

This Is What Poverty Looks Like

BY SCOTT RODD - GUEST CONTRIBUTOR POSTED ON MARCH 11, 2015 AT 11:18

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Sitting in a rusty, sky blue GMC pickup on the side of Main Street, Gavin* rested his arm through the rolled down window and took a long drag on his Phillies cigarillo.

“This here’s a good truck,” he said, patting the side panel through the window. “Had it for a long time now. Have to say, though, I do like Fords better. Don’t use it for work, just use it to get here and there, sometimes move stuff with it.” He took another drag of his cigarillo and exhaled through his nose. “Work’s scarce around here.”

Gavin has lived in Beattyville, Kentucky his entire life, and at 74 years old he’s the oldest of 14 siblings.

“We lived on a farm and I used to work all day in the fields. We didn’t have tractors back then, we had to use mules. I can’t tell you how many years I worked for a quarter an hour in those fields—and I was happy to have the chance to do it, too.”

When asked if he had seen his town change in the intervening years, he responded, “Hell yes. There used to be four new car dealerships here, now there’s only one used dealer. Used to be three or four grocery stores, now there’s only one. This whole Main Street used to be full of stores, but most of them’s closed down now.”

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Beattyville’s decline during the 20th century pulled many residents into poverty—54 percent of the population live under the poverty line today, making it one of the five poorest towns in the country with more than 1,000 people. Today, the median household income hovers above \$14,000, and according to Mayor John Smith, work has become harder to find than ever.

“You just don’t have the opportunities here that you do in other areas,” Smith said. “There used to be a Lion Apparel factory here, which was the major employer in the area. But they left about three or four years ago and that left a couple hundred people out of work, which had a big impact on the community.” Today, to find even low-skill, low-wage work, residents often have to travel outside the county.

The poverty in Beattyville and many other Appalachian towns is the result of a culture holding onto its traditional values in a world that no longer shares those values. Historically, Appalachia

consisted of discrete, tight-knit communities that were self-sufficient and self-sustaining. Local agriculture and tradesmen served nearby residents, and communities lost few members to the outside world. A strong, almost tribal sense of community became central to the region. In his book *Yesterday's People*, Jack Weller describes this ethos as “a private system of justice based on the personal relationships common to the clan.” These trends continued through the 19th century, but the world around Appalachia began to drastically change during the following century and eventually outpaced the region’s ability to adapt.

The resulting decline that spread across the region and crumbled once-thriving towns like Beattyville is intimately tied to Appalachia’s connection to place. Weller’s book explains how the unforgiving land, terrain, and climate cast the mold of an individualistic, self-sufficient population in Appalachia, but adds that it also had its detriments. When pioneers first settled in the region, the soil proved infertile and the rough topography made building houses, and later infrastructure, a challenge. When an abundance of oil and coal were discovered and extracted, little of the money came back to the towns that were built on the natural resources, leaving communities with little more than pillaged land.

Today, in an increasingly interconnected and digital world, the rugged terrain that shaped Appalachian towns like Beattyville alienates them from the rest of society. Beattyville is tucked away in a narrow valley, and the only roads into town are Route 11 and Route 52—windy, two-lane stretches that snake through heavily wooded hills. Transportation into and out of the area is a challenge, especially for truckers and other commercial travelers. And while Beattyville is one of the more established towns in Lee County, the mountainous topography makes cell phone reception spotty at best and has prevented the installation of town-wide DSL, leaving it critically isolated both physically and digitally.

“The irony is deep,” writes Michael Harrington in *The Other America*, “for everything that turns the landscape into an idyll for the urban traveler conspires to hold the people [of Appalachia] down. They suffer terribly at the hands of beauty.”

