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CENTRAL APPALACHIANS Ecoregion

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Central Appalachians Ecoregion Overview

The landscape in the Central Appalachians as a whole is:

- People living where the land is flat. This is generally creek and river bottoms. Occasionally the flat land is artificial terraces from coal mining or terracing just because a community needs flat land. Also, there occasionally there is flat land on hill tops.
- The other significant areas of flat land are in active and reclaimed coal mines
- Sometimes coal land is recycled to other uses, such as an airport, but because the mines are generally inaccessible from the transportation routes (especially in West Virginia) and because they are at significantly different elevations, this was uncommon. In Kentucky abandoned and restored coal land is often used for wildlife management.
- Travel is taxing in this region. First, typically travel takes an excessive amount of time because of narrow winding roads that almost invariably route the traveler through a near-endless string of towns, settlements, and rural housing. Second, to build wide, straight roads that can be traveled swiftly at rates of speed that most Americans consider normal for rural travel, costs an excessive amount because of the expense of building in the hills.

This is a simple landscape overlying a complex topography.

- Strips of houses are typically along creeks
- Most towns are string towns. Larger towns have arisen in areas that have more flat land, which is at the confluence of streams (and their accompanying roads). This makes for a spider-web like system of human interaction with the next higher order of urban center at the center of the web.
- Most of the region is tree covered. The wooded hills are punctuated by coal mines that are either woods, active mining, or restored, which was typically grass.

West Virginia Blocks seemed poor, isolated, and unkempt compared with Kentucky blocks. Roadside trash and informal dumps were endemic in West Virginia, while Kentucky was nearly spotless. Part of the reason may be the availability of rural trash service. Throughout Kentucky we saw roadside trash boxes, but they were not visible in West Virginia.

In Kentucky we saw several underground mines operating beside the road. All mining in West Virginia was out of sight. This may reflect different cultural and ownership attitudes or perhaps the West Virginia seams are at a different level compared to the road.

We saw many new houses in blocks that otherwise appeared to have little change and little economic growth or vitality. Are these houses the homes of return migrants?

Porches were a theme of this ecoregion. Many houses and many house types had porches. Most of these porches appeared to be used, though on some of the new houses the porch may have been a stylistic addition. Porches were practical before air conditioning and were common throughout much of the nation, but in other parts of the country many of these porches have been removed or enclosed. Porches may also serve as a source of

entertainment in this poor part of the country where unemployment and poverty may provide much time with little income. We saw people sitting on their porches as early as 8:00 AM, and often these were not elderly persons.

We saw few gardens in West Virginia and many in Kentucky.

Car repair businesses were common. Many seemed to have a backlog or the owners were selling used cars on the side.

Mobile homes were common in this region, perhaps more common than in other parts of the South.

Oil and gas were in several blocks but did not appear to make significant contributions to the economy or landscape. Would different roads or sample blocks have shown more oil and gas?

West Virginia appeared to have never had farming. Kentucky had some small scale tilling and many small farms with hay and pasture, but few row crops. Would the Kentucky part of this ecoregion have had much more cropland in 1970? 1950? Could some of these be found on USDA air photos?

We were surprised by the few tobacco fields. Perhaps later in the summer there would be more. We did see a few small tilled fields that had not yet been planted.

Baptist may have been the largest religious 'family'. The Regular Baptist church was fairly common. Community nondenominational and interdenominational churches were common. Fighting chickens were common in this ecoregion.

Logging businesses were common, but did not appear to be important anywhere. The logs that we saw were relatively large and were larger than the size of trees that we could see along the road, so apparently the loggers were highgrading private forest tracts. We never saw evidence in the forests of trees being cut.

We never saw a farm implement dealer in the ecoregion in or out of a block.

The Central Appalachian ecoregion seemed to be a region that people can't get away from. The neighboring Ridge and Valley ecoregion is one that people are choosing to migrate to.

Out of Block

June 3, 2002.

Bluefield. Depressed, declining town.

Driving on H 52 we saw severe flood damage from the floods of the spring of 2002. We saw damage in several watersheds and stopped for photographs several times. First on Elkhorn Creek between Vivian and Landgraff (Delorme 58 I4. Several houses had numbers that had been painted on them. These were severely damaged and had been vacated by the residents. The numbers appeared to be FEMA purchase numbers. We saw signs to several FEMA offices, but did not get a photograph. Work crews were moving soil and debris, and creek bottoms were littered with natural and human flotsam.

