

“Action, Scholarship, Reflection, Renewal”

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I'm honored and delighted by your invitation to give this talk today; it feels like a homecoming!

The theme of this year's conference -- “Action, Scholarship, Reflection, Renewal” – resonates strongly with me. The cycle of action, reflection, and renewal is one I'm sure most of us have experienced, and many have added the scholarship component to that virtuous circle as well.

Lately I've been feeling that several circles have come full round in my life. Attending this conference completes a circle that began for me in 1976 in Boone, North Carolina, for the Symposium in honor of Cratis Williams. Several of us then-young scholars had the sense that this was a momentous meeting, with many of us becoming acquainted for the first time – Jerry Williamson, Ron Eller, Steve Fisher, Gordon McKinney, Patricia Beaver, and the late Henry Shapiro, among others. That meeting, as you may know, led directly to the founding of the Appalachian Studies Conference (now Association).

The paper I gave at that Symposium, “On the Naming of Appalachia,”ⁱ remains one of my favorites. Remarkably, it had its start with the first sentence in the introductory chapter of my dissertation.

Making a long story short, I read the accounts of the survivors of Hernando de Soto's 1540 expedition through the American southeast, hoping to confirm the old story that de Soto named the mountains. No such evidence was to be found, prompting my journey through the early maps of North America. And that elaborated footnote became a chapter in the Symposium proceedings as well as the first chapter of my dissertation.

Recently, as I glanced through my file on the Cratis Williams symposium, I found an article from the *Winston-Salem Journal*, which had sent a reporter

to Boone to cover the event. Bemused and somewhat tongue-in-cheek, the reporter characterized the occasion as a “two-day binge of scholarly vaudeville turns. Anybody with an aversion to the researched, the footnoted, and the bibliographed would have found his anti-intellectual prejudices more than amply inflamed.”

Referring to my contribution, the reporter wrote, “Scholarly preoccupations can easily cobweb the nonacademic brain. David Walls, of the University of Kentucky . . . admitted that all that stuff . . . was just ‘a footnote to my dissertation run wild’ – the audience chuckled, most of them having experienced firsthand the cancerous proclivities of footnotes.”ⁱⁱ

Writing the “Naming” paper left me with the conviction that no old story should be accepted without scrutiny. Every now and then raising a rude question can open up an unexpected and productive line of research. So, aspiring scholars, find an impertinent question that no one thought to ask before.

Another circle coming round in my life involves community organizing. Two years after graduating from University of California at Berkeley, I was working in Washington, DC, for the federal Office of Economic Opportunity, the headquarters of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. I faced a choice. I could continue in my safe bureaucratic position with the federal government, or I could take a leap and accept the field staff position offered me by Milton Ogle, director of the Appalachian Volunteers. I took the latter, and found myself celebrating my 25th birthday in an abandoned, dilapidated coal camp commissary at Verda in Harlan County.

My initial job was to supervise a group of VISTA Volunteers and free Steve Daugherty to organize communities against strip-mining across eastern Kentucky. The transition was less difficult than you might imagine. I had grown up in a small iron-mining town in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and had spent a good bit of time outdoors -- camping, fishing and hunting with my grandfather on my mother’s side.

On my father’s side, my great-great-grandfather immigrated to Appalachian Ohio in 1869 as an experienced coal miner from Wigan, in Lancashire, England. He settled in Steubenville – Jefferson County -- with his three sons, all of whom also worked in the coal mines as young men. Two of the brothers, including the eldest, my great-grandfather James Walls, left the mines to become ministers in the Methodist Episcopal church. I don’t know much detail about James’s life in

Steubenville, but the family has preserved several newspaper reports of sermons by his younger brother, my great-great-uncle Alfred Walls.

Uncle Alfred attended what is now Mount Union College in southeast Ohio, and earned a divinity degree at Drew University in New York in 1890, at age 30. He became pastor of the M.E. church in Woodsfield, Ohio – Monroe County -- and was described by a local newspaper as “very liberal in his religious views,” believing more in “good deeds than strict creeds.”ⁱⁱⁱ He did not forget from whence he came. In a conference of M. E. ministers in 1897, he offered a resolution that said, “We are in full sympathy with the miners of this country in their efforts to obtain just compensation for their toil. We condemn every private monopoly which is hurtful to the industrial welfare of the people, and are agreed that such monopoly should be made impossible.”^{iv} The resolution was tabled, I am sad to report.

