H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ronda Lee Hicks. *Beech Mountain Man: The Memoirs of Ronda Lee Hicks.* Edited by Thomas G. Burton. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009. xxii + 133 pp. $32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57233-665-0.

Reviewed by Lynn Salsi

Published on H-Appalachia (September, 2011)

Commissioned by Steven Nash (Post-Doctoral Fellow, Department of History, East Tennessee State University)

In *Beech Mountain Man: The Memoirs of Ronda Lee Hicks*, Thomas Burton adds another volume to both southern Appalachian lore and Appalachian literature. His text unfolds through his narrative interpretation of Ronda Hicks's memories captured on tape and transcribed into print. Burton's story gathering, editing, and interpretive techniques twist this memoir into a revealing story about a historical and often misunderstood existence of mountain families.

From page 1, the reader learns that Hicks travels a rocky road. He tells of his tumultuous life, beginning with a revelation of his young years: "Now in school I was meaner 'n a blacksnake. I wouldn't do nothin' right" (p. 3). He further relates the difficulties of living in an isolated environment where modern transportation, electricity, and the simple convenience of indoor plumbing were unknown until the early 1950s. School was optional past the eighth grade. Rather than continue in school, Hicks pulled galax, gathered herbs, and cut cabbage until he entered the U.S. Army at eighteen.

Rather than telling family tall tales and Jack tales, he reserves his talking for his life's most distinctive moments, many of which jar the reader. His early years included moving from tenant farm to tenant farm, since his father did not own land. Eventually, his life includes one challenge after another. He knows about suffering and anger that comes from living a hard rural life with too little opportunity and no money. He knows relatives and neighbors who killed people and sometimes witnesses violent anger from close kin. He muses how revenge is strong and might only come after someone has seethed for a long period of time. He appears philosophical about his military service, his days in prison, his conflicts with women, and the times he chooses to be a troublemaker. Colorful passages enhance the reader's vision of the mountains where life revolves around an isolated existence requiring rig-

orous, backbreaking work and acclimation to a hostile winter climate.

While Burton's well-selected scenes also show Ronda's vulnerable side, Hicks reacts negatively whenever he hits a "wall" of judgment, whether from military personnel, civil authorities, his wife, his mother, or the church. Necessity informed most of his decisions, especially when he required resources needed for survival. It seems impossible that Hicks could draw a four-year prison sentence for passing two forged twenty-six-dollar checks. This episode illustrates how modern-day justice can be administered to unfortunate citizens in a rural community as unfairly as in the inner city. In a few passages Hicks's story reminds readers that communities remain in America where citizens need a handout rather than a prison sentence.

Often, Hicks seems to bring problems upon himself willingly, especially when he figures he can run off from the sheriff. Then, he "outs" the probation officer in much the same way local color narratives reflect how mountain folk learn to survive through cleverness and by besting their neighbors and kin. Hicks's distrust of authority creates tension in his story, as he adopts a type of payback which seems like an eye for an eye. And, as Hicks suffers for love, he shows his vulnerable side for the right woman, even if he has to walk home over two hundred miles.

Most of all, this is Ronda Lee Hicks's forum--a place where he lays it all out, including the good and the bad. Yet, he leaves conclusions to the reader. His life's story sometimes requires the reader to suspend disbelief as Hicks tells of his heavy liquor-drinking, womanizing, and fighting ways. This brings Hicks's tough persona to the forefront, especially when he runs from the prison gang and stays on the lam. The best part of the collaboration between the author and the storyteller is the way Burton avoids sitting in judgment. Though Burton leads Hicks to reveal his life, the author is also careful not to stereotype or exploit Hicks. Rather, Burton interprets the circumstances that shaped many of Hicks's unfortunate situations.

Through careful transcriptions and editing with a light hand, the author allows Hicks's natural Appalachian dialect and mountain colloquialisms to come through. Burton avoids forcing Hicks's voice into a non-regional flow that would deny the story flavor. It is obvious that Burton respects his subject. His relationship with Hicks adds depth to the story. Burton, the interpreter, is integral to the Ronda Hicks's story. Together, Hicks, the storyteller, and the author give the reader an authentic view of Appalachian life, one that often disputes the beauty of the Blue Ridge and the quaintness of old-fashioned ways that tourists find endearing. However, regardless of where Hicks travels, he always longs for home.

Ronda Lee Hicks's story illustrates conflict and struggle. He tells what it is like to be a native-born Blue Ridge Mountain man.

“

”

“

”

“

”

“

”

“

”

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-appalachia

Citation: Lynn Salsi. Review of Hicks, Ronda Lee. ***Beech Mountain Man: The Memoirs of Ronda Lee Hicks.*** H-Appalachia, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=26154