Today, many high school graduates and young professionals are drawn to opportunities outside of Beattyville, while older generations continue to uphold the virtues of communal self-sufficiency. Many younger residents view this model as no longer viable, but that doesn’t mean they don’t take pride in their town. Most proudly refer to Beattyville as “home” and say that if they left at some point, they would inevitably come back. Returning home, however, may not be enough to win over the older generation that remains. As Mayor Smith admitted, if a resident

returned after leaving, “they would likely be viewed as an outsider by [those who remained] in town.”

Thus Beattyville is at a crossroads, where individual opportunity and communal self-sufficiency seem at odds with each other. What’s at stake is cultural longevity, and the test will be to overcome the dire poverty that is reinforced by the same connection to place that has defined the region’s culture.



Martha and Vernon

CREDIT: SCOTT RODD/THINKPROGRESS

Martha and her husband Vernon sat in folding chairs in front of the Main St. Gallery, smoking cigarettes and enjoying the crisp air as dusk settled in.

“It’s Saturday on Main Street in America—and this is as Main Street America as it gets—and it’s dead out here,” Martha said. “A lot of people think it’s getting better everywhere in this country, and I’m sure some places are getting better, but this town is still depressed. It hasn’t gotten better here in a long time.”

Vernon contemplated what Martha said. He grew up in Beattyville, and while his job working on the railroad took him all over the country for weeks at a time, he always returned home.

“It’s tough to pin down one reason why the town is struggling,” he said. “A big part of it seems to be the coal mines closing. The EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] is focused on green energy and eliminating fossil fuels, which is good for the globe, but they neglect how it impacts small, individual communities.”

An artist himself, Vernon was asked to paint a mural on the side of a downtown building that would embody the spirit of Beattyville. He said he wanted the mural to be of a woman in town who always walked her dog on Main Street and had to constantly tug on the leash to get the dog to move forward.

“I think people would be able to relate to it,” he said, “because that’s the nature of this town. Set in its ways, stubborn, reluctant.”

The main thing that holds the town back, in Martha’s opinion, is the lack of jobs—especially for young people.

“If you come from little or nothing around here, you have no means of improving your life. A cashier position just opened up at the Sunoco on the corner, and I’ve spoken to at least a dozen high school students or recent graduates who applied for the job. It’s just a cashier job, but that’s the only thing available around here.” In fact, the Sunoco received 55 applications for the position and would have taken more if they hadn’t run out of paperwork.

“Just talk to the girls in the gallery right now,” Martha continued, referring to the two college-age women who use the back of the gallery as an art studio. “They’ve had more trouble finding a job than you’d believe. The other week, they came in crying because the manager at a restaurant said he’d only give them an application if they gave him sexual favors in return. What is this world coming to?”



Principal Mark Murray

CREDIT: SCOTT RODD/THINKPROGRESS

With the imposing stature of a linebacker and a hard, administrative glare he's honed over the years, principal Mark Murray's presence alone commands authority.

"You know the movie *The President's Man*? Where no matter what happens, there's that one guy you can call to jump out of a plane, fix the problem, and get out of there? That's kind of like me. Troubleshooting is what I do when schools are struggling."

Principal Murray's office serves as a kind of the central nervous system for Lee County High School. To the left of his desk is a conference table where administrative meetings take place,

and there is a constant flow of teachers, administrators, and students into and out of his office. Scattered across his desk are folders and reports containing the school's latest figures, keeping him abreast of the performance of his teachers and students. To his right are two large desktop monitors carrying live feeds from the school's 47 cameras. He can survey the entire feed at once or pull up a single camera and even direct it on a specific student with the click of a mouse. Murray likes to be at the center of things: in complete control if all goes according to plan, or at the heart of the maelstrom if things go awry.

"I may not be from Beattyville, but this is my town and these are my kids," he said. "I've adopted each and every one of them—I tell them every day, I've got 304 kids. You're all my children."

Part of what makes Principal Murray such an effective administrator is his very identity: a thorough blend of Appalachian tradition and academic vision. Raised just outside of Paintsville, Kentucky, Murray developed a love for hunting and the outdoors and went on to study mining technology and mining reclamation energy studies in college. After graduating, he worked in heavy construction, largely in coal mines.

