

**From Margins to Margins:  
Cultural Integrity, Ecological Survival, and Future Transcripts  
in the Historical Home-Based Health Narratives of  
Nova Scotia and West Virginia**

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**Abstract:**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “industrialization, urbanization, and im/migration” helped birth a 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity with which most of North America grappled. The pivotal word here, though, is “most”: for while most of North America modernized, Atlantic Canada and Appalachia became identified in this same period as “backward” and “underdeveloped.” These regions’ persistent rurality, the exploitation of their eco-systems as resources “colonies,” and even their geo-political placement at the margins meant that, for most of the period under scrutiny in this inquiry, Appalachia and Atlantic Canada were more associated with “anti-modern” than “modern.” Both regions have been identified

with unhealthy populations, ravaged landscapes, and vulnerable economies, even as both have been marketed to tourists for their natural beauty/quaint inhabitants.

Historians, geographers and others have utilized numerous theoretical frameworks and evidence to explain the existence of “underdevelopment” and unhealthy populations in Atlantic Canada and Appalachia. An exploration of 20<sup>th</sup> century sources yields a more complex view. As the world comes to grip with environmental limits elsewhere and everywhere, transcripts for an environmentally sound and more healthy future may be found in the narratives of those who have been at the (perceived) margins before. This paper, using the tools of the herb gatherer, cook, literary/cultural critic, and historian, examines comparatively the lessons of cultural integrity and ecological survival found in the oral history narratives of rural Nova Scotia and West Virginia women.

**Key Words:**

**health; rural women; rurality; gender; modernity; home remedies; Appalachia; Atlantic Canada; Nova Scotia; West Virginia; ecological survival**

**Introduction**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the multiplicity of historical realities bound up in changes that can be shorthanded as “industrialization, urbanization, and im/migration” helped birth a 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity, in all its attendant contingencies, ruptures, and continuities. If modernity is viewed as a series of transformations with which most of the world, including North America, grappled in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then the pivotal word here is “most.” While most of North America contended with change, and embraced ideas and ideals of “progress” and modernity championed in science, medicine, agriculture, and technology, both the Maritimes (later Atlantic) Canada and Appalachia, key players in North America’s modernizing processes of industrialization, paradoxically came to be identified in this same period as “backward,” and “underdeveloped”.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, modernity did not mean a modern life for all nor a complete embrace of any particular sensibility. But the regions of Atlantic Canada and Appalachia - which did not, in fact, become recognized *as* regions until nearly the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - provided the necessary modernizing resources of timber, oil, natural gas, coal and human labour. They were the sites for steel and other major manufacturing. They helped make the dominant paradigm in North America one of modernity. Yet, both places’ persistent rurality, exploitation of their eco-systems as resource “colonies,” and what ultimately came to be defined

as their “cultures” attachment to home and tradition resulted in their geopolitical and economic placement at the margins of their respective American and Canadian societies. Whether they were in actuality, both places were perceived as being at the margins and in decline, both economically and culturally, more “anti-modern” than “modern.”

The use of the term ‘anti-modern’ as a means to explain each region’s culture has had, and continues to have, implications for the health, broadly conceived, of both Atlantic Canada and Appalachia. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the environmental destruction and human psychic damage wrought by coal mining, timber clear-cutting, and industrial polluting of diverse sorts were challenges attending not economic prosperity, but rather economic hardship; perhaps it also made the scars on the landscapes even more difficult to bear. To add insult to injury, at the same time as both regions began to feel the brunt of their “underdevelopment,” the remaining unspoiled lands of both places were marketed to tourists for their natural beauty and quaint cultural features.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, while tourism is an economic mainstay in both regions they have also each been identified as containing some of their respective nations’ most unhealthy populations, ravaged landscapes, and vulnerable economies. Nova Scotians, compared to Canadians as a whole, have high rates of cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes. All of rural Nova Scotia has a

population between 36-48% overweight, which exceeds the national average of 31.9%. West Virginia is currently the 41<sup>st</sup> least healthy state and ranks 48<sup>th</sup> in obesity. The Sydney Tar Ponds in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the result of over a hundred years of steel and coke production, are currently the site of an ongoing major clean up<sup>3</sup>. Numerous groups in West Virginia are fighting mountain top removal, the latest (and some might say, most devastating) means to extract coal from the mountains of West Virginia. Small wonder that both regions continue to be sites of struggle over issues of environmental and social justice.

The current crises in health and healthcare connect to the environment and environmental justice, however, in a way that I wish to put forward in an argument related to oral history narratives. The oral histories in question were collected, originally, to learn more about home-based health knowledge. While the narratives speak to the intersection (and interstices) of health and gender, in this paper they have sparked a line of inquiry fueled originally by the work of John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, and Ian McKay, author of *Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*<sup>4</sup>. Through comparative examination of oral histories gathered in Nova Scotia and West Virginia it is possible to look at a larger question having to do with 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity, economic and ecological disorder, and the resulting long-term health (both individual and societal) effects.<sup>5</sup>

Historians, geographers and others have utilized numerous theoretical frameworks and 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century historical evidence to explain the existence of “underdevelopment” in Atlantic Canada and Appalachia. Health care professionals, sociologists and others have noted the unhealthy populations in these two regions and in some cases pointed to the “uniqueness” of the cultures to justify the need for interventions to solve the health problems besetting these regions’ inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> An exploration of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography along with the 20<sup>th</sup> century home-based health narratives produced in this project, yield a more complicated view. The first element of the argument is one of perspective, and economics.

