and historical narratives.

One way to keep history alive is to ask friends and families to practice storytelling with one another. The keys to telling a memorable story are simple – a compelling intro, staying on topic, engagement and a big finish! Check out these great story starters to ask friends and family to help keep their personal histories alive:

### Childhood

- What is your favorite holiday memory?
- What was the most challenging part about growing up?
- What was the best part about growing up?
- What is the most memorable present you ever gave?

### Adult Life

- What was your wedding like?
- What were the happiest days that you remember?

### Family Stories

- What were your proudest accomplishments?
- What/who was the greatest influence in your life?
- At times of stress in your life, what got you through it?

## Keeping Folklore Alive

In a culture as unique and cherished as our West Virginia home, folklore is abundant. While some may see the region as poor and rural, the early isolation of the area allowed history to live on through that folklore and the stories. There is pride in Appalachia that others may not understand, but for that lore to remain, storytelling must continue, superstitions should be shared and the next generation of Appalachia will continue to take pride in their homegrown roots.

### Reflection Questions

- What superstitions/old wives' tales have you heard or learned from your family?
- Practice storytelling with a starter above!

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