

Review Essay

DAVID WALLS

The Appalachian Volunteers in Perspective

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UNDER CONSIDERATION:

Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and The War on Poverty. By Thomas Kiffmeyer (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008) \$40.00, cloth. ISBN: 9780813125091, 284 pp.

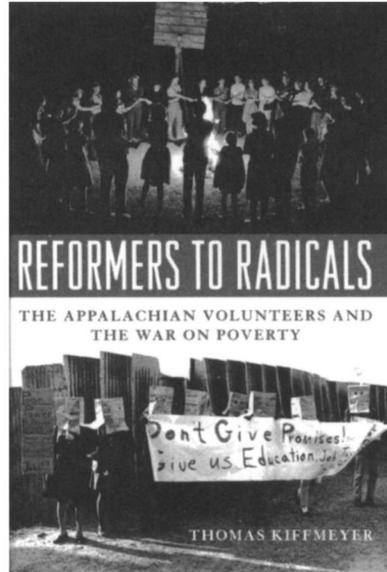
It's now nearly 50 years since the Presidential campaign of 1960 brought John F. Kennedy to West Virginia, introducing him to the poverty of the central Appalachian coalfields as he waged a successful battle against Hubert Humphrey in the Democratic primary. Kennedy's confrontation with West Virginia's poverty led to several new federal programs, including the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and the War on Poverty launched by President Lyndon Johnson through the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). The Community Action Program of OEO was the most dramatic innovation among these efforts—and the most controversial. Among its projects to draw young people to public service and foster “maximum feasible participation” of the poor was the Appalachian Volunteers (AVs). At our present moment of renewed interest in community organizing and President Obama's call to community service, a thoughtful assessment of the AVs' work could inform contemporary activists. The publication of the first book-length study of the AVs, Thomas Kiffmeyer's *Reformers to Radicals*, is both timely and long overdue.

Kiffmeyer, an associate professor of history at Morehead State University, provides a thorough account of the early history of the AVs, beginning with the visit of Robert F. Kennedy aide Dick Boone in late 1963 to the Council of the Southern Mountains (CSM), which coordinated the first weekend of Berea College students repairing one-room schools in Harlan County, Kentucky, in January 1964 under the name of AVs. As Kiffmeyer points out, with federal funding the AVs soon lost its pure volunteer status as well as its reliance on college students native to the Appalachian region. Volunteers In Service To Appalachia (VISTA) workers from the newly created OEO program were assigned

to the AVs as its staff grew, and both “volunteers” (the summer students and VISTAs received modest stipends) and staff were increasingly from outside the Appalachian region. Federal officials were less concerned about the purity of either “volunteers” or “Appalachians” than they were about mobilizing the idealism of American youth around the project of eliminating poverty.

AV students and staff soon grew disillusioned with local educational and political leadership in the mountain counties and began to see conflicts between the poor communities in which they worked and the local “courthouse gangs” and school superintendents. This increasingly antagonistic stance toward local officials ran contrary to the cooperative community development vision of the CSM’s executive director, Perley Ayer, who fired AVs director Milton Ogle and Dan Fox, his top assistant, in 1966, just before the start of the 500-student, four-state summer program, which expanded from Kentucky to southern West Virginia, southwest Virginia, and northeastern Tennessee. The remaining AV staff quit, the organization incorporated independently of the CSM, and Ogle moved the AVs’ central office from Berea to Bristol, Tennessee. The 1967 AV summer program was scaled back to 400 students, and the East Tennessee projects were dropped. Kiffmeyer details the organizing against strip mining for coal that led to sedition charges against AV staffer Joe Mulloy and Southern Conference Education Fund staffers Alan and Margaret McSurely in Pike County, Kentucky, in August 1967. He also covers the subsequent Kentucky Un-American Activities Committee investigation in Pikeville in October 1968, but appears to think the AVs would have fared better if its leadership had voluntarily given testimony to the committee.

Kiffmeyer’s research methodology relies heavily on the AVs archives at the Berea College Library, from which he has excavated many obscure memos, reports, and documents that illuminate aspects of the organization’s history and development. He also draws on a limited set of oral history interviews—some of which he conducted—on the War on Poverty in Kentucky, housed at the University of Kentucky, dated between 1990 and 1993. Although the AVs story has been told before—by Billy D. Horton’s 1971 M.A. thesis and by David Whisnant in a chapter of his 1980 book *Modernizing the Mountaineer*—no one has been as thorough in scouring the AV archives as Kiffmeyer. Some of his time, however, might have been better spent interviewing more of the many veteran AVs staff and VISTAs who still live in the region or could have easily been reached by telephone.