"Blueprinting, mapping, surveying—I did it all," Murray said. "Some days I'd work with my boots on the ground, other days I'd be 300 feet in the air." From heavy construction, he moved into commercial construction where he mainly built school facilities, which served as a kind of bridge between the two halves of his professional life.

"After a number of years in construction, I was laid off—as they say with unionized labor, when you're the last one in, you're usually the first one out. So I found myself at a crossroads, and my grandmother, who was a career teacher, told me I should go back to school and get my teaching degree. 'You won't be rich,' she said, '[but] you'll stay in demand—they're always making kids.'"

While getting his teaching degree, Murray studied Appalachian dialects and traditions to better understand the culture from which he hailed. He taught elementary and middle school before starting his principal career, which is when he gained his reputation as "The Fixer." His Appalachian roots and commitment to progress through education enable him to understand the challenges the modern world imposes on Appalachian life, while at the same time being able to offer potential solutions.

"One of the things that's frustrating for the people in our community is that we have a lot of natural resources that go out of here, but those that take the natural resources do not give back to the community. I think that's probably one of their biggest frustrations," he said. "The people in

this community have gotten so used to things going away but never coming back, so [the mentality] has become, ‘If it comes from here, it stays here.’”

This mentality not only applies to valuable natural resources like coal, timber, and oil, but also to community members, especially younger residents. Those who have the means to leave for college or other opportunities often do, and those who don’t are left behind. Like natural resources, the community’s brightest, most skilled, and best resourced are often extracted from the place where they originate, leaving the community embittered and feeling as though it is on the losing end.

Principal Murray understands this concern, and his outlook on the problem, like his identity, is two-fold: He wants to see Beattyville return to a flourishing, self-sufficient community with jobs in industry and manufacturing, but sees education as the means to achieving this goal.

“Industries are not going to locate to any small, rural community if it doesn’t have quality instructional and educational facilities. It’s just not gonna happen—and it’s hard to stress that to some folks. You can have all the zip lines and trails and attractions you want, but that won’t build a thriving community.” Additionally, Murray believes that sending the best and brightest out into the world can improve the strength of a community, but acknowledges that not everyone would agree with him. “I think this community needs to learn—and I’m on the outside looking in, so I might be ostracized for this comment—that you’ll never grow in strength unless you give your strength away. And that strength has to be our youth.”

After years of leading and fixing schools, Murray said he looks forward to retiring in a few years, and Lee County High School will likely be his last school. Beattyville is one of the most economically challenged communities in which he has worked, and it seems like no coincidence that his final task is the toughest of his career. With a series of school successes in his wake, Lee County High School would be a final high note to establish his legacy of fixing schools in Appalachia.



Jess

CREDIT: SCOTT RODD/THINKPROGRESS

In the back room of the Main St. Gallery, Kendra and Jess listened to Jimi Hendrix on a boombox while working on their latest paintings. Born and raised in Beattyville, both girls discovered art at an early age and pursued their passion through high school.

“During our senior year, we both received scholarships from Hazard Community College, which has a branch in the next county,” Jess said. “We were both really excited—not only because we had to the chance to go to college, but we both really wanted to continue studying art.”

The scholarship offered the chance to do something that many in the community, including most of Kendra and Jess's family, don't have the chance to pursue. Getting accepted to college should have been the hardest part of the process; instead, it opened the door to a series of challenges the girls would face if they wanted to continue their studies.

"The first problem is, we don't have access to a car," Jess said, "so we won't be able to get to the campus for classes. But on top of that, we can't get a job to earn money to buy a car. We've been looking for jobs all throughout high school. We've applied everywhere—every store, every gas station, every fast food place. Together, we've probably applied to Dairy Queen about 15 times over the years."