In 1902 Uncle Alfred spent a year as Assistant Pastor of the Epworth Memorial Church in Cleveland. We have newspaper accounts of a series of sermons he preached on labor and the American industrial system. To quote some headlines: “Rev. Walls in a sermon lauds Mitchell, the leader of the coal miners.” The next is “Industrial system is all wrong,” said pastor, “employer and employee must be one and the same.” Another: “Rev. Walls claims that until a better method of doing business prevails, America’s progress will be hindered.” And finally, “Rev. Walls also wants public co-operative industrialism; favors national ownership of land and public utilities.”^v Right on, Uncle Alfred!

Ancestry aside, my move to Kentucky was not without ironies. Alessandro Portelli’s book, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*,^{vi} has a chapter titled “It Was Supposed to be Happening in Berkeley: The 1960s Meet Eastern Kentucky,” in which he counter-poses Gurney Norman and me. Gurney, you will recall, moved from Hazard to Stanford to study creative writing, while I left Berkeley for Harlan, to take up the challenges of community organizing in the coalfields with the Appalachian Volunteers.

Thanks to Tom Kiffmeyer’s recent book,^{vii} we now have a widely accessible history of the AVs’ founding with the Council of the Southern Mountains in Berea, its break with the Council and incorporation as a separate nonprofit group, and its activities in Kentucky that led to its rapid movement from “self-help to sedition,” as Kiffmeyer has written, or as the title of his book puts it, from “reformers to radicals.” And we also have considerable documentation of the AVs’ work in West Virginia thanks to Jerry Thomas’s new history, *An*

Appalachian Reawakening.^{viii}

Beginning with Berea College student volunteers repairing one-room schools in eastern Kentucky in 1964, the AVs soon had federal funding from OEO's Community Action Program and VISTA.^{ix} As Kiffmeyer has pointed out, the AVs quickly lost its pure volunteer status as well as its reliance on college students from the region. Federal officials were more concerned with mobilizing the idealism of American youth to end poverty than they were about the purity of either "Appalachians" or "volunteers."

It didn't take long for the AV staff and students to become disillusioned with the political and educational leadership in the mountains. They took to criticizing local "courthouse gangs" and school superintendents.^x As the AVs began to help local communities resist strip-mining, the political hammer really began to drop. Toward the end of the 1967 summer program, outgoing Democratic governor Ned Breathitt helicopered into Island Creek and revoked the permit of the company about to strip-mine the land of Jenck Ray and his neighbors.

Pike County Commonwealth Attorney Thomas Ratliff brought sedition charges against AV staffer Joe Mulloy and Southern Conference Education Fund staff Alan and Margaret McSurely. The charges were quickly dismissed by Federal judge and former Kentucky governor Bert Combs (whose daughter Lois – purely coincidentally -- had been a summer AV volunteer). Nevertheless, the political damage had been done.

This was followed by hearings the Kentucky Un-American Activities Committee held in Pikeville in 1968, sealing the AVs fate, dependent as it was on public funding (although we did have fun with the group's unfortunate acronym KUAC, which we pronounced "quack").

Despite its short seven-year life-span, the AVs had some significant accomplishments (none of them anticipated at the start): In West Virginia AVs gave important support to the Miners for Democracy in its campaign to reform the United Mine Workers union, and to the Black Lung Association, which got a strong federal black lung compensation act passed in 1969 (total federal expenditures under this act totaled over \$41 billion through 2004).^{xi} The AVs's final remaining foundation funds provided seed money in 1970 for Eula Hall to start the Mud Creek Clinic in Floyd County, Kentucky.^{xii}

At least 26 people who came to West Virginia with the AVs stayed on to live and work in the state.^{xiii} The AVs played a role establishing the legal services programs in West Virginia and Kentucky known as the Appalachian Research & Defense Funds (Appalred), with former AVs director Milton Ogle working for West Virginia Appalred for nearly thirty years.