While the three provinces (Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick) that are referred to as the Maritimes experienced, to different degrees and through various means a form of marginalization (as did Newfoundland, when it joined Confederation in 1949, and the four became known as Atlantic Canada), the reshaping of Nova Scotia’s “image” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, from one of “modernizing force” to one with an obscured role (and class structure) in modern society, provides a case in point of the marginalizing process. A means to promote an anti-modern picture of quaintness and simplicity, one that largely ignored both the historical picture and the contemporary realities, was found in emphasis on the notion of Nova Scotia’s past as one in which a “Folk” society

had lived simpler, non-modern lives (and where evidence could still be found of this life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). As Ian McKay makes brilliantly clear, “This is not the history of a settled, ordered Folk society, but of a region that experienced many of the contradictions of capitalist modernity”<sup>7</sup>.

In the period from early to late 20<sup>th</sup> century the re-fashioning of rural image effectively facilitated an erasure of the role Nova Scotia - and this region as a whole - played in this final stage of modernity. This, too, was to be the fate of Appalachia. Yet, as John Alexander Williams cogently points out, in economic terms, regions like Appalachia and Atlantic Canada may have actually been *leading*, rather than lagging behind, their respective countries – “into a future whose outline is only now just coming into view. In the new terrain of globalized market capitalism, the combination of exploitation and per- / re-sistance, of crisis and renewal,” Williams argues, the message from the margins “...may turn out to be instructive to every dweller in the postmodern world.”<sup>8</sup> Beyond the difference in perspective found when one is looking from the “margins,” the following essay, using the tools of the historian and the herb gatherer, the knowledge of the literary/cultural critic and the cook, examines comparatively some of the lessons of cultural integrity and ecological survival to be found in the oral history narratives of Nova Scotian and West Virginian rural women.

These narratives offer something, “from the margins,” so to speak, for rethinking just what it means to be *at* the margins. But in these home-based health narratives are also what I am calling, for want of a better term, “future transcripts.” By transcripts is meant a glimpse at a way forward, to the future, a future in which knowledge of nature, the environment, and health are connected to current and future health, environmental justice, and economic concerns. Within these narratives, which centre on how thinking about home remedies changed, about what was used before medicalization and modernization of society was complete,<sup>9</sup> ideas expressed on rurality, health, and the human relationship to natural and social environments collectively offer insights into contending with what is often characterized as crises (of different sorts) of environment and ecosystem, in health and health care. Arguably, these can only be minor hints toward a better understanding of what is a systemic failure of broader and deeper proportions, one having to do with modernity and the human-nature relationship. Still, I would argue, these are important lessons to consider.

Following archival research in rural women’s diaries, letters, and transcripts of oral histories, thirteen oral history interviews with rural women aged 50 or older were conducted in each of West Virginia and Nova Scotia. The aim of the project was to better understand the pasts of home-based health knowledge – household based modes of healing, prevention, and thinking about

health, as well as caregiving. In addition to oral histories, archival sources such as cookbooks and books on 'home remedies' were examined, as was the historiography covering the industrial and environmental history of each region.<sup>10</sup>

The oral history interviews consisted of twelve, sometimes multi-faceted questions, in an interview of 30-45 minutes' duration. Review and approval of the project was given by the Research Ethics Board of the Nova Scotia Agricultural College. Each interview was recorded on audiotape, if acceptable to the interviewee, and most were later transcribed if taped. For the interviews, the project recruited primarily, though not exclusively, members of the Women's Institutes of Nova Scotia (WINS), and the West Virginia Community Educational Outreach Service (WVCEOS), formerly known as Farm Women's Clubs and Extension Homemakers. Both of these organizations belong to the umbrella (and global) group, the Associated Countrywomen of the World. (The ACWW was also contacted when this project first began).

WVCEOS members are organized into local (county and community) clubs, and WINS members are organized into local branches; both groups are fairly hierarchical in their structure and use the levels of district/area and provincial/state leadership to promote and concretize through various projects an ethic of service.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the more urban/suburban-based and middle-class oriented "women's clubs,"<sup>12</sup> both the WVCEOS and WINS have longstanding

(nearly a century) relationships to rural and agricultural institutions within their respective province/state and countries. Both groups also have long histories of volunteerism related to rural health in their respective places, and have been and continue to be educationally-focused on health and other volunteer and community service work in their communities. These organizations' original, and, for the most part, still predominant, presence in the rural places of Nova Scotia and West Virginia provide a window into change related to health as viewed by members. However, in terms of the rural women's population accessed via these two organizations, some important populations of rural women have been missed. In Nova Scotia, African-Nova Scotian, Mi'kmaq, and Acadian women have comprised and currently comprise a very small percentage of the Women's Institutes organization membership, and thus, their health knowledge and historical understandings are unfortunately absent from this analysis. Similarly, West Virginia's population since 1980 has been about 3% African-American (and was higher in earlier decades). Prior to the integration of the Farm Women's organization in the mid-1960s there were several thriving clubs in southern West Virginia, whose memberships were (due to segregation) solely African-American, and their work and accomplishments, despite the racist context they had to contend with, resulted in considerable progressive initiatives. There also has been an increase in Hispanic population in recent years. Sadly, the

current membership of the WVCEOS does not yet reflect much of this diversity, and no African-American or Hispanic women were able to be recruited for an oral history interview.<sup>13</sup>

Despite these limitations, the interviews have nonetheless been an engaging source with which to examine a segment of rural women's home-based (as opposed to medical institution-rooted or more public-health oriented) health knowledge, perceptions, and practices. Along with the other sources, these narratives have provided a means to uncover a sense of how home remedies were used in the home, family, and/or community, both in the past and present. Home-based health knowledge and its human practitioners should be viewed within the context of the ecosystem in which these women and their families and neighbours lived; helping to heal (keeping healthy) connected to household, community, *and* the natural world. As both regions, as indeed the world contends yet again with growing health and food insecurity, health care inequalities and mis-matches, as we all come to grip with environmental limits elsewhere and everywhere, these narratives also suggest something more: hints at how a more environmentally sound and healthy future might be had for all, from those who have been at the (perceived) margins before.