"It's a really small town," Kendra added, "and if you don't know someone in management personally, then you can't get a job. We'll even call in and be like, 'Hey, it's me—is that job available?' And every time it's, 'No, not yet. We'll call you back.' But they never do."

Jess and Kendra will be forced to take classes online for at least their first year of college, but they face the additional challenge of Beattyville's lack of reliable DSL coverage or fiber optics.

"It just sucks," Jess said. "If I get financial aid, I'm going put it towards a car so we can just get to campus. That's the priority—even if I have to take out loans. That way, we don't have to get online and deal with this crap anymore. If we could physically be there and listen to [the professors], it'd just be so much better."



A card game at the gas station

CREDIT: SCOTT RODD/THINKPROGRESS

On Saturday night, a group of teenagers were huddled around the hood of a pick-up truck below the overhang of an abandoned gas station. Playing cards were splayed across the hood of the truck and crumpled dollar bills were stacked in the pot. They were all recent high school graduates, but Tristan was the only one in college—he attended Moorehead University. Ron worked in the oil fields in the next county, and Tim worked at the zip line course off Route 52. “It’s a cool place to work,” Tim said. “You get to meet different of people from all over. Had a couple deaf people come in today—do you know how hard it is to get a deaf person to understand instructions?” Tim’s job at the zip line course pays well compared to other jobs in the area, but it’s only seasonal. The course closes six months out of the year and the season was

coming to an end soon, which meant Tim would be out of work. “Not sure what I’m going to do in the [off season],” he said. “Not many jobs around here to begin with. I was lucky to land that one.”

A large pickup rounded the corner on Main Street and loudly accelerated past the gas station into downtown Beattyville.

“That’s what you get here,” Ron said. “People just cruising in diesel pickup trucks, nonstop.”



Dorothy

CREDIT: SCOTT RODD/THINKPROGRESS

In the parking lot of the Beattyville train depot, a lone car was surrounded by tables filled with small ornaments and women’s clothing. Dorothy sat by the back bumper of the open hatchback, watching cars drive past on Route 11. Few passersby stopped—when one did, the driver usually sifted through the tables and then simply drove on.

“There are usually more people—I’m never the only one who sets up out here,” Dorothy said.

“Probably ‘cause it rained earlier and the weather’s starting to cool down. In the summer, this whole lot is filled with tables. You should see it on the first Saturday of the month when

everyone gets their check—the whole town comes out and buys stuff. Then it slows down till the first Saturday of the next month.”

Dorothy grew up down the road from Beattyville and moved to Ohio after high school. When her husband retired five years ago, the two moved to Daytona Beach, Florida, where Dorothy planned to spend the rest of her life.

“We came back to help my son take care of his daughters a few years back,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong—I love my son and my granddaughters, but this isn’t where I belong. I may have grown up here, but I belong in Florida.”

Dorothy and her husband looked for work when they first arrived in Beattyville, but there were no jobs to be found. She resorted to tag-saling to make a little money, but even the busiest first Saturdays of the month don’t bring in much income.

“Not that we couldn’t use it—my husband and I would love to help pay the bills,” Dorothy said.

“For me, I guess tag-saling has more to do with community.”



CREDIT: SCOTT RODD/THINKPROGRESS

Bob Smith, editor of the local Three Forks Tradition newspaper, looked out the window of his Main Street office, resting one hand on his prodigious paunch and twisting his handlebar mustache with the other.

“The reason this town is struggling,” he said, “rests squarely on the current administration in Washington. The potential for this town is here. There’s opportunity for tourism, and a population that’s ready to work—but there aren’t any jobs.” Smith doesn’t buy the official job growth numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. “If there were all these jobs they say are being created, you wouldn’t see all these stores closed down. This town has potential, but the liberal media up in Lexington [Kentucky] won’t credit us ‘mountain folk’ with being able to chew gum and walk down the sidewalk at the same time.”

