

# *Greene County*

MAGAZINE

**What Are They Like?**



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## WHAT ARE THEY LIKE?<sup>3</sup>

by

Mozelle R. Cowden

When the Shenandoah National Park was accepted by the Department of the Interior from the State of Virginia, it was with the understanding that the families now living in the Park Area would be relocated on land better suited to agriculture and in localities where they would have access to schools, medical care, and employment. The Resettlement Administration has undertaken to solve this problem by providing homestead communities where full time farm programs, subsistence farming, supplemented by outside income or full time industrial programs, may be undertaken by any family who can assume the responsibility of purchasing a home, being given a long period in which to pay. The State Welfare Department is assisting the very old people and any others who, because of ill health or other disability, are unable to take a homestead, to relocate outside the Park area. Each family is studied individually and is helped to choose the plan best suited to its needs. The group consists of 432 families or 2,250 people.

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Eliminating the families who will move without assistance and the welfare cases, we have left about 300 families or 1,500 people who are the definite responsibility of the Resettlement Administration. It is true of this group, as it would be true of any group of 1,500 people, that some of them are good, some bad, but most of them are "just middlin." They are just people with individual problems and individual differences. There will be exceptions to anything that is said of them.

It is impossible to describe a typical park area family, but using the median (the number above and below which an equal fall) as "typical" we can say that our "typical" family head is between 36 and 40 years old and his wife is between 31 and 35 years old. There are five persons in his family. He and his wife have between a first and fourth grade education. His cash income for a year is about \$100.00 to \$150.00. He is a share renter, cultivating less than five acres of land. He lives too far away from school for his children to attend and they go to church only occasionally, since no regular church services are held within reach. The family has good health, with the exception of bad teeth. The weight and height of the children are normal. They live in a log house which is kept reasonably clean and there are flowers around the door. They have canned fruit and vegetables, some dried apples and beans, at least ten

gallons of kraut, potatoes, pumpkins and cabbage stored for winter use. They have a hog to kill for their winter meat, a few chickens, and a cow. You would expect that people living in such circumstances would have problems we know little about. They do. A mother of six children said a doctor had never been in their home. They called one last winter when two of the children had double pneumonia, but the snow was so deep he couldn't get there - so they just did the best they could and all six children are living and a doctor has never yet been in their house.

A woman living not very far from Skyland told me that during the summer they bought flour, meal, salt, lard, sugar, and coffee for winter use. There were two reasons for this: first, they have no income during the winter, and second, when the snow is deep they are unable to get out to the store for weeks or months at a time.

Recently a man told me he had rheumatism and heart trouble as result of bad teeth and diseased tonsils. I asked why he didn't have them taken out. He said, "if you had to choose between having your teeth fixed or feeding your family, which would you choose?" Of course I said, "Feeding the family." He nodded and said, "Well then, we ain't so different, only you've had money enough for both and I've never had quite enough for the first."

Why hasn't he moved out of the mountains? He couldn't. He has little education, no vocational training, no cash and only a very limited credit. If he went to a farmer to rent a good farm he would have to admit that he had never handled a team, that he had previous experience on a five-acre farm raising patches of corn, potatoes, and garden. He would get the farm only if it were so poor or badly in need of cleaning up that a more experienced farmer wouldn't take it. He wouldn't better his present condition on such a farm. Suppose he wanted to buy a farm. He couldn't make the initial payment, and who would extend him unsecured credit sufficient to buy a farm? He has a poor kind of security in the mountains. He knows the mountain environment and no other. Nowhere else could he make even a bare subsistence with so small investment. It has been impossible for him to raise himself in the economic scale without help.

Asking that you bear in mind that there are always exceptions, I shall attempt to give a clearer idea of what they are like by naming a few general characteristics with incidents to illustrate.