Block 69-360

Southwestern West Virginia, near the Kentucky border. Delorme 57. Logan and Mingo counties.

Natural energy resources dominated the economy of this block. In addition to coal mining we saw a natural gas transmission line and a facility to burn natural gas for electricity. An irony in this coal rich region.

This block, which was on the Kentucky border, was the home territory of the Hatfield family that is famous for its feud with the Kentucky McCoy family. We saw evidence of tree thinning in one location. Fighting chickens were common. We saw signs of both active and inactive mining with a coal conveyor belt and abandoned coal silos.

Block 69-318

West Virginia. Delorme 57 and 51. Southwestern, West Virginia.

This thickly settled block centered on Logan.

Wooded hills with reclaimed grasslands peeking over hilltops. The Logan County airport was on a reclaimed coal mine. Life appeared to be centered on coal. Businesses sold coal equipment or provided coal services, such as Commercial Coal Testing.

Block 69-315

Southwestern West Virginia. Delorme 50 & 51. Mingo County.

Typical creek bottom settlement pattern. At the edge of the block we started seeing some new houses. There was evidence of both oil and natural gas production.

The housing was mixed with more diversity than we had seen earlier in the day. There was little growth, but there were some new houses.

Block 69-357

Mingo County, West Virginia and Martin and Pike counties Kentucky

Delorme West Virginia 56

This block had no significant changes.

Block 69-379

Kentucky, Delorme 56

Pike County with fragments of Floyd and Martin.

Pay catfish lake, golf, forest reclaiming pasture and reforesting hills were all in this block. This block was more open with wider valleys than what we became accustomed to seeing in West Virginia. This block was also more diverse than West Virginia. There were lots of hay fields or CRP land. This block was much cleaner than the West Virginia blocks. This block had some tilled fields, including a corn field. We did, however, observe brush invading some bottom land, flat fields. The population density seemed to be lower in this block from what we saw in West Virginia. Population density may reflect the quality and quantity of available coal supplies. This Kentucky block had more clear land than West Virginia.

Block 69-379 had no change. The population density is low. There were some new houses. The block was clean and appeared to be relatively prosperous.

Block 69-425

Kentucky. Delorme 55-56. Floyd County.

No change. This block was periodically prosperous; we saw many examples of new houses that looked good with older houses that seemed to be owned or rented by the less prosperous. Are these new houses owned by return migrants? There seemed to be no manufacturing or other jobs other than coal and coal related.

We observed coal trucks, nice houses, old coal roads, small fields that were mostly hay, and an abandoned rail line that appeared to have gone to a coal mine. This block had no row crops.

Block 69-486

Kentucky. Delorme 71. Perry and Leslie counties.

This block is located about 3 miles west of Hazard.

This end of the day block had reclaimed coal land and coal land ready for reclamation. This was the only block where we saw evidence that local residents used coal for home heating. Here many driveways had piles of coal. The rural population density was very dense.

Block 69-483

Kentucky. Delorme 72. Knott County. Northeast of Vicco.

Cane Creek Lake and State Park are in the block. This long, narrow lake appeared to be in an abandoned strip mine.

Dense fog part of this first block of the day.

Summary. This block had active mining and reclaimed mines. There was a high proportion of new houses, probably because of Cane Creek Lake. Cane Creek Lake appeared to be an old strip mine and we were able to see signs of active mining on the hillsides to the north of the lake.

Block 69-466

Kentucky. Delorme 72. Knott County east of Hindman.

What we saw

Five new houses in one mile on 899. An old road and a new road. Houses typically had porches.

Alice Lloyd College, established in 1923 was in Pippa Passes.

On our route up 899, from Mallie to Pippa Passes, the settlement pattern seemed to be a distributed urban area with significant urban-type services provided in small places that were separated by rural areas. Some of these urban services included Alice Lloyd College and a large rehabilitation center. Gardens were very common. Mobile home strips were along the road. There were small, flat valley fields grown up in weeds or grass. Why were these not being used for hay or crops? Old pastures were being invaded by brush. Some cattle. Logging and logging equipment. Houses crammed into a small valley. An underground mine. A pile of coal and coal loading facilities.

