

On the Pronunciation of *Appalachia*

by Anita Puckett

You can raise hackles by how you say a single vowel in the word *Appalachia*.

One day during the spring 1998 semester, I took my Virginia Tech Appalachian folk culture class on a field trip to visit a potter. Originally from Illinois, the gentleman has lived and worked near Blacksburg, Va., for over 20 years and is very knowledgeable about the history and lore of Southern Appalachian pottery-making. After his demonstration, I queried the students to gauge the presentation's success. One young man from Southwest Virginia dismissed the entire expedition as having had no merit. "Once he said *Appalāchia*," he explained, "I knew he had nothing to say to me."

This student is subscribing to a belief among many regional native-born residents, especially in Central and Southern Appalachia: They are certain they can readily categorize individuals as "one of us" or "not one of us" based on how they say the word *Appalachia*. Those falling into the "one of us" group pronounce *Appalachia* with a short *a* (ă) in the stressed third syllable. The "not one of us" people say the word as the potter did, with a long *a* (ā) in the same spot.

Certainly this categorization of individuals by native-born Appalachians is a form of stereotyping. Individuals such as my student are, after all, labeling those who say *Appalāchia* as ignorant people whose knowledge about the region can be dismissed. Allow me to suggest, however, that this student's comment captures much more than an unthinking, oversimplified prejudgment of another person. It also reveals the underlying processes by which a speaker's pronunciation of a single vowel in a single word can help construct social boundaries be-

tween "insiders" and "outsiders," define ethnic identities, and establish social and political hierarchies.

Some Linguistic History

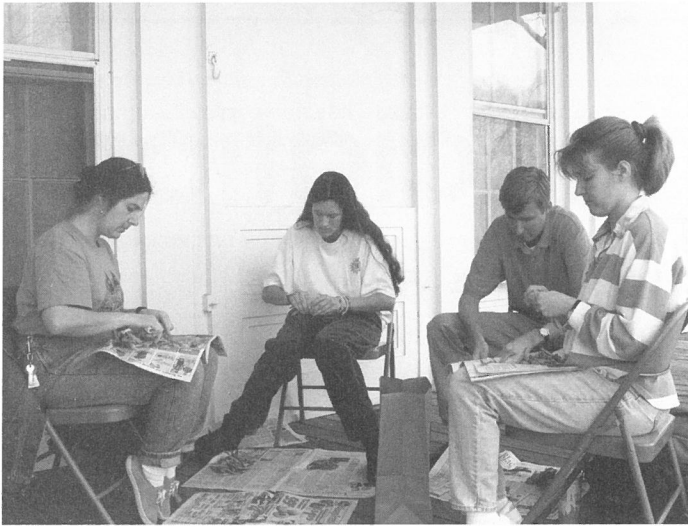
Although there is no detailed study of the regional distribution of the two pronunciations, we know that how a person says the word is related to where he or she grew up. I found this to be true when I informally queried about 45 individuals from various backgrounds and parts of the country. I interviewed them in person in Blacksburg, Va., in phone conversations, and in the Appalachian Studies classes I teach.

Those who say *Appalāchia* today tend to be from the northern or western states, including Appalachian portions of Pennsylvania, New York, and some parts of West Virginia. Those preferring *Appalāchia* tend to be from Southern or Central Appalachia

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or from the South in general. Also favoring the *ă* pronunciation are Appalachian and Southern migrants currently living in Northern cities who still exhibit Southern Appalachian or Southern speech patterns.

The history of the use of the word *Appalachia* offers insight as to why the word's pronunciation is so significant to Southern Appalachian residents. David Walls wrote the definitive article on the word's history, "On the Naming of Appalachia," published in 1977 in *An Appalachian Symposium: Essays Written in*



Courtesy of Anita Puckett

Students in Anita Puckett's Appalachian folk culture class at Virginia Tech snap beans in an exercise to demonstrate place, interfamily bonding, and gender roles. These students, depending on where they grew up, regard the pronunciation of *Appalachia* as a marker to identify those who do or do not have anything of value to say to them.