#### **1. Cultural Integrity:**

Cultural integrity here refers to the capacity of an identified “culture” – bearing in mind the problematic notion that “culture” is –<sup>14</sup> to maintain itself over time in identifying (and identifiable) characteristics of human language/idiom, behaviours, traditions, and relationship to a particular place as well as perhaps to a place of “origins.” Both Appalachia and Atlantic Canada have ‘cultures’ that can be characterized as the sum of a combination of influential landscapes (seascapes as well, in the case of Atlantic Canada), aboriginal and immigrant peoples, and the relationship between the two. Too, Nova Scotians are Nova Scotians, but they are also “Maritimers” (NS being one of the three Maritime provinces, PEI, NB, and NS) and, since Newfoundland joined Confederation in 1949, they’ve also been known as “Atlantic Canadians,” though the latter term sees less use except to refer to “Atlantic Canada” as a region as compared to “the West,” or Ontario or Quebec, in light of federal initiatives within Confederation.

West Virginians, similarly, are West Virginians, but also have, in the American context, the closest association of any state with the federally-defined region of Appalachia, because it is the only state, in fact, whose counties all fall within the “official boundaries” of the region set via establishment of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) in 1965. It bears repeating that, as Williams notes, outside of the multi-state set of counties identified as

“Appalachia” for the purposes of funding under the ARC, ‘Appalachia has no agreed-upon boundaries.’ Most of Atlantic Canada, technically, falls within the northern geographic boundary of the Appalachian Mountains, but in the US, the Canadian part of this mountain and valley range tend to be overlooked.<sup>15</sup>

If we continue to use the two ‘nationally’ devised appellations of region of Atlantic Canada and Appalachia, here, however, and treat each as different regions - as they are viewed politically – it’s possible to see that, certain social realities (like national health care) aside, the two places are similar in many respects. Appalachia and Atlantic Canada echo to a degree plant species, climate, the timing and trajectories of aboriginal-European encounter, raw resource extraction political economies, and the occupational plurality, both past and present, of their respective rural inhabitants. Each saw rural industrialization in the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and each experienced (and continues, in some sense, to experience) significant outmigration and economic distress.<sup>16</sup>

The issues of out-migration, “dependency,” and “underdevelopment,” as outlined in Salstrom, in *Appalachia’s Path to Dependency*, are a useful beginning point in illuminating the economic context of what were environmental, ecological, and social upheavals as well as economic conditions in both regions. To begin with Appalachia: in the colonial and early national periods, up to 1840, Appalachia was marked by both subsistence and profit-oriented inhabitants and

settlements, but in this period agriculture did provide self-sufficiency. The region grew enough to feed itself, and then some. Between 1840 and 1880, however, while both population and agricultural production increased, per capita production declined steeply, leading Salstrom to conclude that the loss in agricultural self-sufficiency, the lack of capital within the region, and the capacity of outside capitalists to be able to utilize post-Civil War technologies and the necessary capital to exploit West Virginia's coal fields and timber resources better than locals could, led to the beginnings of economic dependency in this period. By the turn of the century the dependency led to wholesale environmental and economic disaster.<sup>17</sup>

Nova Scotia and the Maritime colonies, similarly, appeared to have bright prospects in the wake of its achievement of self-government in the 1840s, part of a regional economy that contained ship-building, self-sufficiency, and exports of fish, timber and agricultural produce. But as Acheson has demonstrated, and as with the case Salstrom makes for Appalachia, there developed no regional metropolis, no within-the-region financial centre with adequate capital. This led to outside capital coming in, and the development of 'underdevelopment' after the American Civil War and Canadian Confederation. A national economy was thus built through a tariff wall and transportation policy, one which, due to political power in central Canada, ultimately favoured central

Canadian industrialism over anything going on in the East. Attracted by the booming economy of New England's 'Boston States' the trickle of migrants leaving the Maritimes in the 1860s and '70s turned into a flood by the turn of the century. By the 1890s, manufacturing within the Atlantic region was unable to compete with the scale of central Canadian manufacturing might (who could buy cheaper coal from the United States than from Nova Scotia, in order to build that might) and began to wither away. Agricultural self-sufficiency was similarly undermined, though the process was a more protracted one.<sup>18</sup>

By the 1880s, when out-migration from the Atlantic region began to tally up its major numbers "exodus," Appalachia's inhabitants, unlike those in the Maritimes, could elect to "stay put" and engage, as best they could, in the kind of occupational plurality Rusty Bittermann characterized as typical in earlier decades in the northeastern Maritimes. Later decades, however, would see West Virginians heading off on their own exodus, to Akron and other cities in Ohio and elsewhere, while Nova Scotians went "down the road" in order to make a living. Both places' people returned to home when the Great Depression closed the border for Canadians, and jobs became harder to get for West Virginians in the cities. Out-migration began again in the WWII and post-War period, as deindustrialization accelerated and fewer and fewer decent jobs were to be had in both regions, although now, Atlantic Canadians generally stayed in Canada,

while West Virginians continued to leave for places fairly close and in many cases were able to do sufficiently well to be able to retire 'back home' .<sup>19</sup>

This review of these two regions' pasts is necessary in order that the period of the 1930s onward, where this story in specific is taken up, makes sense in view of the larger/longer questions of change over time in these two places' environments and economies. Turning to the narratives of home-based health gathered for this project: the oldest of the interviewees were both born in 1916, and three in the late 1920s, and the two youngest interviewees born 1953 and 1954, but the rest and thus the majority of the interviewees were born in the mid to late 1930s through the late 1940s, making their childhood/early adult experiences ones of Depression years into the seemingly more prosperous years of World War II, when jobs were to be had for Nova Scotians willing to leave the countryside and go to Halifax, Montreal, or Toronto, and West Virginians willing to go west to Ohio, or east to Baltimore or Washington or other seaboard cities. Several of the older interviewees recalled growing up years with only the father of the household engaging in part-time work, if any, and limited interaction with the consumer economy or established (such as they were) medical institutions.

