

**Carl E. Feather.** *Mountain People in a Flat Land: A Popular History of Appalachian Migration to Northeast Ohio, 1940-1965.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998. xxvi + 255 pp



**Carl E. Feather.** *Mountain People in a Flat Land: A Popular History of Appalachian Migration to Northeast Ohio, 1945-1965.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998. xxvi + 255 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8214-1229-9.



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>From Appalachia to Ohio

Carl E. Feather's *Mountain People in a Flat Land* tells an important, but little-known, story of migration from the Appalachian South to the farms and industries of northern Ohio. The common thread in Feather's story was the migrants' destination: Ashtabula County, Ohio, whose location on the shores of Lake Erie in the far northeastern corner of Ohio encouraged boosters to market the area as "the best industrial location in the nation" in the years after World War II. Unlike most accounts of migration from Appalachia, which focus upon the exodus from Kentucky, most of the migrants in Feather's book came from West Virginia (a lesser number came from Kentucky, Virginia, and southern Ohio). Feather's ac-

count is also distinctive among Ohio migration studies in its emphasis on small-town and rural areas of northeastern Ohio (Conneaut and Kingsville in Ashtabula County, and nearby Painesville), rather than the larger Ohio cities of Cleveland, Akron, Columbus, and Cincinnati. While the migration to such cities was much larger than the migration-stream to small-town Ohio, Feather notes that the Ashtabula area "offered the mountaineer advantages of both worlds-jobs and a relatively rural environment" (p. 28). Feather sets his story in context to the broader patterns of Appalachian migration, but he describes his goal as writing "a popular, oral history of the Appalachian migration to northeast Ohio, not a genealogical research tool, social or economic histo-

ry, or textbook of the migration. Its purpose is to honor, not dissect, a wonderful, overlooked group of people who made significant contributions to every community they called 'home'" (pp. 11-12).

The migration out of Appalachia is not as well known as the Great Migration of African-Americans from South to North during the first half of the 20th century. However, for the millions of people who left Appalachia (and for the communities they left behind), it was equally significant. The rural communities, once-thriving mining towns, and lumber processing centers of Appalachia withered and, in some cases, vanished. The impact of out-migration was particularly pronounced in West Virginia, which sent generation after generation of young adults to other states. One study, a 1941 survey of Lewis County, West Virginia, noted that "the principal export product of this area appears to be children."<sup>[1]</sup> The rate of migration from coal mining areas increased during the 1950s as the mining industry became increasingly mechanized, but the process of migration was nothing new. Even in the late 19th century, the migration from the Appalachian region had drawn attention from reformers concerned with the influx of mountain people into southern cotton mills and other industries.

Feather focuses upon one particular generation of migrants—those who shared the common experience growing up in Depression-era Appalachia in communities with little prospect of future prosperity. Most came of age during World War II or the early 1950s and migrated to Ohio between 1945 and 1960. Feather's parents were among those migrants; his book concludes with a description of his childhood recollections of the long drives back "home" to Thomas, West Virginia, and the bittersweet feeling that accompanied them (p. 238). The book is essentially a series of oral histories drawn from interviews with the migrants who settled in and near Ashtabula County. The most appealing aspect of the book is the clarity of the voices of individual migrants as they

tell their stories. The book also provides important insights into rural life in the early-to-mid 20th century and descriptions of work life, the migration process, and the migrants' efforts to preserve their culture.

The migrants' stories follow a similar structure, but the accounts of their reception in Ohio vary significantly. A migrant's personality, occupation, gender, living quarters (upon arrival), time of arrival, extent of interaction with others, and his or her expectations of what life in Ohio would be like were all significant factors in adjustment. Living in the culturally and geographically unfamiliar "flat lands," migrants remained nostalgic for the homes they left behind. Most maintained their ties to their mountain homes through regular trips back (every weekend or two, for some migrants). Women often found adjustment more difficult than did men, especially if they did not work outside the home, lacked transportation, or had small children: "I just slept all the time, just to pass the time," one woman said in describing her first months in Ohio. "I just slept and waited for the weekends" and the return to West Virginia (p. 206). To make adjustment easier, some migrants encouraged their families and friends to join them in Ohio. They also maintained cultural practices, such as playing bluegrass music, harvesting ginseng, and stirring apple butter. The mountaineers' decision to maintain cultural patterns and ties with home served to slow their assimilation and set them apart as "hillbillies." Although they faced hostility, ridicule, and ostracism, those who stayed in Ohio did assimilate, although many of them expressed ambivalence about their decision to stay. Feather's narrative favors the stories of those who stayed. Virtually all of the interviewees mentioned friends or family members who returned home after a brief stay in Ohio, but the book includes only a few interviews with those who returned to West Virginia. That some migrants returned to the mountains after retirement is a testimony to the pull that home and culture exerted upon them. Feather's description of life

on both ends of the migrant stream-in the mountains and in the "flat land"-is essential to understanding the motivations of those who moved to Ohio. For most migrants, the decision to relocate to Ohio was an economic one: "I knew there was more to the United States than where I was raised, and we were raised in poverty," one man said. "Let's face it, it was during the Depression. And I thought I could do better because I was willing to work. There was no opportunity there, and there still isn't" (p. 147).

The migration from the Southern Appalachians to northeastern Ohio took place in several stages, as Feather shows. The first group arrived in the years around World War I and sought out work on farms or in the timber industry, establishing "beachheads" for later arrivals. The next major wave of migrants was drawn to northeast Ohio by the economic resurgence that accompanied and followed World War II. These were the "golden years" for Ashtabula factories that processed metals, chemicals, and other products. Such industries recruited heavily in the southern states, drawing black migrants from the Deep South and migrants, most of whom were white, from Appalachia. Mountaineers left shrinking family farms and dying mining towns to seek work in the factories of Ashtabula County and the shipping industries of the Great Lakes. The largest such employer of Appalachian migrants was the Electromet plant operated by Union Carbide, one of several companies that recruited workers from West Virginia and encouraged them to recommend family and friends. Belying the stereotype of the shiftless mountaineer, the new arrivals welcomed the stability and high wages of jobs in heavy industry, which local residents shunned as "'a black man's job'-too dirty, hot, and hard for the Anglo-Saxons and Italians" (p. 35).

For this generation of migrants, factory work represented an opportunity to improve their circumstances. Later generations were less willing to endure the grinding labor and environmental

hazards of jobs in heavy industry. Feather also reminds us that the opportunities in Ashtabula's factories were limited to a specific generation: as well-paying factory jobs began to vanish with deindustrialization of the 1970s and 1980s, additional education was needed for economic stability and upward mobility. The migrants' children and grandchildren who sought out education were often able to move into professional jobs. By contrast, many of those who entered factory jobs found themselves leaving northeastern Ohio for other regions, replicating their parents' role as migrants.

Feather's book originated as series of stories that was published in the *Ashtabula Star Beacon*, a series that told the stories about the area's Appalachian migrants. Scholars will find some of Feather's secondary sources and interpretive framework to be dated. For example, he relies upon such works as Jack Weller's *Yesterday's People* to describe the "fatalism" of traditional Appalachian culture, a concept that scholars of Appalachia discarded decades ago.[2] However, the oral histories of the migrants clearly convey their experiences and the ambivalence they felt toward their adopted communities. As a popular history, Feather's book makes a valuable contribution to our knowledge of how migrants made the transition from mountains to the towns and rural areas of northeastern Ohio.

[1]. Cited in Paul Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History, 1730-1940* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p. 117.

[2]. See Jack E. Weller, *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1965).

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