In his 1998 dissertation, *From Self-Help to Sedition: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty in Eastern Kentucky, 1964-1970* (University of Kentucky), and his 1998 article of the same title in the *Journal of Southern History*, Kiffmeyer provided a detailed account of the rapid evolution of the AVs' approach to community organizing, but wavered on the reasons for the AVs' ultimate demise. Was it the fault of the AVs' confrontational approach to community organizing—instead of the “cooperative approach favored by the Council of Southern Mountains” (184)? Or were the young idealists defeated by the overwhelming power of the political and economic establishment, whose strength the AVs had gravely underestimated? Fond of binaries, Kiffmeyer can't seem to decide whether the transition from “self-help to sedition,” or as his book title has it, from “reformers to radicals,” was a self-inflicted error resulting from the inability of non-Appalachian staff to understand the local culture, or the natural consequence of a more sophisticated, realistic analysis of structural barriers to reducing poverty in the region—one that underestimated the power of those who benefitted financially from such barriers.

Kiffmeyer ranges from sounding at one moment like Bill Best (whom he interviewed), railing against cultural interlopers from outside the region, to sounding at another moment like Harry Caudill or Helen Lewis denouncing internal colonialism. Kiffmeyer's introductory summary (over-generalizing from the dispute between local and non-Appalachian staff over Joe Mulloy's draft resistance): “what emerged as the reform effort progressed was a clash between Appalachians and non-Appalachians” (11). In a September 2004 talk at the Prestonsburg Courthouse during the reenactment of Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 tour of eastern Kentucky, Kiffmeyer candidly acknowledged that he continues to “flip-flop” in his interpretation of the AVs.

Kiffmeyer's book has a deeper problem that prevents him from coming to a more balanced judgment on the work of the AVs: he hasn't really expanded the scope of his discussion of the AVs' activities he covered in the dissertation he completed ten years ago. A close comparison of the 1998 dissertation to the 2008 book reveals only a new 15-page Introduction, and re-written introductory paragraphs to the chapters, which otherwise are the same as the dissertation (down to their overly cute militaristic titles, i.e., “The Shot Heard Round the World,” “A Splendid Little War,” “The New Model Army,” “Operation Rolling Thunder”). Although the qualifying phrase “in eastern Kentucky” was dropped from the book title (whether by the author or the publisher we are not told), Kiffmeyer presents no new material on the AVs in West Virginia or southwest Virginia. Nor does he fill in the AVs' later activities in Kentucky that did not get into the dissertation. For example, there is nothing in the book on Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 tour of Eastern Kentucky (which AVs director Milton Ogle was closely involved in planning), despite one of the two cover jacket photos showing a student protest at Kennedy's hearing at the Fleming-Neon High School in Letcher County (which Kiffmeyer doesn't seem to realize, as the photograph isn't so identified).

And Kiffmeyer misses the uneasy relationship between AVs and Office of Equal Opportunity staff who wished to push “maximum feasible participation”

as far as they could, using the AVs as their “shock troops” to challenge local political machines (Dick Boone at first, then Larry Parachini, assistant to Mid-Atlantic Regional Office Community Action Program director Jack Ciaccio). This dynamic played out in the Cumberland Valley of Kentucky, where OEO wanted more representation of the poor on an eight-county Community Action Agency (CAA) board of directors. The AVs worked to organize the turnout of hundreds of local people for public hearings and comment on the CAA board, with the result that the Cumberland Valley CAA was divided into one- and two-county CAAs. In southern West Virginia, AVs-supported community leaders took over the Raleigh County CAA, and AV Gibbs Kinderman became its executive director—an accomplishment noted by Kiffmeyer, but without any additional comment.

Kiffmeyer brings his story of the AVs to an abrupt halt in 1970, with the formal end of the AVs as an active organization. He is thus unable to assess any long-range effects the organization may have had. The story of the AVs becomes one of defeat: “In the end the defeat of the Appalachian Volunteers resulted not from their faults alone—myriad though these may have been—but from the political and social resources mobilized against them by a local county power structure seeking to solidify and maintain the status quo” (215).