The interviewees were thus individuals growing up in the wake of the massive upheavals their parents and grandparents experienced in the turn of the century. The timbering, coal mining, steel and other manufacturing boom and

bust realities were thus less a part of their lives than of their parents' and grandparents' generation, but they were the first generation to fully experience those effects.

Some of the interviewees migrated out of the region, as adults, and returned; others had never left. Most had a growing up background of mixed farming and experienced occupational plurality (off-farm work) in their adult lives. Interviewees recalled that, in most cases, it was the mother or grandmother (where mother was not living) who was responsible for providing care. In some families mothers had the knowledge (prepared the remedies, diagnosed, etc), but fathers helped administer treatments and sometimes provided nurturing (rocking of sick child, for example).

Whether in Nova Scotia or West Virginia, interviewees remembered the years of growing up as "healthy" and their adult years of raising children similarly "healthy." This may be a matter of nostalgia, but it is interesting to note that whether they were among the few who had spent part of their adult lives away from their region, or had lived in rural West Virginia or Nova Scotia all of their lives. <sup>20</sup> The expressed sentiment was that "We never went out to the doctors<sup>21</sup> and "You never went to the doctor...Took care of yourself."<sup>22</sup>

Those who recalled a past of health and well-being, interestingly enough, applied the "we were healthy" assessment not only to themselves, but

also everyone in the household and neighbourhood. And good health was connected to being “outdoors”: “...but I think that maybe we were healthy because we spent a lot of time outdoors! And I still believe to this day that the best, I don’t know what it would be, it’s not a cure, prevention – for a lot of illnesses is fresh air.”<sup>23</sup> Country life on “mixed farms” or other rural settings also meant much less interaction with people, and more with nature: “I grew upon a hillside farm, 30 acres, straight up....my dad was a farmer as all the other families....we just raised what we ate and that was it”<sup>24</sup>

At the intersection of health, environment, and the economy, in these two groups of interviews can be found some broader understandings in terms of cultural integrity. There are economic and sociological interpretations for cultures being sustained over time, but the simplest interpretation for how these cultures have maintained a wholeness, an integrity about them, is that enough of place, people, and understood and valued “traditions” remained to at least survive but also in some cases thrive, whether in Nova Scotia/West Virginia or elsewhere. The recollection of being “healthy” and associating health with outdoors activity can not in isolation be deemed a part of culture, but the activities recalled by interviewees, of helping to gather peppermint and spearmint, goldenseal, plantain, and other herbs for healing, and greens in the spring for eating, together with general notes of good health suggest that the

sustaining processes of “traditional” cultures – as opposed to the Parsons’ sociological model of those embracing “modern” attitudes - is not all a matter of negative attributes of the former. Although with such a small sample of interviews it is not possible to generalize it does appear that, while the outsiders’ or experts’ perception of “traditional” cultures as containing such practices as wild-gathering and using home remedies may indeed constitute “anti-modern” behaviour (interpreted, by modernization theorists, as “social maladjustment,”) from the margins of Nova Scotia and West Virginia it is more about how access to the natural environment as well as health knowledge and practices passed down from older generations was a means of maintaining, over time, the health and well-being of the household. In this sense, the integrity of culture can be seen as sustained in a very real physical sense: it was a means to sustain health and/or well-being. Health and foodway practices can be seen as embedded within the culture, in the case of gathering greens in the spring for example, for need of a tonic, or in employing home remedies to recover lost health. In both West Virginia and Nova Scotia, gathering and using home remedies, including those items collected from the farm, field and woods, were gathered and used because there was a belief in their validity and efficacy.<sup>25</sup>

These rural cultures may be characterized as final hold-outs against the relentless tide of progress and modernity. More recently, however - and recalling

here John Alexander Williams' and Ian McKay's arguments – at least some of what were touted as the triumphs of modernity have ultimately been proven to be a cul-de-sac - in terms of unbridled consumerism, suburban wasteland landscapes, and the environmental destruction and loss of civic community those so-called triumphs have wrought. This raises another question. To what degree did those involved in the commodification of rural, so-called “traditional” (or tradition-bound) cultures such as those of Atlantic Canada and Appalachia facilitate as well the non-critical proliferation of suburban, middle-class-aspirant ways of life—ways of life ultimately more harmful to the health of the planet than those attached to their ‘anti-modern’ ways? Tourist escapes – West Virginia, on the license plate as “Almost Heaven”, and Nova Scotia, as “Canada’s Ocean Playground” – were escapes for some of the middle and upper class urbanites, who, as McKay points out in the Nova Scotia case, benefitted from such re-imagining. Yet, this re-imagining did not result in disintegration of authentic cultural traditions, but rather it allowed for a re-shaping of them, into what Ian McKay terms Innocence.

“I find in Innocence a systematic exclusion of those aspects of the past that would help people think historically about alternative outcomes, or about patterns of power and privilege in society, or about themselves as

agents and victims of history. Innocence in particular, and tourism in general, is ethically troubling because it exemplifies the transformation of living people (and their customs and beliefs) into articles of exchange.”<sup>26</sup>

In terms of societal health and well-being, the dis-connect from nature implied in much of modernity’s stress on urban, and later suburban living, has also proven to be an exercise in wastefulness and unsustainability. The attributes of these so-called traditional, rural, “anti-modern” cultures are alien to those who do not practice them, and not because they are dissimilar landscapes or spaces, but because the latter are based on knowledge of one’s eco-system and economic limits: the plants and animals, what is in season and useful, for healing or nutrition, values of frugality, and of ‘making do,’ (or doing without).<sup>27</sup> Those that possess this type of knowledge value it, at times highly, and hold on to it, despite ‘modern’ intimations that they’d be better off otherwise. It then becomes less a matter of being exploited by middle class cultural producers who, in earlier decades, brought the tourist gaze (and dollars) down upon rural dwellers, forcing adaptation strategies in order to ensure, over the long term, the integrity of what was valued culturally; and more a case of survival.