And generally, as this concurrent reunion shows, AV staff and VISTAs, over the next decades, by and large did not give in to “the big chill,” but kept the progressive faith in one way or another.

For all its accomplishments, we have to acknowledge that the AVs is far from a model for community organizing today. But we can learn from its shortcomings as well as its achievements.

As sexist as any movement organization of its day, the AVs hired few women in supervisory positions.

Although the AVs worked with a few black communities and leaders, it had no systematic anti-racism training for staff and interns to anticipate community conflicts.

The AVs had no effective formal mechanism of accountability to the communities and organizations it served. The AVs developed into a staff-run organization, with a board of directors that functioned largely to satisfy legal requirements and OEO mandates.

The AVs had no formal program of training and leadership development. At best there was mentoring from the field staff and AV director Milton Ogle.

Strategically, the AVs never thought through how they would accomplish change at all the relevant political levels. They focused on the county level primarily, but because of the “one-room-school” beginning in Kentucky, often had a base only in one corner of a county, typically the poorest and most remote or most isolated.

Although the AVs kept an eye on opportunities to influence federal policy on various social welfare and mining issues, they gave relatively little thought to how they could have an impact on the state level. In Kentucky, a community organization would have to organize statewide, as Kentuckians for the Commonwealth eventually did, or find allies among other groups in the center and west of the state.

Nor did the AVs seriously contemplate how they might operate without federal grants and contracts.

Nevertheless, the AVs left a legacy of resistance and struggle, emphasizing the efficacy of community organizing, even if it is practiced in a much more systematic manner today. By its very notoriety the AVs deflected attention and criticism from some less publicized organizing efforts. All in all, the AVs helped create an atmosphere more open to criticism of public and corporate officials, and more encouraging to organizations that would challenge their power.

Although the AVs itself was a multi-issue organization, some of its most effective work was in support of single-issue groups. I've mentioned the Black Lung Associations and the Miners for Democracy. The fight against strip-mining is another case in point. Steve Daugherty took the model of the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People from Knott County, Kentucky, and encouraged the formation of new chapters in such counties as Harlan and Pike.

Considerable hope was placed in securing federal legislation, culminating in the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977, passed with the support of President Jimmy Carter after having been vetoed twice by President Gerald Ford. But its subsequent administration under Republican presidents proved disappointing. Another heroic effort was waged by Kentuckians for the Commonwealth in securing an amendment to the Kentucky constitution in 1988 limiting the use of the notorious "broad form deed."

But none of this legislation proved capable of checking the scourge of mountaintop removal. As Silas House wrote in a recent New York Times op ed, mountaintop removal has "destroyed some 500 mountains and poisoned at least 1,200 miles of rivers and streams across the Appalachian coal mining region."^{xiv} Efforts by the federal Environmental Protection Agency to regulate mountaintop removal under the Clean Water Act show promise, but the coal industry counterattack on EPA is well underway.

Community organizers like to say that power has two sources: organized money and organized people. Corporations have the edge in organized money, but -- potentially at least -- we should have the advantage in organized people.

Recently I've been interested in the work of Marshall Ganz, architect of the field organizing model and the Camp Obama training program for Barack Obama's

successful 2008 Presidential Campaign. Ganz emphasizes the importance of narratives in social movements.^{xv}

A rabbi's son, Ganz grew up in Bakersfield -- that western hub of the Appalachian and Ozark migration to California. Ganz recalls Rabbi Hillel's famous three questions: If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when? From these questions, Ganz derives the story of self, the story of us, the story of now.

We need to learn to tell these stories in a powerful and compelling way. Here our poets, novelists, and short-story writers have much to teach activists. It's not surprising that Wendell Berry was among the members of Kentucky Rising who occupied Governor Beshear's office last month. Our stories connect us to other people by expressing our values, interests and commitments. And all organizing is based on personal relationships.

As some of you may have caught on by now, I've tried today to give you a bit of my story of self, a story of us (the AVs), and the story of now, as it applies to mountaintop removal -- "the fierce urgency of now," as Martin Luther King, Jr. said.