Just outside the block some oil and gas.

Block 69-501

Kentucky. Delorme 72. Letcher County. Isom was in the block and Whitesburg was just outside to the east.

What we saw

Strip mall and old, unused coal loading equipment in Isom. Meadows in flat lands, but no cattle. Signs of coal mining (coal roads, hills with beauty strip trees). A garden in a narrow valley with

post 1950 houses. Was this garden, and some of the nearby house sites and yards, located where there had been farms and fields?

Pasture and abandoned trailer. Coal loading facility. Kingdom Come Baptist church. Scrap yard. Nice houses at Ice.

Block Summary

No agriculture even where parcels had been classified agriculture by the interpreter.

Block 69-488

Virginia. Delorme 36 & 37. Dickenson County.

This block of the Central Appalachians ecoregion is located near Kentucky, but separated by Pine Mountain. There is no nearby city. Clintwood, a small town is in the block. Most of the John W. Flannagan reservoir is in the block.

What we saw

The north part of Clintwood had modest housing. Fighting chickens, Regular Baptist Church, and a park and ride lot. We were unsure where the commuters would work. The Tri Cities are only about 30 miles south as the crow flies, but with the transportation difficulties of the Central Appalachians, a trip to Bristol would probably take an hour and perhaps much more in good weather. Bear Pen Recreation Area on the Pound River. Lots of forests. A few trailers and cabins along the Pound River. Small pasture (3-4 acres). Improved pasture being invaded by brush (very steep slopes). Pasture, hay, tobacco and old farm buildings. Hay and pasture. Moderate density rural nonfarm population. Part of this block is supposed to be in the Jefferson National Forest, but we saw no sign of it. The Blowing Rock area had lots of open space with grass surrounded by forest. Cumberland Church of the Brethern. Ridge top strip housing. Beautiful old stone house. Signs of a pine plantation, but no hard evidence. Brush encroachment on hillside pasture.

Block Summary

Inactive. A block with wonderful vistas that was heavily forested. There were old farms with steep fields being invaded and pockets of dense town-like settlement. This block had a Blue Ridge look and feel.

Block 69-545

Virginia. Delorme 20. Wise County.

This block had a Ridge and Ridge and Valley look and feel looking both at the Delorme and the land. It is a cove sandwiched between Powell Mountain and Little Stone Mountain just north of the Big Stone Gap and the town of Big Stone Gap and just south of Norton. The driving distance to Kingsport may be as little as 30 miles and is probably a drive of no more than one hour. The valley is beautiful.

What we saw

Hayfield and wooded ridges. Steep pastures, hay, and cattle. The Butchers Fork Cattle Ranch, and one Christmas tree farm. Legion Memorial Methodist Church and a nice grass meadow with a For Sale sign that appeared to aimed at developers. Lonesome Pine Country Club. Substantial

houses near the country club. Cemetery. Hay. Dog grooming business. Rural exurban houses and dairy cattle.

Block Summary

The valley surface has hills (ridges) and flat land. Virtually all of the flat land and many of the slopes have grass. The farming is entirely hay and pasture.

This block is an exception to the Central Appalachians. It is Ridge and Valley in its character. There was diverse housing that ranged from mobiles to mansions. Many houses are recent and only one had a For Sale sign. Some wealth. Most jobs are probably in towns within commuting distance. Do the wealthy live in the valley year round or seasonally? Who are they and what is the source of their wealth?

Out of Block

Harlan County on Highway 38. Coal seemed to be everywhere. There were at least two seams mined at topographic levels higher than the highway as well as underground mines that tapped into a road level seam. Highway 38 had a near endless string of villages.

Block 69-557

Kentucky. Delorme 87. Bell County. West of Harlan and just east of Pineville. Pine Mountain slices through this block but is easily negotiated because of the gap at Pineville.

What we saw.

Modest to poor housing on H 987 in the valley and nice on the hill. Thinned forest cut logs. Tractor and mower in hay field. Nodes of dense rural settlement (Laurel Hill). New road being constructed up a hill, but the purpose escaped us.

Block Summary

No change except for some Laurel Hill housing and some logging. We saw lots of coal trucks on the road but no mine entrances.