Honor of Cratis D. Williams, edited by J.W. Williamson. In this article, Walls documented how *Appalachia* evolved from 16th century Spanish explorers' use of a Native American word for an Indian village in Florida, most often spelled in the Spaniards' journals as *Apalache*. Ignorance about eastern Northern American topography led 16th and 17th century Spanish and French mapmakers to label all of the Southern mountains as some variant of the word *Apalatchy*. As late as 1911, *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia* reflected this Spanish origin by noting that *Appalachia* "was first applied by the Spaniards to the extreme southern part of the system" and is sometimes spelled with only one p, consistent with its Spanish spelling. The ã form is also consistent with the way *Apalachicola* and *Apalachee* are said, both Florida geographical place names sharing a common origin with *Appalachia*. Since the ã form is found in all three words, it may reflect how the word was originally pronounced.

Appalachians or Alleghenies?

By the late 18th century, cartographers were, for the most part, dividing the Appalachian Mountains into two separate domains: a northern section extending from New England to the southern Virginia border and a southern part stretching from North Carolina into Georgia, roughly coinciding with the Great Smoky Mountains and surrounding ranges. Walls points out that the Southern region became known by a Latinized variant of *Apalatchy*: *Appalachia* or the *Appalachians*. The northern sub-region was labeled *Alleghenia* or *Alleghenies*. A few Northern-born speakers I interviewed, originally hailing from New York, Michigan, and central Ohio, still maintain this distinction.

Interestingly, in the first authorized dictionary of American English published back in 1828, the New England lexicographer Noah Webster did not include the word *Appalachia* at all. He labeled the entire geological region as the *Alleghenies*, thus suggesting that *Appalachia* was not a suitable entry for an

American English dictionary. Webster's favoring the Northern term for the mountain region was essentially a political act, excluding the Spanish word from the authorized American vocabulary. Here, then, is an important and early insight into why the pronunciation of the word *Appalachia* has become such an emotional issue for many Central and Southern Appalachians. If lexicographers did not think of *Appalachia* as an American word, then the use of that word by people living in parts of the region was at least nonstandard, if not unacceptable, by educated elites.

Despite Webster's pronouncement, various geographers continued to use — and refine the usage of — the word *Appalachia*. By the late 1800s, John Wesley Powell, the U.S. Geological Survey's first director, classified the Eastern Seaboard mountains as *Appalachian* and the plateau west of those mountains as the *Allegheny Plateau*. As a result, many U.S. English speakers and dictionaries began applying *Appalachia* to denote the entire Eastern U.S. mountain range, while many others continued the older usage and employed the term to describe only the region's southern portion. All of the early 20th century dictionaries I consulted, including several recently published editions, list meanings that refer to the entire mountain range. While most of the Northern speakers I interviewed support this usage of *Appalachia* and say the word indicates only the mountain range, just three of the 30 Southern speakers limited their definitions to a landform. The remaining 27 Southern speakers also mentioned that *Appalachians* could also mean the region's residents.

According to Walls, no published usage referred to people living in the region as *Appalachians* until former librarian Horace Kephart applied that adjective to mountaineers in his classic 1913 study of life in the Great Smoky Mountains, *Our Southern Highlanders*. Prior to that time, various general labels — such as *Cohee*, meaning a British descendent living west of the Blue Ridge mountains — were applied, but these were not usually

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linked closely to geography. Residents and outsiders simply had no name for Appalachians, although people sometimes used colony or state names, such as "Pennsylvanian" or "Virginian."

Kephart, of course, was subscribing to a view that first came into existence during the post-Civil War period: Southern Appalachian whites were members of a distinct culture that was both exotic and a remnant of the past. With highly popular local color writers such as John Fox Jr. and Mary Noailles Murfree leading the way, influential individuals and organizations came into the region from elsewhere and attributed — with varying degrees of accuracy — specific ancestries, customs, material and folk traditions, religious orientations, and speech patterns to white residents.

