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This Side of the Mountain

Thomas Parrish

Appalachian Heritage

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

This Side of the Mountain Thomas Parrish If you have much of an acquaintance with the comics, you're probably aware that Snuffy Smith is going straight—or, perhaps, straighter. The other day the local sheriff smashed the tubes and coils that made up Snuffy's venerable still, and so, after some sixty years of keeping Hootin' Holler supplied with moonshine, the big-nosed little fellow has decided not to rebuild it. As the Washington Post noted editorially, Snuffy would probably have disappeared from the funny papers long ago as representing a slur on Southern mountain people "were it not for the likelihood that there's no place on earth where people actually talk the way they do in Hootin' Holler and thus no one to take offense." Nowadays, certainly, with so many exposed nerves everywhere reaching out to snag any possible passing slur, we wouldn't want to add another one—though you can't help noting (as others have observed, too) that the world expects these same mountain people to display more forbearance than is required of the members of any other identifiable ethnic, sexual, occupational, religious, or topographical group. Anyway, that's not our point here. What Snuffy's retirement really brings to mind is Jane Stephenson and her

remarkable book, *Courageous Paths*, which is subtitled "Stories of Nine Appalachian Women." This book consists of first-person accounts by women who have attended the New Opportunity School at Berea—an enterprise that has now produced more than two hundred graduates, women who have learned important things about what you do in a job and how you go about getting one. One of the hardest things these women have had to do is to make the decision to come to the school, in the first place, and then to follow through on it. Their backgrounds—well, they've had it rough, much rougher than would be required of anybody in a fair and equitable universe. And here's where Snuffy comes in. Listen to some lines from these stories: Ada: "He was drinking some, but I thought it would get better.... During this time my husband still was having a problem with alcohol; in fact he was getting worse.... Then the physical abuse started." Rebecca: "My husband, he was an alcoholic... We were never really stable.... I was the one making the living because I knew I had to." Evelyn: "My brother was an alcoholic; my husband was an alcoholic; his brother was an alcoholic, and they all come to stay with us. Nobody worked . . . When I was asleep, he had taken my money out of my purse and drank it up." Emma: "The boys' dad was in a habit of drinking ... [He] got into a fight with another person and was stabbed in the chest." Crystal: "We grew up very rough because both of our parents were alcoholics.... We would be left alone for days by ourselves with me to take care of the children, and we never knew where our parents were or when they was coming back." And so it goes—lots of compulsive customers for Snuffy Smith's product, whether it's obtained direct from the still or bought at a package store. Drinking, by husbands, parents, brothers—talk of it, problems created by it, horrors brought on through its inexorably worsening course—runs through these narratives. It doesn't really run, though. It's more like an oppressive stone, weighing down those associated with the afflicted drinker. The stories, of course, are told by the escapers, those with no alcohol problem and a drive to take up a new life. What about the others? What about the alcoholics themselves and all of the women who are bound to them? And, for that matter, what about the drinking women, too? Several years ago, a therapist writing in this magazine (Summer 1992) observed that "interwoven with the threads of alcoholism and drug addiction in Appalachia are long-secret strands of violence and sexual abuse." She commented, as well, on a study that—well, it tells us what we already know, but it's nice to have it soberly stated in a study: "Factors associated with high...

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