**2. Ecological Survival:**

He Starved, He Starved, I Tell You

His name was Eddie Crimmins

And he came from Port aux Basques,

Besides a chance to live and work

He had nothing much to ask...

And yet, he starved, he starved, I tell you,

Back in nineteen twenty-four,

And before he died he suffered

As many have before.

When the mines closed down that winter

He had nothing left to eat,

And he starved, he starved, I tell you,

On your dirty, damned street.

--Dawn Fraser, *Echoes From Labor's Wars* (1926)

“Labor’s Wars,” as Nova Scotia poet Dawn Fraser put it, were indeed open warfare: and, as the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century labour historiography

reminds, this was sustained war waged by the coal companies against miners and their communities and families in both Nova Scotia and West Virginia. These wars produced victims of the bullet and of the harsh economics imposed by the capitalists. When access to nature was cut off entirely and someone, without friend or family, did not ask for help, a tragedy – like the person, Eddie Crimmins, dying of malnutrition, about whom Dawn Fraser wrote in his poem - could ensue. In contrast to the general view of the 1920s as the height of the Modern Era - the Jazz Age - in both Nova Scotia and West Virginia the 1920s were a period of intense upheaval and hardship, followed by somewhat less troubling times that nonetheless ushered in de-industrialization.

But it is also worth remembering that the assaults on this rural working class were preceded, accompanied, and followed as well by assaults on the environment and ecosystem. In terms of both Nova Scotia and West Virginia, ecological survival can be understood as about modes of learning, behaviour, and systems of knowledge (such as experiential) that are employed by humans in the face of human activities fundamentally at odds with an implicit, 'natural,' ecological order within which humans reside. The economic changes, to put it bluntly, involved key ecological upheaval. Here, some examples from West Virginia provide the backdrop: Ronald Lewis points out how, for example, over the period 1870 to 1920, the number of farms in Randolph county, West Virginia

increased from 575 to 1,774 but decreased in size from 360 acres in 1880 (size not available in 1870) to 170.4 acres by 1920. Changing from the 'long fallowing' and less intensive methods that had been the hallmark of both First Nations and medieval European agriculture (pasture systems) of production, "farmers reduced their total acreage by selling their woodlands and then using the money to shift over to the fenced-pasture commercial system." In other words, they tried becoming "modern." And as Salstrom notes, "the 1920s saw the worst ecological abuse yet inflicted on Appalachian farmland."<sup>28</sup> The huge cut-over that was West Virginia by the 1920s meant hillsides scraped nearly bare of their timber and subsequent years of sheep and cattle pastures (many on lands so steep they should have remained in woodland) where the dangers of overgrazing were apparent. It meant scars on the landscape, floods, and fires.

Devastating as these changes were, the realities of coping with them were factored in to activities related to daily life. One oral history collected, transcribed and placed in the West Virginia University archives several years ago, is of lumberman/farmer George Thompson recalling the 1890s. It's very useful for its before and after perspective on the Canaan Valley area of Tucker County, where fires swept through during the timber boom:

(before)

There was a trail very rough into Canaan Valley. Wagons could get over it but it took them all day...and if you wanted to see the sky you had to lay on your back in the middle of the road and look up. <sup>29</sup>

(after)

It was a beautiful valley and that was all. The fire had burned about 3,000 acres. They called it the burning woods. <sup>30</sup>

The turn of the century period was the pivotal period of change, but, in terms of strategies for ecological survival, and related health preservation and/or healing strategies, those growing up in the later period, the 1930s to 1950s, can be seen as the first generation to actually experience the effects of these changes in the economy and the eco-system. It was the forest environment which suffered, through fires, floods, and the more intensive and destructive methods of harvest, restrictions on traditional uses and management through the establishment of National Parks and Forests in West Virginia. In Nova Scotia the losses were more contained but nonetheless graphic - the Sydney Tar Ponds, presently the site of a massive clean up from a century of steel and coke production – is the most prominent example of how industrial capital's effects can be felt long after the jobs justifying it have disappeared.

There was also one complete loss that was not directly related to industrialization, but rather through international trade, and it will be mentioned here as it links both regions just as labour history does, and suggests the extent to which the devastating consequences we face today environmentally have been faced before. It is the case of the American chestnut tree. Through introduction of a blight from Asia, the American chestnut tree at mid-century was all but made extinct. The cost of the loss of the chestnut can be glimpsed in Williams' observation that the "amazing biodiversity" of Appalachia lost "one of [its] mainstays... a tree whose role in human, animal, and plant ecology was irreplaceable." The American chestnut has been found in Nova Scotia, incidentally, thought to have been brought in by United Empire Loyalist settlers at the end of the Revolution.<sup>31</sup>

And yet, and yet – the eco-system survived. And people persisted. These brief examples cannot completely paint the picture of ecological survival; but the overarching theme to take from them is one of resilience, and survival, and of human adaptation to environmental injustice at the hands of capital and its collaborators. Although, as the Nova Scotia example of Eddie Crimmins recalls to us, there were many who did not survive, those interviewed for this study, who were growing up from the late 1910s through the mid-1950s did survive, and recalled, however, not a cutover landscape, but one that offered the next stage of

growth/succession following a timber cut: acres and acres of blackberry and raspberry brambles. While Nova Scotia interviewees of farm backgrounds remember a lot of ‘vegetables’ being consumed, especially in the moderately successful agricultural sub-region of the Annapolis Valley, West Virginia interviewees recalled most often the results of wild-gathering, which would include the high fibre, rich in vitamin C (and other good things) berries that would be picked and eaten fresh as well as preserved for the winter: “oh gosh....We picked, we would can a hundred quarts of raspberries, maybe a hundred quart of blackberries, all kinds of wild berries....”<sup>32</sup>.