This designation of Southern Appalachia as a nationally recognized regional culture is critical to the current social, political, and cultural significance now attributed to the pronunciations of *Appalachia*. When a region becomes associated with characteristics of a specific culture, and vice versa, then how a person pronounces the name of that region acquires certain associations and significance. A given pronunciation is linked to views about the members of that regional culture, views held both by Appalachians and non-Appalachians. For Appalachia, this post-Civil War designation became either highly romanticized or highly negative in the popular imagination. This led, in turn, to how some regional residents responded to the way people pronounce *Appalachia*.

Gaining Currency

However, *Appalachia* did not achieve widespread currency until the 1960s when the region became one of the main battlefields in the War on Poverty, declared by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. Over the next several decades, *Appalachia* with the long *ā* has become the nationally preferred pronunciation in large part because most governmental, media, and anti-

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poverty workers working in the region came from parts of the country using the *ā* form. In fact, this *ā* form is the more common pronunciation used by Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) administrators; Congress established the ARC in 1965 to support economic and social development in the 13-state region, from southern New York state to northern Mississippi, that the commission defines as Appalachia.

The word *Appalāchia*, then, became synonymous with the residents of the Central and Southern parts of that region, nearly all of whom were presumed to be impoverished and white. This shift in meaning is again reflected in several American English dictionaries that now define the word as referring to the white residents of the region. For example, *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, published in 1983, defines *Appalachian* as "a white native or resident of the Appalachian mountain area." The Third College edition of *Webster's New World Dictionary* proclaims that Appalachia is "the highland region of the E[astern] U.S. ... characterized generally by economic depression and poverty."

Many people in Southern Appalachian communities responded to the intense and usually negative coverage the War on Poverty inspired during the 1960s and 1970s by fighting back. Residents have, in various ways, developed regional views and strategies for countering popular distorted images by portraying their communities and the region in a more positive, accurate light. Offering their own definitions of what *Appalachia* should

mean, they present a picture of the region consistent with their senses of personal and cultural identity. For instance, a local Southeastern Kentucky woman I know reported that she successfully sued *The (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal* for mistakenly portraying her children as dirty and poor (they'd been playing in the creek). Other scholars and community activists formed the Appalachian Studies Association as well as watchdog groups such as Appalshop, the Whitesburg, Ky.-based media arts and cultural center, and the online Silicon Holler e-journal for Southern Appalachia (accessible at www.webgranny.org). Appalachians have made better use of the media and the courts, produced scholarly and policy publications, and developed and implemented educational curriculums at all levels.

At about this time, *Appalāchia* became the way that experts said the word, experts who were, for the most part, from the region and who were personally and professionally committed to changing negative images about life in the mountains. The *ā* pronunciation became equated with outsiders who insisted on assuming that the region was a place of unrelenting poverty peopled by backward, hopeless folk badly in need of the outsiders' expertise and assistance. People who said *Appalāchia* were perceived, in short, as outsiders who didn't know what they were talking about but were more than willing to tell people from the mountains what to do and how they should do it.

Taking Sides

Many regional educators, local media broadcasters, and government officials have taken a leadership role in insisting that the *Appalāchia* pronunciation is the correct one. It is the pronunciation they use in Appalachian cultural heritage programs in elementary and secondary schools and in various Appalachian Studies programs in regional colleges and universities. Regional performers and artists as well as Appalshop productions employ the *ā* pronunciation. Taken together, these efforts

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have had a definite, though sometimes spotty, impact throughout Central and Southern Appalachia.