Two other explorations of the War on Poverty in Appalachia have made a more positive assessment of the AVs: Ball State University historian John M. Glen in the Winter 1989 *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* (40-57) describes the AVs’ success at stimulating “Appalachian residents into building grassroots organizations willing to push hard for an end to strip mining, political corruption, poor education, tax inequities, and unresponsive poverty agencies.” In his recent book, *Uneven Ground*, University of Kentucky historian Ron Eller points out the success of the AVs in challenging the Cumberland Valley Community Action Agency to represent the poor on its board of directors, assisting the Highway 979 Community Association in Floyd County, and in West Virginia assisting the Fair Elections Committee and the Black Lung Association.

Kiffmeyer’s history does not consider the increased sophistication of community organizing as practiced today as a standpoint for evaluating the AVs. From my study of contemporary multi-issue community organizations, I can identify numerous shortcomings of the AVs’ approach. Once the AVs had rejected consensus-based community development, they had difficulty defining their organizing goals. Neither the community organizing done at that time by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the South, nor the Economic Research and Action Project of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the North, was a particularly appropriate guide for the AVs. (Like the AVs, both were essentially staff-directed organizations.) Saul Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) was known primarily through his work with The Woodlawn Organization in Chicago. The more sophisticated model of the “modern IAF,” widely respected today for its emphasis on training and leadership development, was formulated by Ed Chambers and Ernie Cortes only after the death of Alinsky in 1972.

Over the winter of 1966-67 the AVs decided to make a strategic reorientation that would focus on the coal counties and discontinue its commitment to the

rural agricultural counties surrounding the coalfields. Coal county populations were denser, and mining families had a tradition of militant organizing. Although the AVs focused primarily on organizing local poor communities, its work on building single-issue groups often had a greater impact. New chapters of the Appalachian group to Save the Land and People revived opposition to strip mining in eastern Kentucky. Chapters of the Eastern Kentucky Welfare Rights Organization pushed for food stamps, school lunches, and welfare benefits. Miners for Democracy returned control of the United Mine Workers to the rank-and-file, and Black Lung Associations won workers' compensation reform.

Despite successes in these opportunistic interventions, the AVs gave little thought to how they could have an impact beyond the county level. Influencing state policies would require a presence throughout the state, as Kentuckians for the Commonwealth later demonstrated. The AVs seemed to think they could substitute good media coverage and editorial endorsement from influential liberal state newspapers—primarily the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in Kentucky and the *Charleston Gazette* in West Virginia—for a solid statewide organization.

Looking past the end of AV activity in 1970, we find a significant legacy: the Mud Creek Clinic on Highway 979 in Floyd County, Kentucky, was started by Eula Hall with the AVs' last \$14,000 in private foundation funds. At least 26 people who came to West Virginia with the AVs stayed on to live and work in the state. And in Kentucky several former AVs continued work connected to the region, including the establishment of the Appalachian Center at the University of Kentucky. The West Virginia former AVs played an important role in support of Miners for Democracy and its successful campaign to reform the UMWA, as well as the Black Lung Associations, which managed to get a federal black lung compensation act passed in 1969. According to a 2005 study of the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the total federal expenditure for black lung compensation through fiscal year 2004 was over \$41 billion. The AVs played a role in establishing the legal services programs in West Virginia and Kentucky known as the Appalachian Research & Defense Fund (AppalReD), with former AVs director Milton Ogle working for West Virginia AppalReD for nearly 30 years.

The Appalachian Volunteers is far from a model for community organizing today. As sexist as any movement organization of its day, the AVs hired few women in supervisory positions (the women's liberation movement was beginning in the region just as the AVs was in its final months). 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. Nevertheless, the AVs left a legacy of resistance and struggle, emphasizing the efficacy of community organizing, even if it is practiced in a very different manner today. By its very notoriety, the AVs deflected attention and criticism from some less publicized organizing efforts, yet helped create an atmosphere more open to criticism of public and corporate officials and to organizations that would challenge their power.

Reformers to Radicals is an impressive accomplishment documenting the history of the Appalachian Volunteers, as far as it goes, but it presents an ambivalent interpretation of the meaning and significance of the AVs' efforts. Had Kiffmeyer done the additional work he should have completed on the AVs, it's likely he would have ended up with a more decisive conclusion. Contemporary activists would have clearer insights, both positive and negative, to contemplate. Despite a strong start, Kiffmeyer missed an opportunity to write the definitive history of the AVs. Other writers will have to fill out the AVs' story.