On his desk sat a mountain of paper, books, and office supplies. A large dictionary was bookmarked with an array of objects—pens, flyers, a pair of scissors—and a decorative wooden box at the corner of the desk read, “All a man really needs out of life is three squares a day, a roof over his head, a reasonably good woman, and a damn good shotgun.”

“In 1964, when I left Beattyville for a short while, there wasn’t a soul that didn’t have work in this town,” he recalled. “There was no welfare, no unemployment. Whoever thinks this War on Poverty hasn’t cost us is out of their mind. Do you know what the national debt is? Seventeen and a half trillion. And do you think it’s any coincidence that the cost for the War on Poverty has totaled seventeen and a half trillion? I don’t think so. It’s the same exact figure.”

For over 25 years, Bob Smith has garnered a reputation in Lee County for his outspoken opinions and blunt, deeply conservative editorial style. But he is also known for his community engagement. He headed up the construction of the war memorial on Highway 11 honoring members of the armed forces from Lee County. He chaired the Woolly Worm Festival committee for a number of years, consistently attracting over 60,000 visitors to town for the festival weekend. He directs The Beattyville Museum, which is home to the largest archive of Lee County historical artifacts and documents, and also holds a number of significant artifacts from America’s history, including a flag that flew over Pearl Harbor during the attacks on December 7, 1941.

Still, Smith is trying to do more.

“My wife and I—we’re too old to travel. We’re too old for fun. So all the money we have, we just pump back into this community. Everything we do, we do to help this community.”



James

CREDIT: SCOTT RODD/THINKPROGRESS

In the middle of Kooper’s General Store is a large wooden table where people come to chain smoke and talk over bologna sandwiches. The owner of the store, Karl, sat across from a soft-spoken logger named James who was on his lunch break.

“I hate the drugs in this damn country,” Karl said. “That’s the cause of most the problems we have around here—not all, but most. They spend millions of dollars to fix it, but that’s all for show—they let this county go wild. Kids get hooked on this shit and you see it generation after generation. The parents pass it along to the kids.”

James nodded in agreement as he chewed his sandwich. He spoke up only every once in a while, usually to agree with Karl.

“You see the same people running around with this shit,” Karl continued. “Same families year after year, and nobody ever fusses. The sheriff has his hands tied, he can’t do anything about it. The FBI, the government—they don’t wanna deal with it. Too much money in drugs. Judges make money off of it, lawyers make money off of it, state police make money off of it.”

“Pharmaceutical companies make plenty off it,” James added.

“Exactly,” Karl said.

Two months earlier, Kooper’s was robbed in the middle of the night and Karl was sure the incident was drug related. The burglars threw a tire iron through the front window with such force that it shattered a freezer door on the other side of the store. Karl had an alarm system that allowed him to monitor the store from home when it was closed. The alarm woke him at 2 a.m. and he jumped out of bed, grabbed his revolver, and called the police on his way out the door. By the time he arrived at the store—before the cops showed up—the burglars had fled.

“They made off with some cigarette cartons and a few others things,” Karl said, shaking his head. “Maybe two hundred bucks worth of stuff, but they caused at least a couple thousand in damage.”



Mayor John Smith

CREDIT: SCOTT RODD/THINKPROGRESS

Given the lack of resources in the area, many ask why residents of Eastern Kentucky don't just move elsewhere. One reason is that it simply takes resources, resources that poor residents don't have, to pack up and leave.

But that explanation fails to go beyond hard numbers and consider the human reasons residents remain in Eastern Kentucky towns like Beattyville. Money creates the possibility for mobility, but not the motivation—there's something irreplaceable about the connection to a place that has so directly shaped generations of a family.

Mayor John Smith understands this human dimension to the poverty in Beattyville and is working toward creating opportunities in town that will enable it to coexist and compete with the modern outside world. At the top of the list is Internet access.