Proponents of the *ā* pronunciation can be almost as zealous. For example, when my colleague, Virginia Tech folklorist Elizabeth Fine, gave a workshop on current Appalachian issues in 1997, she pronounced *Appalachia* with the *ā*. A high-ranking member of the U.S. foreign officer corps questioned Fine's credibility on the basis of what the government official firmly believed was her mispronunciation of the region's name.

During a recent phone conversation, I discovered that the staff at the Appalachian Volunteers of Boston College, a campus organization that provides Central and Southern Appalachian service opportunities for students, draws similar conclusions from the way people pronounce *Appalachia*. A staff worker, originally from Norfolk, Va., stated that *App-a-lā-sha*,

pronounced with a “sh” sound in the last syllable, was the correct pronunciation. She assumed *Appalāchia* was “colloquial” and incorrect.

Yet despite all of these feelings on both sides of the pronunciation issue, there is one fact we must keep in mind: Most residents of the region rarely use the word *Appalachia* in their day-to-day interactions with friends and neighbors. Part of the reason for this resides in the dialect’s basic characteristics.

Most Central and Southern Appalachians speak a regional vernacular many call “country,” “mountain,” or “hillbilly” talk; sociolinguists, those scholars who study the effects of social factors on language patterns, refer to it as Appalachian English. This vernacular’s underlying sound-and-stress patterns don’t lend themselves to either pronunciation of *Appalachia*. Mountain talk prefers one-syllable words, such as *truck*, or two-syllable words spoken with the stress on the first syllable, as in *mountain*, or with the stress on both syllables, as in *graveyard*. In addition, words that end in “a” in other American English

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dialects tend to be changed to a long e sound, as when *opera* becomes *opry*. So as soon as someone uses the word *Appalāchia* in conversation to refer to nearby places and communities, locals can be fairly sure the speaker is someone who “isn’t from around here.” Not only is the speaker from elsewhere, but many local speakers perceive the person as someone who is “putting us down” or who “thinks they’re better than we are.” Conversely, speaking in the local vernacular establishes the individual’s “right” to a place in local life, defines their ethnicity, if you will.

For example, over several years’ residence in a rural Southeastern Kentucky community as a linguistic anthropologist and community resident, I came to realize that while each pronunciation of *Appalachia* had its own distinctive meaning, both had essentially negative connotations. Residents of this particular community clearly associate the ā form with media “spies,” government officials, and missionary “do-gooders” who “don’t know nothing about us.” They use *Appalāchia* or *Appalāchian* to parody these outsiders. The people of this rural community use the ā form to draw the line clearly between “insiders” who know how to use the ā variant and “outsiders” who do not.

However, even when an insider in this community calls someone an Appalachian and uses the correct ā pronunciation, it doesn’t tend to be a compliment. The most benign, though uncommon, usage of the word in this part of Eastern Kentucky occurs when someone uses it to talk about an Appalachian Studies class some family member is taking at the local community college. More often, people consider the speech of those teachers and other professionals who are comfortable using *Appalāchia* or

Appalāchian as “proper” talk or “talking proper.” According to the views of most community residents, people who talk proper belong to a different socioeconomic class than they do and probably look down on them.

This usage pattern changed dramatically when I became a full-time faculty member at a local community college with an Appalachian Studies center. In this more circumscribed academic setting, people strongly preferred the *Appalāchia* pronunciation and routinely used it to denote regional residents. There were consistent efforts to promulgate this pronunciation of *Appalachia*, no matter what the context—in classroom instruction, regional media productions, fine arts enrichment, applied research, and personal conversation. Both faculty and students considered the ā pronunciation a positively valued symbol of membership in and knowledge about the region. Students from the region I’ve encountered at Virginia Tech—including the young man who expressed such disdain for the potter—report having had similar experiences at their high schools or local community colleges.

A Mirror Image

Native-born residents of the Pennsylvania coalfields and some West Virginia areas, of course, generally say *Appalāchia* in contrast to the Central Appalachia coalfields. When it comes to meaning, Northern residents from both inside and outside *Appalachia* seem less consistent about whether the word should refer to regional residents.