The kitchen as well as the garden and woodland was a source for ingredients for a number of home remedies whose aims were to deal with all but the most serious illnesses or injuries. From the kitchen cupboard, both Nova Scotian and West Virginian women recalled the use of bread poultices, ginger for stomach or menstrual difficulties, onion poultices for colds, mustard plasters for aches, and the making of an onion and brown sugar-based cough syrup. How they differed in their recollections relates to their differences in the natural environment and farm practices; where both groups recalled people raising a hog “for winter’s meat”<sup>33</sup> in Nova Scotia the use of goose grease was much more common than the use of lard (from hogs – rendered fat), as the base for salves and other medicaments. Lard was generally used much more in West Virginia

than in Nova Scotia; goose was not a Christmas favorite in West Virginia, as it was in Nova Scotia and it only took one, at Christmas; the amount of fat from one goose was enough for the family's use all year.

Wild gathering was much more part of the farm and forest economy and eco-system of West Virginia than in Nova Scotia, but both groups of interviewees mentioned the annual ritual of gathering greens in the spring, most notably dandelion greens which are widely known to be an early and prized spring source of vitamins and also are said to be good for the liver<sup>34</sup>. Dandelion greens (and, in the Nova Scotia case, dandelion wine) fell under the category of "spring tonic" by interviewees and in print sources<sup>35</sup>. The only more frequently mentioned tonic (this in West Virginia only, as the tree is only common there) was sassafras tea, made from the bark of the root of the sassafras tree.

Both the Women's Institutes in Nova Scotia and Farm Women's/Extension members grew in numbers, the groups each played important roles in health related initiatives. For example, the Women's Institutes were instrumental in providing cod liver oil for disbursement at schools, while the West Virginia clubs were responsible for establishing many hot lunch programs throughout the state. Interestingly enough, however, the one interviewee who mentioned school-time lunch programs brought out the differences she perceived between the plenty observed at her rural, farm-based

household, and what she saw once her “country school” was closed and she was bussed into town:

I didn't realize until they closed that country school and brought us into town and we rode home with other kids that their homes didn't function as well, probably with the food. The food was probably what impressed me the most, it was the...well we had a big table like this and that had a lot of food on that table and the warm bread with every meal. Other people didn't live like that.<sup>36</sup>

### **3. Future Transcripts:**

The final section of this paper examines the oral history narratives in view of what they provide in the way of clues as to how we (particularly those of us who live in rural cultures and places ‘at the margins’ – but nevertheless privileged ones, by virtue of our Global North residence) might move toward a more environmentally sound and just future at the same time as put into practice some fairly simple lessons of the past about getting and staying healthy. To begin, some excerpts:

NS Participant: ...No sitting at a desk doing computer or doing something else, you were out in the fresh air. That's also to me one of the reasons why there wasn't so much obesity...they walked to school...and it's what, three kilometres or something? And we walked it winter and summer.

NS Participant: Yeah...we never had a chance [to get sick] we were out in the field working our bellies off all the time while we were kids you know. And people today don't do that, they're home and they get this and they get that...the kids today they're always sick. Every one of the kids you ever see there's something wrong with them.

NS Participant: I didn't grow up with any child...with a chronic disease, illness. There was nobody had asthma...you know, I can't remember any of them having chronic illness. Isn't that interesting? Perhaps I have a faulty memory – perhaps I just want to remember all the good things – but I think I'd remember.

WV Participant: I would say in the [19]80s a lot of the home remedies was, it's ...'don't do that, it's harmful to you.' I think up until that time some did and some didn't, but it seemed like in the early '80s it started...But now I see it

reverting back to the home remedies and some of these things really did work and really are good.

Moderator: ...would you still use a bread poultice today?

WV Participant: Sure I would....it's much easier if you have an antibiotic cream...but if I needed to I probably would just continue to use those things because it worked.<sup>37</sup>

There is always the danger of nostalgia colouring memories when considering the expressions of oral history. Yet, the historical record combined with the recollections of these rural women suggest that the historical picture of economic hardship in these 'marginal' regions was no less true than the truth that hardship in these marginalized places was also rendered habitable and endurable, even enjoyable through recourse to and a healthy interaction with nature as well as community. These interactions involved physical activity (whether through outdoor play, walking to and from school/events, or through gathering of herbs, and other food/medicine items), use of what was available in cupboard, field and forest to heal or maintain health, sharing information both generationally and between friends at branch/club meetings or otherwise in the locality/community, and providing a boost to the household's self-sufficiency through the

provisioning of medicines, vegetables and fruits from farm or the wild. The healthful exercise through walking that was involved in all the provisioning and other activities should not be downplayed or dismissed. Contemporary current unhealthy rural “lifestyles” are unhealthy because they typically do not include the kinds of walking exercise that was a matter of course in the days of gathering greens – and before the days of consolidated schools, cheap fuel, more distant employers.<sup>38</sup> It may take some time, despite the high cost of fuel and the clear signs that this kind of consumptive lifestyle promoted by the champions of modernity is unsustainable over the long term (both in terms of human health as well as the environment), to move toward the re-localisation of rural (as well as urban) economies; but, taking a cue from the home-based health knowledge shared by Nova Scotian and West Virginian rural women, perhaps it is time to recognize that the simplest remedy for non-acute health problems may also be the most efficacious. More and more people are realizing this and getting off the treadmill of multiple prescription drugs, which has its own dangerous environmental side effects, in terms of what makes its way into water supplies. Still, many have not yet reached the stage of critical reflection one respondent offered in her comment, below:

I have worked in the medical field all my life, but as I've gone along I've realized that we have gone more and more in the direction of trying to look for instant answers, and pills and all sorts of things to solve every little ache and pain, and that there is very little healing going on....<sup>39</sup>

In closing, the intersection(s) of health, household-based practices and remedies with the rise more recently of “functional foods” and other food-nutrition-health connections, suggests that the one of the editors of the volume, *Food Nations*, may not be far wrong when he argues that

Food means power, power means food....How, in the context of great globalization of trade and culture, do we protect the local and individual?<sup>40</sup>

The assertion, in this instance, should be amended to read “food and knowledge of nature” – though it should read power-to, rather than power-over, as it is the systems of dominance found within capitalism, cultures and patriarchal legacies that are at stake here. It would need to be amended yet again, however, to recognize that the knowledge of nature must also include access, in some fashion, to it. In the coming struggles to “protect the local and

individual” - and in the process fashion healthier, collective, communal futures – these knowledge of nature and access to nature questions, including those related to keeping ourselves healthy, may be key. Here, then, is another question. Is the diffuse and image-twisting multinational corporation, which, in exploiting the eco-system yet again, tries to isolate and make money off of an active ingredient in a wild plant - so that the same thing can be fed back to people who will pay for a pill - any less of a robber baron than those who, in an earlier century, maimed these regions and then induced the human inhabitants to adapt to the circumstances as best they could? These oral histories suggest alternative avenues for environmentally just and healthy ways of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, avenues that, in part, involve a recognition of what modernity did and did not provide at the margins: and what those at the margins can teach all of us: about what we can, and cannot, do without.

<sup>1</sup> P Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History 1730-1940*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1994; J A Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2002; ER Forbes & DA Muise, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, University of Toronto/Acadiensis Press, Toronto/Fredericton, 1993; a key text formulating the “anti-modern argument” is TJ Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, University Of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994; this argument is used by Ian

McKay, in his argument concerning the commodification of Nova Scotian culture in I McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*, Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.

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<sup>2</sup> The tourism "industry" in Nova Scotia, for example, meant the collecting of sea shanties and careful "preservation"/reconstruction of sites such as Peggy's Cove; in Appalachia, through park developments, "all traces of modernity, including numerous white frame farmhouses, were destroyed." McKay, *The Quest of the Folk*, pp.?? Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, 299.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tarpondscleanup.ca/>

<sup>4</sup> Health statistics for Nova Scotia are found in Painting the Landscape of Rural Nova Scotia: Rural Communities Impacting Policy Project, Coastal Communities Network, October 2003; West Virginia's ranking is cited in KJ Williams et al 'Cultural Perceptions of Healthy Weight in Rural Appalachian Youth,' *Rural and Remote Health* 8:932, (Online), 2008, 1-13. J A Williams, the author of *Appalachia: A History*, is also the author of *West Virginia: A History*, West Virginia University, Morgantown, 2001. I McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*, Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Others from diverse fields have tackled the idea of the intersection of modernity and knowledge, in terms of the concept of "ecological survival"; see, for example, V Lal, "Modernity, Frameworks of Knowledge, and the Ecological Survival of Plurality: An Introduction to the Multiversity Enterprise- United States Chapter," <http://vlal.bol.ucla.edu/multiversity>. Accessed June 2008.

<sup>6</sup> A typical 1970s-era study in Appalachia, that notes the necessity of using "insiders" – nurses born and raised in the region – to effectively deliver health programs, is DH Loeff, 'Rural Appalachians and Their Attitudes Toward Health', in RL Nolan & JL Schwartz (eds.), *Rural and Appalachian Health*, Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, Springfield, IL, 1973. pp. 3-15; Williams et al raises the issue of Appalachia as unique, but couches it in terms of the statement that the "Appalachian region is predominately (sic) rural, and persons residing in these areas maintain values and practices somewhat different from those living in more urbanized locations." Williams et al, 'Cultural Perceptions of Healthy Weight in Rural Appalachian Youth,' 8.

<sup>7</sup> I McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, pg. 27

<sup>8</sup> KJ Williams, et al “Cultural Perceptions of Healthy Weight” whose study took place in four high schools in rural West Virginia, identified the region as a whole, but via a rural-urban dichotomy: The Appalachian region is predominately (sic) rural, and persons residing in these areas maintain values and practices somewhat different from those living in more urbanized locations” p. 8; J A Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> W Mitchinson, ‘The Medical Treatment of Women,’ in S Burt, L Code and L Dorney (eds), *Changing Patterns: Women in Canada* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1993, 391-421. As Mitchinson notes, “The impact of culture on medicine, the medicalization of society, and the interventionist nature of [conventional/mainstream/modern/allopathic] medical practice affect both women and men,” although, as she notes, historically women have felt these effects more keenly. But, without doubt, “Since the mid-nineteenth century we have seen the increasing medicalization of our society and our lives.” Quotes, p. 393, 402 respectively.

<sup>10</sup> EA Howland, *The American Economical Housekeeper and Family Receipt Book*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., SA Howland, Worcester, MA, 1841; Committee Recommendations, Standing Committee Recommendations, West Virginia State Farm Women’s Bureau/Farm Women’s Clubs/Extension Homemakers Clubs. 1926-1995, Morgantown, West Virginia; Oral Histories with women from West Virginia and Nova Scotia, each interview is given a numerical value, with WV signifying West Virginia, and NS, Nova Scotia (WV1-WV10; NS1-NS8).

<sup>11</sup> M Kechnie, *Organizing Rural Women: The Federated Women’s Institute of Ontario, 1897-1919*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003; S Eagan, “‘Women’s Work, Never Done’: West Virginia Farm Women, 1880s-1920s” *West Virginia History*, vol. 49, 1990, pp.21-36; S Eagan, “West Virginia Farm Women’s Clubs (1914- )”, In FS Hensley, ed. *Missing chapters II: West Virginia Women in History*. Charleston, WV: West Virginia Women’s Commission, WV Women’s Foundation, and Humanities Foundation of West Virginia. Pp. 151-64.