“The number one thing we need is DSL in the entire county. We need our residents to have Internet access, and that’s something we don’t have right now,” he explained. Reliable Internet access would open an untapped part of the economy for Beattyville residents, such as online jobs and e-commerce. He’s optimistic that countywide access will be achieved through a partnership between the state and federal governments called SOAR (Shaping Our Appalachian Region), an attempt to revitalize areas of eastern Kentucky by expanding and improving broadband coverage. Smith also believes that the same geographic features that pose a challenge to Beattyville can be capitalized on through what he sees as the most promising area of the local economy: tourism.

“The Natural Bridge brings a lot of people into the county, and the Red River Gorge is an international draw for rock climbers,” he said. “We’re also trying to become a certified Trail Town through the state of Kentucky, which gives us an avenue to receive additional funding and create trail systems.” Trail Towns are a network of Kentucky towns that are recognized for their outstanding hiking trails and wilderness and are eligible for matching grants through the state’s Department of Travel and Tourism.

“When you hear people talk about ‘pick up’ in the area, it’s all about tourism,” he continued.

“During my first year as mayor, we formed a Tourism Commission that was aimed at going out and bringing in as many people to the area as possible. And ultimately, after we’ve attracted people to the area, the goal will be to bring them into downtown Beattyville.”

With a greater number of people traveling to and relying on downtown Beattyville for goods and services, Mayor Smith is hopeful that vacant storefronts will transform into open, thriving businesses—perhaps becoming a catalyst for the rest of the town’s economy.



Junkyard

CREDIT: SCOTT RODD/THINKPROGRESS

As the last of the parishioners petered out of the Beattyville Christian church on Locust Street, Victor stepped out of his apartment building for a smoke. A native of Beattyville, he described the changes he's seen in town between drags on his cigarette.

“When I was a kid, if a store closed down, it'd only be a few days before a new store took its place—at least, that's what it seemed like. Now, when a store closes, nothing takes its place. It just sits there empty,” he said. “There used to be a car dealer across the road there, an appliance shop down the street—now they're all dark and empty.”

Victor left town at 18 and lived in Indiana for four years. He landed a good paying job and soon saved enough money to put a down payment on a small house.

“When I left Beattyville, I vowed I’d never come back,” he said. “I liked living in Indiana—I enjoyed my job and having my own place. But over time, I started to feel something wasn’t right. My grandparents grew up in Beattyville, and most of my family still lived in town. Even if I wanted to escape it, this place was home. So I sold my house, bought my granddaddy’s farm and have been fixing it up since I got back.”

Victor set out to find work to support himself, his fiancé, and two-year-old daughter while renovating his grandfather’s farmhouse, but found few jobs in the area that offered a livable wage. As he steadily widened his search, the only job he found that offered pay comparable to his job in Indiana was in Louisville, which is over two hours from Beattyville. He accepted the job, but to minimize the cost and stress of traveling, he only drives to Louisville three or four days a week and works extended hours.

“Around here, if you’re lucky, you find a job where you break your back for 40 years and then spend the rest of your life in a wagon; you work most of your life and then can’t hardly walk for the rest of it,” he said. “I didn’t want that, so I had to look for work elsewhere.”

He added, “It’d be great to get the farm up and running again—raise some cattle and crops, and then find part-time work in the area—but for now, it’s just back and forth to Louisville.”

Beattyville, for Victor, will always be home, but he has a bleak outlook for the town’s future. He paints the picture of a town that fell from prosperity into a cycle of misfortune—a cycle, from his perspective, that isn’t likely to be broken.

“See all those cars parked on the grass over there? That used to be a junkyard, but they closed down, too. Those cars were sitting there when I left Beattyville, they were there when I came back, and I’m sure they’ll be there when this place shuts down and everyone leaves.”

**Some names have been changed to preserve privacy.*

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Scott Rodd is a freelance writer currently based out of Los Angeles whose work has appeared in Salon, the New York Observer, and The Source, among other publications. Read the first essay in his series on the poorest towns in America [here](#).