They are kindly and helpful. Recently my car was stuck in mud and rocks about fifteen miles from the nearest garage. It was my first visit to the neighborhood. The car refused to move backward or forward. I had

no idea where to go for help. A man walking up the road proved to be the son of a family I wanted to visit. He told me I had passed one house I needed to visit just a short distance back, that if I'd visit it before I went on farther, I need not come back through the mud, but could go on up the mountain to the Skyline Drive. After we tried again to get the car out and failed, I asked him what one did in such circumstances. Instantly he said, "Well, what I thought was, a man down the road three quarters of a mile has a team. I can slip down and get it while you see that family. That way you won't lose so much time." So he "slipped back" and got a team while I made my visit, and that way I lost practically no time at all. It took all the combined efforts of the team and engine to get the car out of that mud and up the next red clay hill. Neither the man who had first helped me nor the one who brought the team would make any charge for the service. When I argued that they had helped me and I'd like to give them something, they said I wouldn't have been on that road except to help them, that they were sorry the road was so bad and if I ever had trouble again would I please send for them. They wouldn't take any money. Several times I've met a problem too big for me to handle without assistance and never had one of our mountain people turn away without offering to help -- and making the offer good. Is that because they have always had to meet problems without assistance or garages, hospitals, undertakers or grocery stores -- or just that they

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are unusually friendly? Maybe more of the first, but it's rather comforting to know that the neighborhood will accept my problem as their problem when I am far away from the services of civilization which one can get in such abundance if he can pay for them. Frequently, a house is very inaccessible and directions for finding it cannot be clear. It is not unusual for someone to say "Some of us will walk along and show you -- its pretty hard to find the way if you don't know the paths -- we don't mind." Once the Welfare Supervisor of Park families and I got lost. We had received directions from the home where we left our car. Just before dark the mother sent her boys out to blow whistles and call along the ridges and she stayed in the yard and "hollered" so we'd know which way to come. We would have found our way out eventually -- if it didn't get dark first. It was the boy with the whistle who led us back to the right path. He spoke as if he had met us accidentally and walked on. The mother told us she had been worried and had sent the boys out. When we thanked her she said "Oh, that's all right -- some of us ought to have showed you the way." Several families have indigent old people or children living with them because "they didn't have anyone to look to for help." Often the indigents have no claim or blood kinship; just the claim of being helpless.

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They are frugal. A woman was very distressed because her husband was going into debt. She said, "He's wasting his money. He makes \$60.00 a month and he ought to save some of it. That job won't last forever and there ain't a family living can live up \$60.00 a month." I must have looked skeptical for she qualified her statement thus -- "Well, not a family of three with a garden like we've got." Their furniture is nice and their home livable. They have evidently never spent money recklessly if \$60.00 a month is "mighty good pay" precluding all excuse for going into debt. One day we found a woman busily cracking walnuts. The hulls were still wet. When asked why she didn't wait until the hulls were dry so they wouldn't stain her hands and clothing, she explained, "The price is higher now. I get thirty cents a pound, they won't be that high when everybody gets to selling them. I can crack out a pound of kernals in one hour and fifteen minutes. That's mighty quick money." If we count the time actually consumed in cracking the walnuts, she makes twenty-four cents an hour. But if we count the time it took to go to the woods and gather the nuts, plus the time required to take the kernals to market, the speed with which she is making money doesn't exactly leave us breathless. A man who sold over three hundred dollars worth of farm products -- vegetables and livestock -- in the past twelve months counted up his cash farm expense. He used no fertilizer; he raised his own seed and he



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and his sons did the farm work. His actual farm expense for one year had been \$2.50. He had hired a horse five days at fifty cents a day. The rest of the work was done by hand.

They are accurate in their speech insofar as their experience enables them to be. A woman who refused to try to estimate the acreage the family was cultivating explained, "I don't know how much an acre is. You see the garden; the corn patch is about four times as big as the garden and the tater patch about twice as big. You can put down whatever you think." They have the same difficulty with distance. When asked how far to the next house they will probably say, "It ain't fer" or "It's a right smart piece." If I've walked from the road to their house they can tell me if the next house is twice that far or half that far and sometimes they can estimate the time it takes to walk it (and if it takes them ten minutes, it will probably take me fifteen). But the mile as a measure of distance is outside their experience. They have seldom measured distance by speedometers or the price of a railroad ticket. Often when asked if the health of a child is good, a mother answers, "Yes so fer -- of course I don't know how it'll be, but so fer he don't never complain of nothin'." A man who had failed to give a complete list of his indebtedness came to the office to tell me he forgot one debt. "I didn't mean to give it in wrong, I just forgot, so I come in to tell you.