Thirteen of the 15 respondents of Northern origin but not from Northern Appalachia did not use the word to refer to the region’s residents. One stated he would never think to use the word to refer to regional residents. For residents from or living in Central or Southern Appalachia, he said he would use the word *hillbilly* or, perhaps, *redneck* instead.

More striking, and needing much more investigation, is how professionals working with Central and Southern Appalachian

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service organizations headquartered in Northern cities pronounce and evaluate the word. Two respondents employed by the Boston College Appalachian Volunteers, for example (three, counting Elizabeth Fine’s senior seminar participant) used the word *Appalachia* both to refer to the mountain chain and to the disadvantaged (as they perceive them) residents living in the region’s central and southern portions. One of these two stated that those saying *Appalāchia* were uneducated. A second stated that she had switched to *Appalāchia* to be respectful of local people with whom she was working.

Regardless of their stance, these three respondents clearly perceive Southern Appalachian residents as different from themselves and, in fact, inferior in some respects. Variations,

then, in pronunciation and meaning by Northerners living both inside and outside Appalachia are in some ways a mirror image of those found in Southern Appalachia. Some Northerners involved in Central and Southern Appalachia projects tend to see

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Appalāchia as correct and *Appalāchia* as wrong, exactly reversing the way Central and Southern Appalachians see the situation. These respondents use the word to determine who's "one of us" and who is not — just as my student did.

When the student in the Appalachian Studies class dismissed the potter as incompetent, then, he was stereotyping him. It was, however, a classificatory act made in accordance with values his Southwest Virginia upbringing had assigned to the use of the *ā*

vowel in *Appalachia*. This upbringing had taught him that how the potter pronounced the word could help the student evaluate the outsider's "right" to talk about Appalachian pottery and its history. The student also believed that the potter's pronunciation told him something about the potter's attitude towards Appalachian residents. The values assigned to *Appalāchia*, all negative in this case, were the legacy of hundreds of years of speakers' utterances of the word *Appalachia* in various contexts, reflecting specific cultural interpretations and language use traditions on both sides of the pronunciation fence.

Whether consciously aware of the derivation and perpetuation of these interpretations or not, both the student's and the three non-Appalachian respondents' negative reactions to the pronunciation of *Appalachia* show how important and how complex the relationship is between language and culture — even when talking about a single sound. **Net**

Anita Puckett is an associate professor and coordinator of the Appalachian Studies Program at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va. She is a linguistic anthropologist who specializes in Appalachian language and culture relations. Oxford University Press published her first book, *Seldom Ask, Never Tell: Labor and Discourse in Appalachia*, this year.

ESSAY

Can't Pronounce *Appalachia*? Then Don't Mess With Us

by Amy Clark

A fellow from Northern Virginia shows all the sensitivity some natives of the mountains have come to expect from people who say *Appalāchia*.

Most people I've encountered have used the words *lovely* and *charming* to describe my Appalachian dialect. But there's always the exception.

I've been the victim of stereotyping more than once because of the way I speak. I was having dinner with a couple of folks from Northern Virginia not long ago when one of them (a fellow I had just met) burst into laughter. Now, that would have been just fine, except that what I was talking about wasn't really that funny. I'm attuned to this kind of re-

sponse by now, so I laughed along and said, "It must be my Southern dialect."

"Oh, that's not Southern," he chuckled. "That's hillbilly." What I wanted to say (and didn't) is that "Southern," one

I translated this fellow's remark as follows:
"Frankly, my dear, you're no Scarlett O'Hara. You're Elly May Clampett."

of four major regional dialects in our country, can be broken down into types. Alabama Southern, for example, sounds much different from Savannah, Ga., Southern, which is nothing like East Tennessee (or "hillbilly," if you prefer) Southern. But too many are quick to offer a correction when they hear a Central Appalachian call herself "Southern." For some