<sup>12</sup> SL Barney, *Authorized to Heal: Gender, Class, and the Transformation of Medicine in Appalachia, 1880-1930*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Statistics from [http://www.censusscope.orgus/s54/chart\\_race.html](http://www.censusscope.orgus/s54/chart_race.html).

<sup>14</sup> I McKay, ‘Historians, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture’, *Labour/Le Travailleur*, vol. 8/9, 1981, pp.185-241.

<sup>15</sup> There have been some international comparatives done before: see for example, Obermiller, Phillip J. and William W. Philliber, eds. *Appalachia in an International Context*, Westport CT: Praeger, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> J A Williams, *West Virginia: A History*; ER Forbes & DA Muise, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*; the outline of key issues in terms of rural modern society is provided in Daniel Samson, Introd., Afterword, *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1950*, Acadiensis Press, Fredericton, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> P Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History, 1730-1940*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1994, pp. 122-138.

<sup>18</sup> TW Acheson, "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910." *Acadiensis* 1.2 (Spring, 1972):3-28; Robert J. Brym and R. James Sacouman (eds), *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada*, New Hogtown Press, Toronto, 1979; Patricia A. Thornton, "The Problem of Out-Migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871-1921: A New Look." In P A Buckner and David Frank, eds. *The Acadiensis Reader: Volume Two, Atlantic Canada After Confederation* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.] Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1988. pp. 34-65; Brookes, Alan A. "Family, Youth, and Leaving Home in Late Nineteenth-Century Rural Nova Scotia: Canning and the Exodus, 1868-1893." In Joy Parr, ed. *Childhood and Family in Canadian History*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982. pp. 93-108; Brookes, Alan A. "The Golden Age and the Exodus: The Case of Canning, Kings County." *Acadiensis* 11.1 (Autumn, 1981):57-82; Betsy Beattie, *Obligation and Opportunity: Single Maritime Women in Boston, 1870-1930*, Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency*, 125; Rusty Bittermann, 'Farm Households and Wage Labour in the Northeastern Maritimes in the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century,' in Daniel Samson (ed), *Contested Countryside*, 34-69; Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, p. 313.

<sup>20</sup> NS-2,3,5,7,8; WV-1,2,3,4,6,10).

<sup>21</sup> NS-2

<sup>22</sup> WV-4 ; Those from both Nova Scotia and West Virginia who remembered something other than being "healthy," in response to the question, "when you think about the health of your birth family, the family that you were a child in, what sticks out in your mind the most?" recalled specifics of an ill (or dying) parent, and of the hardship that individual circumstance involved. NS-4, WV 11, 12.

<sup>23</sup> NS-5

<sup>24</sup> WV 2

<sup>25</sup> Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, pp. 321, 333-334; NS and WV interviews. A minor note expressed the gathering as something that was “for tradition” (and this in West Virginia) and not expressed in Nova Scotia; the major note sounded involved the belief that these things “worked,” and were used until more easily utilized (and affordable) products could be had by purchase. For example, one interviewee put it this way: “After we got older and could afford to buy things at the store, then, we did, and just like aspirin. When we didn’t have money to buy aspirin, we used willow bark and it works.” WV-7.

<sup>26</sup> I McKay, *The G of the F* pg 40.

<sup>27</sup> M Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, community, and the foundations of agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1995.

<sup>28</sup> RL Lewis, “Railroads, Deforestation, and the Transformation of Agriculture in the West Virginia Back Counties, 1880-1920,” Research Paper 9402, (online) <http://www.rr.vvu.edu/pdffiles/wp9402.pdf>; P Salstrom, *Appalachia’s Path to Dependency*, p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> George Thompson, Oral History, p. 3

<sup>30</sup> George Thompson, Oral History, p. 4

<sup>31</sup> Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, p. 298;

<http://www.uoguelph.ca/~chestnut/novascotia.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> WV-4

<sup>33</sup> NS-1

<sup>34</sup> Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) is widely recognized as a “tonic” and, according to the “Doctrine of Signatures” was virtually a “cure-all” and yellow – thus good for the liver. William H. Hylton, ed. *The Rodale Herb Book: How to Use, Grow, and Buy Nature’s Miracle Plants*. Emmaus, PA, Rodale Press, pp. 88, 422-423.

<sup>35</sup> Hylton, ed. *The Rodale Herb Book*, 422-23; Florence Hilchey, (no date). *A Treasury of Nova Scotia Heirloom Recipes*. Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture and Marketing. Orig pub. date: 1967 ; *West Virginia’s Treasured Recipes: A Collection of Early West Virginia Food and Philosophy*. Published by West Virginia Extension Homemakers Council. (Iowa Falls, Iowa: General Publishing and Binding, 1974, p. 126; interviews NS 3 & 6; WV-1,2,3,4,6,8, 9, 10).

<sup>36</sup> The Women’s Institutes efforts in this regard are WV-3

<sup>37</sup> Interview transcripts NS-5, NS-2, NS-8, WV-4, WV-5.

<sup>38</sup> Doyle, S., Kelly-Schwartz, A, Schlossberg, M and Stockard, J. (2006, Winter). Active community environments and health: The relationship of walkable and safe communities to individual health. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 72.1:19; NIEHS Fights Fat. (2003, October). *Environmental Health Perspectives* [serial on the Internet] 111(13):A698.

<sup>39</sup> Interview transcripts NS-6

<sup>40</sup> W Belasco, 'Food Matters: Perspectives on an Emerging Field', in W Belasco and P Scranton (eds), *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies*, Routledge, New York, 2002, pp. 4, 19-20.