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Now you can fix it right." Another man gave a statement of his income. After the form was completed and I was leaving he said, "now on that income, I sold \$2.00 worth of carrots and I forgot to tell you. I don't recon' \$2.00 makes much difference, but I want to be fair and honest." One day two mountain women were talking in a WPA sewing room. The door was opened for a minute and one woman was saying, "I said to him, 'Did you ever experience it?' And he said, 'No.' Of course, I ought to have said, 'Did you ever witness it?' for he couldn't experience it." The door closed and I couldn't hear any more, but there it was again -- the striving for accuracy in speech. I can well believe the old yarn about the traveling man who asked a mountaineer if he'd lived in the mountains all his life and got the answer, "No -- not yit."

Perhaps their most outstanding characteristic is that they are unpredictable. A man who beat his neighbor to death with a rock ("They were drinking and got in a fuss over a woman.") was a "trusty" in a local jail. The night before he was sent to the penitentiary he came home. He could have led the sheriff a merry chase if he had decided to hide out in the mountains, but the sheriff had trusted him and his family said, "Of course he had to be back before he was missed." The dirtiest house we have visited had a lovely Early American bed in it. It was surprisingly well preserved. I suggested that they might sell it for enough money to buy other furniture which they needed badly. The wife

said, "No, we wouldn't sell it. That bed belonged to his grandpap - and to his pap before him. We'd rather do without forever than part with it. I make the children take care of it. One hit it with a hammer here where you see, but he won't do that again." Who knows, maybe she could be led to see that a lovely bed like that deserves a clean house. A man whose moral code leaves much to be desired doesn't like to live near a tourist camping ground because "them fools come from all kinds of places. They drink, play cards, whoop an' holler all night. They just as soon throw rubbish in the spring as anywhere else. They don't live by no rules a-tall' an' I'd rather my family was away." Yes, they are unpredictable and contradictory.

They have a keen sense of justice. A man asks, "Why can't I have a homestead house built just like I want?" and I answer, "For the same reason that I can't have a car built especially for me. Neither of us can afford it. If the Government built a house exactly like you want and then you didn't take it, they would be left with a house that suited you, but might not suit anyone else in the Park. You can choose the one you like best of the ones Resettlement builds just like I can buy my choice of the low-priced cars on the market, but I can't have one built just for me." He nodded and said, "Well, there's right in that. I can see why, now that you put it that way."

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The statement that they are independent needs no elaboration. Any family living beyond the reach of schools, doctors, churches and other co-operative services has to be independent. Perhaps you are asking if we are not in danger of taking away his independence by putting him in a homestead. Let us look at his independence: He has the same kind as his feathered and furred brothers have. If the season is good he has plenty of food; if it is hard, he goes hungry. During most of the winter months he is entirely dependent upon his own resources for food, medical care, and in case of death, for his funeral arrangements. Does the custom of having several funerals preached at one summer "church meeting" seem funny? But, it wouldn't seem funny if our own loved ones had been laid to rest in the frozen earth when the snow was too deep for a minister to reach us and we took the first opportunity to have a religious service held. No, their independence doesn't seem enviable, and if putting them within reach of schools, churches, medical care and other contributions of civilization is taking their independence, I'm for it! I'd even be willing for them to lose their independence to the extent of being able to read and enjoy a library. I'd like them to be able to make a living without such long hours of drudgery. I'd like them to make their contribution to civilization. Yes, they will lose some of their independence just as you and I have lost ours -- we are dependent upon all the factors

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of our environment. Let them lose their independence in an enriched environment where they can develop into good citizens sharing all the benefits of civilization. In losing their independence, they may live more abundantly.