Many of us can find motivation from friends or family members – like my Uncle Alfred – who fought for social justice. We can all take inspiration from those people, now passed, who battled strip-mining and mountaintop removal – Ollie "Widow" Combs, Dan Gibson, Hazel King, Charles "Buck" Maggard, the Rev. Otis "Tad" King, and Judy Bonds, among many others.

As Si Kahn wrote in his song, "They All Sang 'Bread and Roses," the concluding verse -- my favorite – goes like this:

And though each generation fears that it will be the last,
Our presence here is witness to the power of the past.
And just as we have drawn our strength from those who now are gone,
Younger hands will take our work and carry on.

We are fortunate to have with us today two younger hands who can carry on this work with the passionate intensity of youth who grasp the "fierce urgency of now." Sarah Riley, Jason Howard -- and all the rising generations -- organize, seize the day!

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Notes

ⁱ David S. Walls, “On the Naming of Appalachia,” in *An Appalachian Symposium: Essays Written in Honor of Cratis D. Williams*, edited by J. W. Williamson (Boone, NC: Appalachian State University Press, 1977, pp. 56-76).

ⁱⁱ J. A. C. Dunn, “Appalachia: Fields for Academia to Till,” *Winston-Salem Journal*, April 11, 1976.

ⁱⁱⁱ From *The Monroe Gazette*, 1895, Woodsfield, OH; quoted in Elizabeth (McElfresh) Ogden and John Ogden, *Highlights in the History of the First United Methodist Church of Woodsfield, Ohio* (Raven Rocks Press, 2004), p. 182.

^{iv} From the *Democratic Standard*, Sept. 24, 1897, Coshocton, OH; quoted in Ogden and Ogden, *Highlights*, p. 183.

^v The articles are clipped and not completely referenced, but appear to have run between July 28 and August 18, 1902, in the *Cleveland Press*, the *Cleveland Leader*, and the *Plain Dealer*.

^{vi} Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), pp. 199-231.

^{vii} Thomas Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

^{viii} Jerry Bruce Thomas, *An Appalachian Reawakening: West Virginia and the Perils of the New Machine Age, 1945-1972* (West Virginia University Press, 2010).

^{ix}The section on the AVs that follows draws upon elements of my Review Essay on Kiffmeyer’s *Reformers to Radicals*, “The Appalachian Volunteers in Perspective,” *Appalachian Journal*, Fall 2009/Winter 2010, pp. 100-105.

^xLest anyone think the AVs were barking up the wrong tree, I offer these stories by reporter Bill Estep from the *Lexington Herald-Leader* the very week of this Appalachian Studies Conference: “Ex-Clay officials get 20, 24 years for vote buying: six others await sentencing” (March 9, 2011), pp. A1, A8; “Former Clay school chief gets 24 years: convicted in voting conspiracy” (March 10, 2011), pp. A1, A6; and “Last two sentenced in Clay County vote fraud,” (March 12, 2011), p. A3.

^{xi} *Federal Compensation Programs: Perspectives on Four Programs*, United States Government Accountability Office, GAO-26-230, November 2005, p. 24; <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06230.pdf> (retrieved 26 December 2008).

^{xii} Eula Hall, “If There’s One Thing You Can Tell Them, It’s that You’re Free,” in *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes*, ed. by Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 194.

^{xiii} See (and hear) the interviews with twenty of the AVs who stayed in West Virginia conducted by Marie Tyler McGraw in 1980 and described in her paper, “Staying On: Poverty Warriors in West Virginia After Fifteen Years,” available at the Berea College Library special collections. Listen also to the four-part radio program “Voices from the 60s” produced by Gibbs Kinderman in the mid-1980s, available on CDs.

^{xiv} Silas House, “My Polluted Kentucky Home,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 20, 2011, “Week in Review,” p. 11.

^{xv} For a comprehensive summary of his ideas, see Marshall Ganz, “Leading Change: Leadership, Organization, and Social Movements,” ch. 19 in *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*, ed. Nitin Nohria and Rakesh Khurana (Harvard Business School Press, 2010), pp. 527-568.